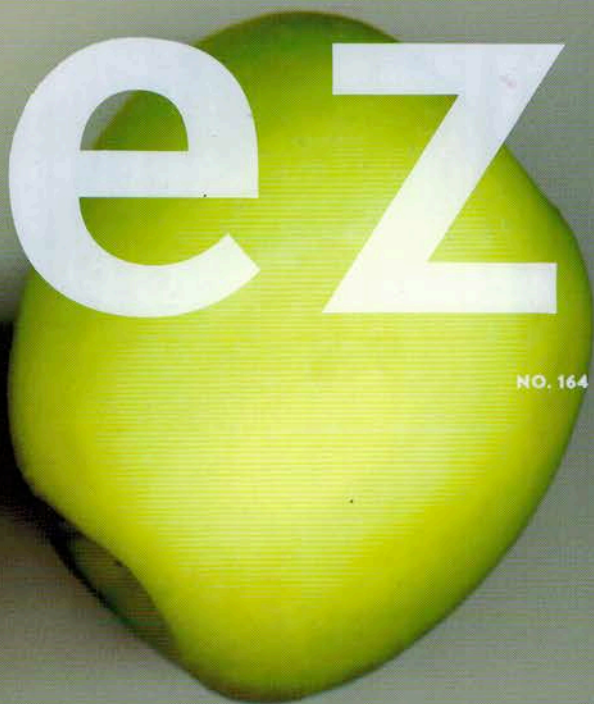
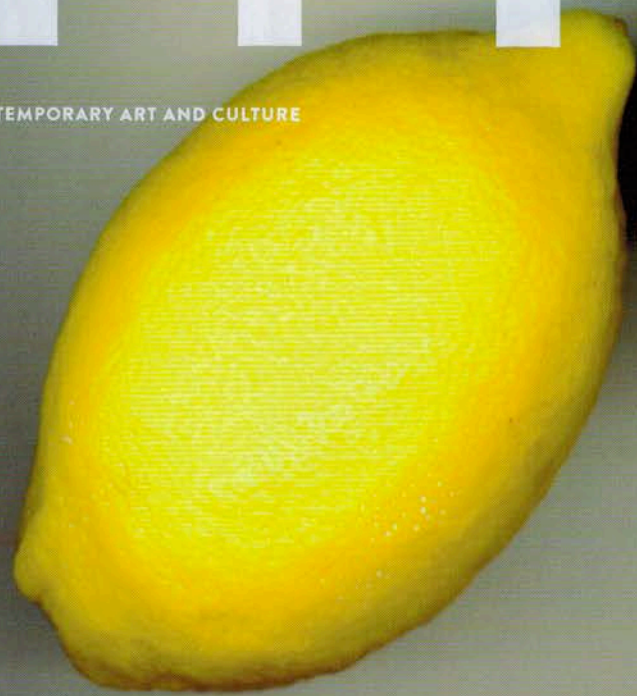


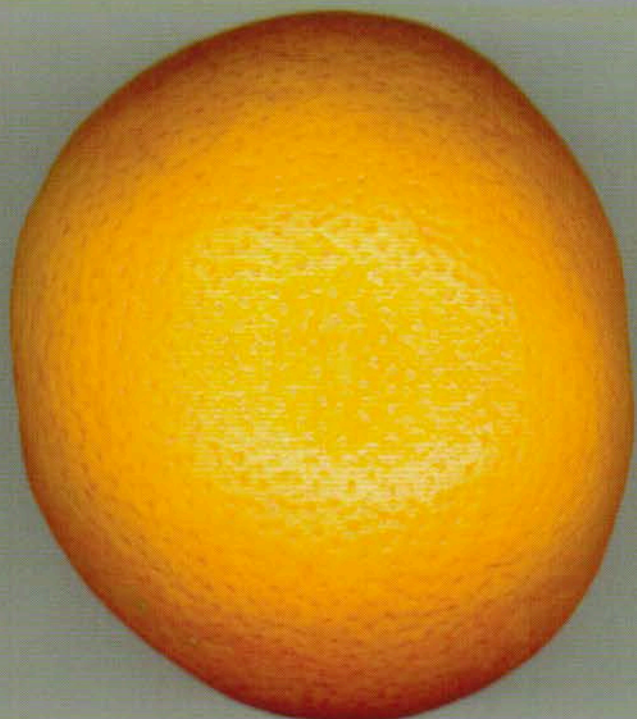
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CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE

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# 1 FRONT

## COVER

Dena Yago, Meyer Lemon, Granny Smith Apple, Navel Orange (ESPRIT), 2011. Courtesy: the artist and Sandy Brown, Berlin. See 'In the Company of Flesh and Blood' p. 176

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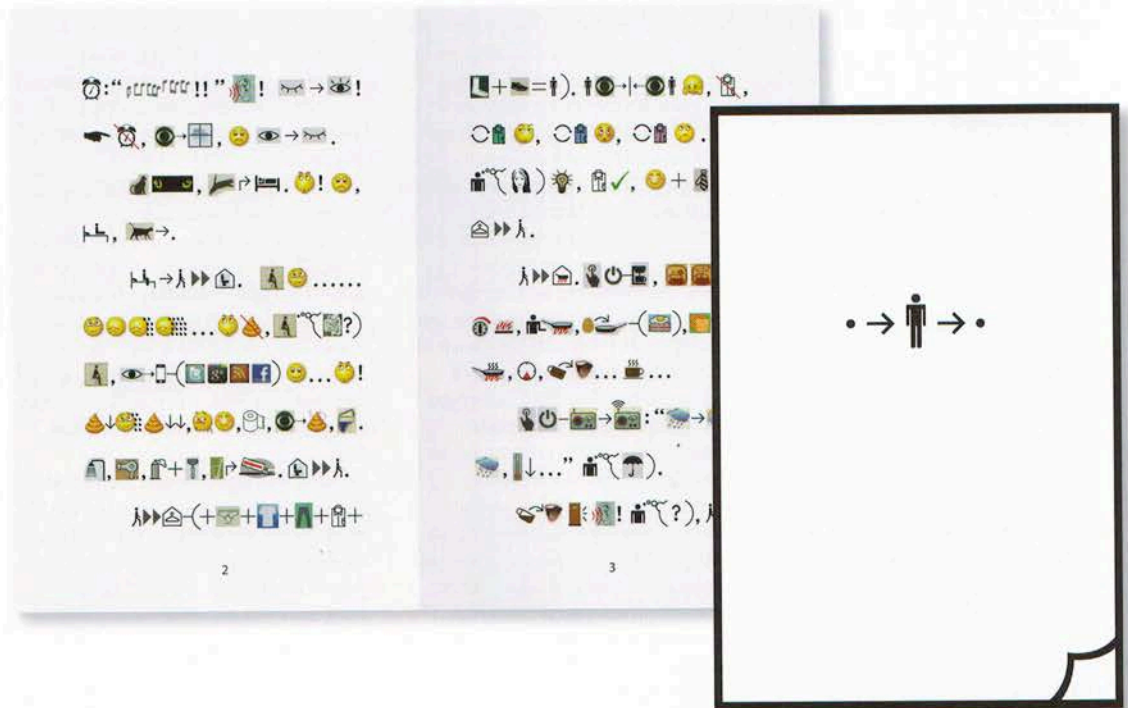
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Luke Fowler, *L'Istituzione*  
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# Books

Robert Barry

Three new publications by artists catalogue the minutiae of contemporary existence

George Perec's *La Vie mode d'emploi* (Life, A User's Manual, 1978) begins with a rumination on jigsaw puzzles: 'The parts do not determine the pattern, but the pattern determines the parts.' 'The pieces are readable, take on a sense, only when assembled,' he writes. 'In isolation, a puzzle piece means nothing – just an impossible question, an opaque challenge.' For Perec, the puzzle was a metaphor not just for the discrete yet interlocking lives of the inhabitants of a particular Parisian apartment block, but was also 'a machine for inspiring stories', a model of the author's own oulipian set of constraints and patterns. Three and a half decades later, contemporary artists are assembling opaque challenges of their own in a series of recent and forthcoming books that build new kinds of stories from individual blocks of cultural detritus – elements which, if not entirely lacking in significance when isolated, certainly add up to more than the sum of their parts.

Xu Bing's *Book from the Ground: From Point to Point* (MIT Press, 2014) begins like many other novels: in a certain house in a certain city an alarm bell rings and a man grudgingly gets up and leaves for work. Though it is built of sentences and paragraphs, there are hardly any letters or words – even if every symbol remains legible. *Book from the Ground* (a project that has also encompassed exhibitions and software) started life in an airport, when the artist recognized that in-flight safety cards were increasingly replacing words with images. From there, he set about compiling a universal language of everyday icons – from the International Organization for Standardization's public information symbols to online emoticons – legible by anyone, Xu claims, 'as long as you have experience of the modern world'.

As Mathieu Borysevicz points out in his introduction to the simultaneously published *The Book about*

*Xu Bing's Book from the Ground* (MIT Press, 2014), the quest for a universal tongue is as old as Babel. Just as it is natural that the Age of Reason would produce Gottfried Leibniz's 'algebra of human thought' and the Romantic century would give us François Sudre's musical conlang 'solresol', it is somehow fitting that, in the 21st century, Xu would make use of this iconography of trivia, a language fathered by consumerism, mass transit, and health and safety regulations. Not a great deal happens in *Book from the Ground*; like many of us, the protagonist seems to spend most of his day browsing the net, but in its accumulation of small panics – running late for work, traffic alerts, fear of one's boss or the police – it manages to say a great deal about our contemporary age of anxiety.

While *Book from the Ground* took its cue from airport signage, Cory Arcangel culls his alphabet from that other great non-place of hypermodernity: the internet. Since 17 December

# Working On My Novel

## Cory Arcangel



1

2011, Arcangel has been collecting random Twitter posts that include the remark 'working on my novel'. This key phrase is now the title of a book (Penguin, 2014) that collates and structures this motley assortment of tweets into a near-narrative of vaunted ambitions and overstretched vanities; one tweet per page, each captioned with its date and author, and with every source credited in the appendix. Lest anyone assume the author is exploiting his contributors, or somehow elevating himself above them, a tweet from 9:05am on 12 September 2013, placed almost exactly half-way through the book, finds Arcangel himself posting: 'Working on my novel.'

There's a delightful mismatch between the restrictively short form of Twitter and the weighty gravitas attached to the novel, which Arcangel clearly revels in. So the whole thing

becomes essentially one long gag 'about the situations that people get themselves into when they enter these new worlds of communication on their computers', as the New York-based artist put it in a recent conversation with the artist Mary Heilmann in *Interview* magazine. He continued: 'These people are broadcasting the fact that they're working on their novels, which obviously they are not because if they were working on their novels they wouldn't be spending their time telling people [about it]. So much of the book becomes a catalogue of modern distractions and deferrals, with tweeters confessing their preoccupations with HBO TV series, cocktails, Netflix, the weather, blogposts and, inevitably, social networks themselves. 'Working on my novel' emerges less as a brag than as a litany of guilt and regret. 'Should be working on my novel ...' the tweets start to say with depressing regularity before, finally, 'I should have been working on my novel over the last 18 years. Instead, I've been killing zombies and eating pizzas. Life = Wasted.'

If *Working On My Novel* seeks to preserve the ephemerality of tweeted comments, Luke Fowler's *Two-Frame Films (2006-2012)* (MACK, 2014) captures some of the immediacy of Instagram snapshots with photos taken through the windows of planes and trains, snapped at gigs or restaurants – there's even a cheeky mirror selfie. Counter to the trend for highly composed frames, Fowler's photography celebrates everyday accidents and the fragility of the moment.

As in the title of the 1974 book by the South African anti-psychiatric David Cooper, portrayed in one of these images, Fowler's pictures present a *Grammar of Living* in which potential narratives are glimpsed only in ellipsis and constructed retrospectively by the beholder.

Fowler was gifted a half-frame camera (which uses standard film at half the usual exposure size) by a friend in 2006 – its obsolete format forced two images to be produced side-by-side in a single frame. The artist only realized this upon returning home from a trip to Germany and developing his film. It was the impetus for the artist's current project, and his pairing of images thereafter became more deliberate. As a result, the split-frame images collated in this book have a split nature themselves: those coupled consciously and those paired arbitrarily. But, as Harvie Ferguson points out in his preface, we are so used to seeing two conjoined frames and envisaging a sequential relation – the elementary genesis and apocalypse of Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* (1967) – that we can't help but impose a narrative on each pair. 'The viewer cannot remain a passive consumer of these images,' Ferguson writes. Instead, we 'become aware of ourselves in a new way through the act of looking; of looking afresh.'

It is in the more or less glaring temporal gaps between each shot that we begin to fabricate their relationships. No matter how beautiful each picture might be (and some certainly are delightfully composed, bursting with rich colours and velvety shades, while others seem almost offhandedly

disposed of, like carelessly picked fruit in isolation each image remains stubbornly resistant to meaning – 'an impossible question, an opaque challenge', in a sense. The peculiarities of this defunct format become, like Percec jigsaw puzzles, a true 'machine for inspiring stories'.

Like Percec's great novel, these three books catalogue minutiae with obsessive zeal: the patterns of old rugs or those formed by parked cars; the iconography of in-flight safety. More than anything else, perhaps, what they record is the mundane act of recording itself. Fowler's shots capture CCTV feeds and men holding microphones. Arcangel's collected tweets show people avoiding writing by writing about their writing. Xu's protagonist is forever composing emails while the book itself registers the development of a new demotic form of language, which we are shocked to discover ourselves already fluent in. In each case, it is easy to recognize ourselves in the small acts accumulated in these books – all it takes is that 'experience of the modern world' Xu refers to. But what a strange experience that seems after reading all three.

*Robert Barry is a freelance writer and composer based in Brighton, UK. A book of his text-based musical scores will be published by bläck charm nostalgi vassa tänder later this year.*



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*Artists are assembling opaque challenges in books that build new kinds of stories from individual blocks of cultural detritus.*