



Adam David Brown, Ian Carr-Harris,
Paul de Guzman, Brian Dettmer,
Alex Itin, Nicholas Jones,
Georgia Russell, Robert The

Novel Ideas

7 March to 31 May 2009

Oakville Galleries
at Centennial Square

Curated by Gabby Agoncillo



The idea for this exhibition came from having once salvaged an aging hardcover novel from a dismal-looking box on campus. A less-than-exciting read soon justified the book's discarded state, but I loved the discovery all the same—old books carry a distinctive air of mystery, with their nondescript covers, curious bindings and antiquated typefaces. Early on it had occurred to me that these books and their familiar compact forms possessed a sense of aesthetic value, one that could only be gained from the tangible qualities of paper and ink—the very same qualities that give them impermanence, allowing books to be classified as effortlessly discarded ephemera.

Novel Ideas explores the reincarnation of found objects and literary detritus in a collection of book-works by eight international artists. In a rapidly growing world of new technology, instant information and electronically

disseminated ideas, books here achieve what a blank canvas surface cannot: they become snapshots of a specific time and place, not only in the stories they tell, but through their very bindings and typefaces. The featured artists resist suggestions of rapid technological progression with their more rudimentary approaches to art: acts of slashing, cutting, and dissecting are reductive processes that reveal the presence of newly appropriated meaning through the very voids they create. This extraction of new meaning from old is mirrored in every act of physical excision made upon aging covers and delicate pages. Georgia Russell's careful dissections, for instance, capture novels in beautifully disarming states. Splayed out against the confines of their glass cases, her acts of slicing and shredding emphasize the books' physicality. Strips of paper emerge like flames from beneath

Above: Georgia Russell, *En Vrac*, 2007, cut book in circular acrylic case, 49.5 x 8 cm, courtesy Georgia Russell and England & Co Gallery, London.
 Page 1: Adam David Brown, *History of Art* (detail), 2007, book 50.5 x 29 x 5 cm; table 47 x 62.5 x 76 cm; book stand 33.5 x 47.5 x 10 cm;
 video dimensions variable, collection of the artist.



their covers, a dynamic visual suggestion of liberated words and ideas. They demonstrate the side-by-side existence of absence and presence, since it appears that every surface of the book remains intact—they are merely rearranged. Other works, such as Paul de Guzman's *Study for Mies in America* (2006), highlight an overt excision of images and text, creating a dense,

grid-like network of thin vertical and horizontal lines. The visual result resembles the bare skeletal foundations of structural design; remarkably mirroring the artist's chosen medium—architectural catalogues. Here, signs of literary consumption through absence are made all the more striking by de Guzman's inclusion of the book covers' excised components, which are placed next to

Above: Paul de Guzman, *Study for Mies in America* (detail), 2006, book, plexiglas, large panel: 26.3 x 26.3 x 6 cm, small panels: 11 x 9.5 x 5 cm, collection of the artist.



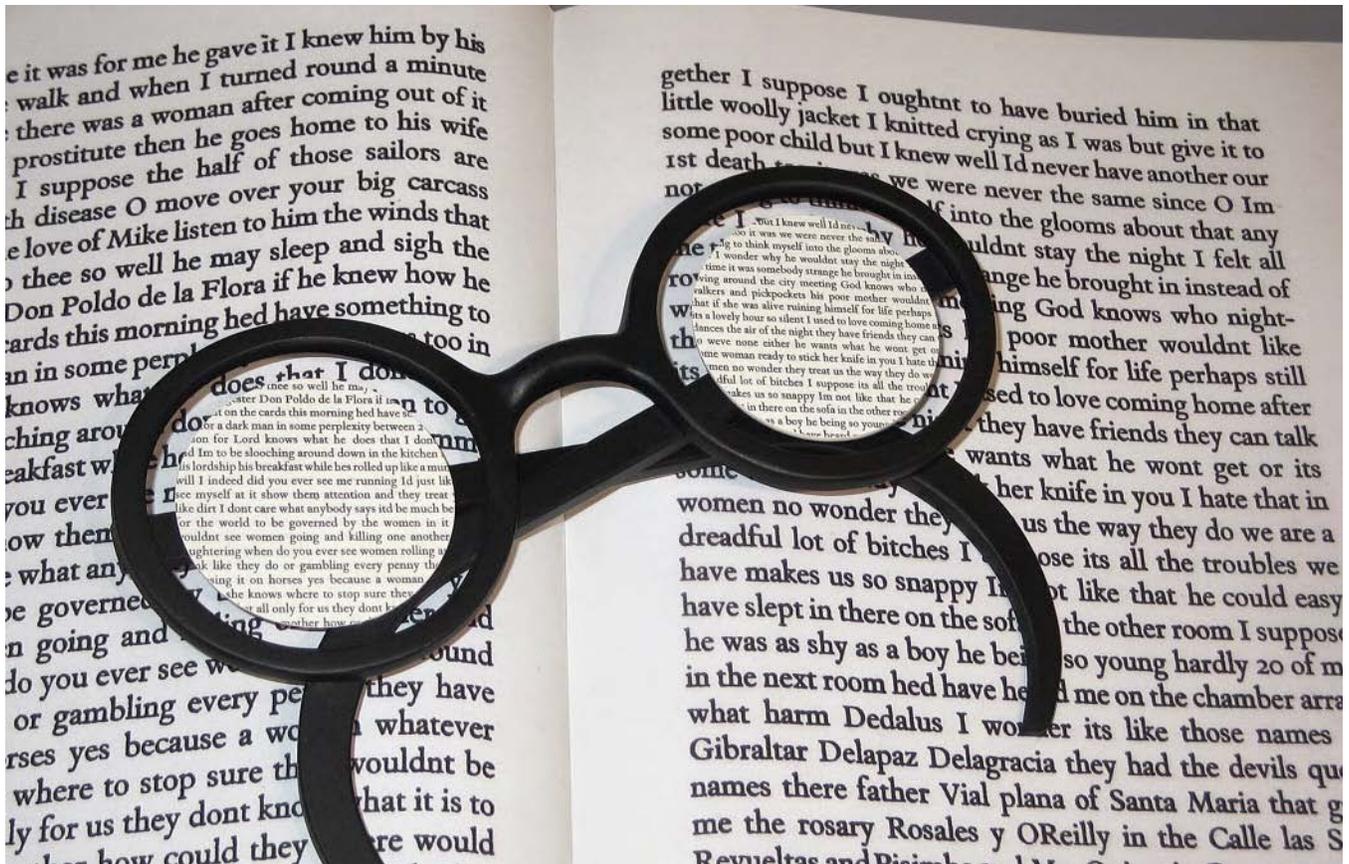
his book structures like little discarded doors. The same can be said for Robert The's *Duchamp* (2008), in which a portion of the book's spine is cut away but remains present, appearing to make its escape in the guise of a fleeing bug.

Encyclopædic works such as Ian Carr-Harris's *Edible* (1993) from Oakville Galleries' permanent collection, and Brian Dettmer's altered didactic texts are beautiful testaments to manipulated states and the flexibility of meaning. Carr-Harris's subtle extractions allow for the outward projection of light, but reveal an intriguingly hollow representation of the novel form beneath, whereas Dettmer's dissected portions expose endless layers of words and illustrations, harmoniously cascading to form strange new vistas.

In some cases, these manipulations can function as modes of subversion. In his movable book piece entitled

Molly (2002), Ian Carr-Harris explores ideas of authorial intention with a reproduction of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Rather than having the text and reader experience come together—as is the author's intention—a pair of Joyce's iconic glasses reverse this possibility. The words upon which they rest curiously appear to move further away in a disorienting reversal of magnification. Adam David Brown's *History of Art* (2007), on the other hand, subverts notions of authority in historical scholarship. His circular extractions serve as literal core samples, which in turn reflect the problem of "sampling" in any editorial process—omissions are inevitable and necessary. In this particular text, Brown critiques the impossibility of gaining a truly comprehensive sense of art's history. While a firm impression of time can be felt in viewing his projections, Brown's piece prompts one to realize that these fleeting images are ultimately mere fundamental

Above: Robert The, *Duchamp* (detail), 2008, cut book, variable dimensions, collection of the artist.



selections—or core samples—from any given point in a long history of artistic achievement.

Other artists play directly on the novel as a statement piece, with works that are altered to reflect their titular and conceptual properties. In *The Other Side of the Hill* (2008), Nicholas Jones carves a receding mound-shaped mass into the heart of F.W. Boreham's book of sermons. Abstract ideas and physical form are thus married in a visual affirmation of the book's title. In Robert The's *The Art Crisis* (2008), Bonnie Burnham's text on art theft, smuggling and corruption is strikingly juxtaposed by The's sculptural vision, in which he transforms the book into a handgun—a bold statement in a self-described process of “lovingly [vandalizing books] back to life so they can assert themselves against the culture which turned them into debris.”

This ideology of books turning into cultural detritus stems from notions of technological threat, where

traditional modes of printed discourse eventually yield to the convenience and novelty of computer screens, audio, and digitized texts. Alex Itin's *Orson Whales* (2007) can be seen as a “slicing” of the collective-page format via fragments of freeze frame. The artist presents successive fleeting glimpses of an altered edition of *Moby Dick*, where book pages (acting as a series of canvases for a unique succession of paintings) celebrate the bound-page aesthetic, as the illusory movements of Itin's painted figures are largely dependent on notions of order and paginated sequence. *Orson Whales* embraces the traditional book form while keeping an eye to the future, questioning modes of readership and literary consumption in an ever-changing modern world. But use of the term *consumption* here is precarious at best. It prompts an evocation of greed and waste, while artistic and literary consumption should, by all means, be an experience

Above: Ian Carr-Harris, *Molly* (detail), 2005, paper, wood, plastic, 11 x 67.5 x 54 cm, courtesy of Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto.

of absorbing new ideas and having them flourish in enlightening bursts of personal interpretation.

This conundrum is inherent in the works of this exhibition, as the desire to preserve a book through artistic re-interpretation is seen by some as cultural waste, often labelled as iconoclasm. Online blogs featuring images of book-works set the stage for heated viewer discourse. Some book lovers protest what they deem to be vandalism, others condone the “destruction” of an author’s intellectual labours. This, needless to say, has sparked a string of heavy debate on artistic propriety and the subjectivity of “mutilation.”

Such issues, however, are hardly new points of contention in art. One is reminded of famed American artist Robert Rauschenberg’s controversial works in the fifties, notably his *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), in which Rauschenberg—as the title implies—has erased all but a few faint traces of ink and crayon from a drawing by Willem de Kooning. Critics deemed the piece “gratuitously destructive,” but Rauschenberg’s conceptual innovation and artistic legacy have since been largely celebrated, especially in the wake of his recent death. These conspicuous physical absences are reflected in *Novel Ideas*, with the artist’s scalpel taking the place of Rauschenberg’s eraser.

This compelling dichotomy of artistic creation through iconoclastic erasure mirrors the exhibition’s emphasis on the birth of new meaning that arises from the accumulative result of each carefully incised surface, or every isolated page. This problem begs the question of why art must be confined to making marks on blank slates. Should traces of the artist’s hand be positive impressions rather than implied presence born from absence? It must be noted that no outrage has ever been sparked by art made from discarded belongings, old detritus, or dated newspapers, the latter of which also contain authorial musings in print. They are, however, readily accepted as ephemera and established as disposable mass-produced entities. But books are also products

of mass production. They too, will expire in time, pages yellowed and turned brittle so as to become intelligible. Most are ephemeral in the fact that their written contents are in themselves rendered outdated by the passage of time. New discoveries make didactic literature obsolete, and cultural references become more difficult to understand with the passing of decades.

Ultimately, the most well appreciated books are always those that show signs of wear, those that are acknowledged and interpreted—their ideas wrestled with, and reaffirmed. It is this active deed of consumption, and not a passive sense of glorified veneration, that speaks volumes about a literary work. In a culture of discount bins, dumpsters, and boxes left on the sidewalk, books have become a dime a dozen. In *Novel Ideas*, artists create tangible forms that beautifully demonstrate the book’s practical use—to be consumed, absorbed, and eagerly explored with inquiring minds and willing hands. With meticulous extractions, surgical abstractions and revealing incisions, ideas are released from the bounds of their covers, wholly concrete, and forming new entities unto themselves. Accusations of iconoclasm will perhaps never be silenced, but the beauty of artistic interpretation often lies in such reactionary response. After all, beauty, like all novel ideas, can take on various guises. In looking back on his infamous erasures, Rauschenberg perhaps put it best:

“They think it was a gesture of protest...or vandalism is the other alternative.”

“And to you?”

“It’s poetry.”

— Gabby Agoncillo, Guest Curator

Gabby Agoncillo earned an Hons. BA in Art History and English Literature, in 2008, from the University of Toronto, Mississauga. *Novel Ideas* is her first exhibition, inspired by a final project for a Curatorial Practice course taught by Marnie Fleming. She is Curatorial Intern at Oakville Galleries.