

## Joe Devlin and Jesse Ash

Books do furnish a room, as Anthony Powell once said. They can also right a wobbly table, embody the potential of a world with malleable laws of physics or promise freedom from oppression. For Joe Devlin and Jesse Ash text is constituted by its physical presence, literary and informational content, stylistic form *and* symbolic power. And for me, too, the British Library, where I am writing this essay, is a piece of architecture that looks oddly like the back of an Asda, as well as a pragmatic point of access to information and ideas and a vertiginous signifier of the immense range of cultural production throughout history.

When referencing literature, then, the artist faces the difficult task of finding yet another role or potentiality for it. Like a painting, a book is already at once a physical object and referential subject; a written passage is both formal materiality and abstracted representation, at times metaphorical and at others literal in its effect. Perhaps the essential difference, and the point at which an artist can take on literature in new terms, is that printed text retains more of an archaic air of authority than a painting. The printed word still seems to imply that the author's intention is the conveyance of objective authenticity, however embedded in a fictionalised form, whereas the constructed image is more readily perceived as fantasy, whim or decoration devoid of didactic purpose. Consequently the reader of a text generally doesn't feel quite as pivotal to the production of meaning as the viewer of an artwork does.

This is the point from which Devlin and Ash consider art and text, colliding the perceived excesses of the former with the sense of responsibility ascribed to the latter. Devlin's point of focus is the handwritten marginalia that accrues over the lifetime of a book, inscribing the intellectual and emotional reactions of those who have read it, indicating points of emphasis, disagreement or confusion. Although the internet has demonstrated amply in recent years that we should question the authority of any text, the history of this doubt is scrawled in the margins of books that date back to the invention of the printing press. Devlin's placards are amplifications of singular voices – a bamboozled student or cantankerous peer – that have refuted the content of supposedly infallible textbooks on British politics in the MMU library. Elsewhere, by compiling the jottings of the sceptical readers of a single copy of a particular book onto one piece of paper, he effectively collates and gives voice to a sample of localised scepticism. And in *The Classics* (2006) Devlin has composed a chromatic and architectural eulogy to this space of potential, mixing pots of paint to match the colour of dog-ears taken from books in his own collection by authors, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Blake, who have particularly encouraged the practice of annotation. Applied to the doorframes of the gallery, a comparable shift draws us away from the usual central focus of the walls to the region of the overlooked.

Wikipedia is a formalised extension of the processes of marginalia: a definition is arrived at democratically through the compilation of corrections, refutations and decentred voices, so that multiple subjective takes on a single issue reach a point of consensus. This on-line environment differs, though, from the scrawls buried in the recesses of the MMU library. Devlin likens such muted voices of dissent to streaking at home. It may be somewhat impotent to shake your cock about when no one's looking, but then you might say that Devlin is holding the curtain open a chink so that we can catch a glimpse. Subversion need not depend on widespread public broadcasts to contaminate the predominant culture, after all. Art, which usually operates in the less public precincts of popular cultural, must drum up its agency in more ingenious ways, often refusing the mass attraction of spectacle and entertainment. *Silent Film* (2006), Devlin's tracing onto a single reel of film the underlinings from all the library's books on sound in film, for instance, becomes a silent, unwatchable movie. And yet its muteness, which muffles any discourse with the original texts, creates a potent sinisterism that intimates propaganda and the erasure of dissent.

In contrast to Devlin's re-centralising of the margins, Ash facilitates entire new texts. His strategy for the refutation of authority is to create new content through opaque means and with it ape cultural forms that give the lie to their illusory strategies. Authoring structures and recontextualising texts and images, he casts uncertainty over the assumption of artefact, photograph and text as evidence. The video footage for *Harmony of the Spheres* (2007) for instance, was garnered after a long search for an astronomer who played golf. Ash's questions, which have been edited out, were devised to elicit an impression of eccentric causality in the subject's associative thinking, moving between the tactile empiricism of the golf ball and the intangible infinite universe. For *Review* (2004/2007) the artist asked a critic to review a group exhibition before it was realised and then displayed the wildly contradictory review alongside the eventual show, while in *Broadcast* (2006) in collaboration with Simon Clarke, song lyrics were generated from Montreal newspaper articles in the tradition of broadside ballads in Europe and The Living Newspaper in Soviet states, whereby news, propaganda and practical advice was delivered to the illiterate public.

Ash's *Marilla Caderas* (2004) is a sham collection of ephemera, from maps and photocopies to memorabilia and letters, which apparently charts an email correspondence between the artist and the eponymous Marilla Caderas, a fictional character living in Puerto Rico whose name is an anagram of its governor Sila María Calderón. Incorporating real events – such as the 1968 world surf championships, the dissident uprisings of the same year throughout Europe and North America, the Columbia space shuttle disaster of 2003 and the long-term US military presence in Puerto Rico – employs universally recognised historiography to endorse an exchange that is entirely fabricated. Presented unembellished on trestles, *Marilla Caderas* speaks the language of documentary, with the pragmatics of display outweighing the aesthetic excesses of recognisable artistic strategies, demonstrating the relative ease with which the subjective collection of 'facts' can adopt the authority of white papers, judicial reports and the exclusives of mainstream journalism.

Although these iconoclastic tactics suggest a sort of homeopathic approach to cultural criticism, this is not to cast Ash or Devlin as evangelical anti-authoritarians. The politics of metafiction – the literary genre in which fact and fiction are interleaved and their structures and devices made apparent – are often a by-product of a formal or lyrical enquiry. And collage can become an ontological proposition through a process of interruption, as in Ash's *Collage Series- March 2007- June 2007* (2007), or accrual, as in the palimpsest-like formulation of Devlin's *Silent Film*. Collage, montage and metafiction recast the everyday into new configurations that, by their very nature, subvert hegemonic structures based on knowledge, categorisation and order; and yet, beyond such categorical opposition, they also generate the fantastical, subjective and fragmentary experience of interior and exterior worlds in dialogue.

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