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ARTIST-FICTION IN AN EXPANDED FIELD

Avant-Garde Legacies in John Holten's The Readymades and K.D.'s Headless

ABSTRACT: This essay examines how contemporary artist-fiction reactivates the historical and neo-avant-garde as a problem of belated creation rather than as a simple repertoire of formal devices. Taking John Holten's *The Readymades* and Goldin+Senneby's *Headless* as paired case studies, it argues that both works inherit avant-garde procedures – readymade appropriation, manifesto, fictional authorship, performance, secret society, and generative constraint – under conditions in which both the historical avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde have already become historical. Holten's novel is read as a literary work that constructs the fictional Serbian artist group LGB in relation to post-Yugoslavian trauma, using concepts such as the “fictional site” and “active escapism” to explore art's fragile capacity to work through violence without overcoming it. By contrast, *Headless* is analyzed as an artist-novel generated from Goldin+Senneby's long-term conceptual art project on offshore finance, in which delegated authorship, detective fiction, and Bataillean acephaly mimic the opacity and displacement of global capital. In both cases, avant-garde newness survives only through citation, repetition, mediation, and reenactment. Rather than confirming the exhaustion of avant-garde ambition, these works test its contemporary afterlife in an expanded field between literature and visual art. Artist-fiction emerges as a form in which the unresolved legacies of radical art are narratively reassembled, exposing the burdened persistence of what Harold Rosenberg called “the tradition of the new”.

KEYWORDS: Avant-garde; Neo-avant-garde; Artist-novel; Conceptual art; Bataille.

1. Artist's Novels and Neo-Avant-Garde Repetitions

The so-called “historical” avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, with their distinctive succession of “isms” following one after another in the century's first three decades, challenged the paradigm of artistic creation as the product of the single, individual artist and sought to reframe artmaking in new group, collective, or even anonymized modes. Concurrently, in typical products and institutions such as the avant-garde periodical or performance venue, they brought together works in divergent and dissonantly colliding media. Especially important were intensive interactions between visual and verbal arts in typographically extravagant manifestos, ekphrastic texts,

collages, picture-poems, and elaborately designed performances. The revival and extension of these original avant-garde modes by artists after World War II – in tendencies ranging from concrete poetry, “action painting,” geometric art, and art informel to Situationism, Fluxus, Living Theatre, and Actionism – has been characterized by critics such as Peter Bürger, Hal Foster, and Benjamin Buchloh as “neo-avant-garde.” (Bürger 1984, 47–54; Foster 1996, 1–32; Buchloh 2000, xix–xxxiv). This term carries paradoxical connotations, combining the historical avant-garde’s thrust toward newness and futurity with the shadow of repetition of and retrospection upon an already achieved artistic past: “neo-“ as new and “neo” as once again.

For Bürger, this element of neo-avant-garde repetition is discrediting. Any attempt, in his view, to revive the avant-garde once it has become an established element of the historical past must prove inauthentic, betraying the defining characteristic of the avant-garde: its impulse to pass beyond the domain of art into the space of a renewed life-praxis. The appearance of a neo-avant-garde, Bürger argues, is a sign not only that the original avant-gardes have become historical but also that they have failed in their attempt to abolish the institution of art as a separate, autonomous realm and to introduce the artistic into a transformed generality of life in all its activities, dimensions, and senses. The neo-avant-garde, Bürger asserts, is just more autonomous art (albeit with a vastly expanded repertoire of new forms and materials), undergirded by those interconnected institutions that support art’s separateness (Bürger 1984, 49–54).

Foster and Buchloh both acknowledge the force of Bürger’s critique, but neither accepts his blanket dismissal of the neo-avant-garde. Each instead analyzes the ambivalent dynamics by which postwar art extends the historical avant-garde’s legacy. Foster recuperates neo-avant-garde repetition in psychoanalytic terms, seeing in its returns a selective foregrounding and symbolic “working-through” of elements repressed by the mid-century history of fascism, Stalinism, and global war. Buchloh, by contrast, focuses on how the neo-avant-garde internalized, in its forms, processes, and materials, postwar dynamics of capitalist production and economy: automation, consumerism, marketing, and the “culture industry.” For Buchloh, these internalizations highlight art’s ambivalent relation to Cold War society and political economy. Both critics therefore provide a more nuanced account of neo-avant-garde developments in the visual arts than Bürger, who, as a literary historian, refers only schematically to early twentieth-century art and even more thinly to postwar artistic activities (Foster 1996, 1–32; Buchloh 2000, xix–xxxiv)¹.

The existence of the critical debate initiated by Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (first published in German in 1974, then in an influential English translation in 1984) implies not only that the classic avant-gardes of the early twentieth century have become

¹ For partial redress of this shortcoming, see the chapter on Joseph Beuys in Bürger 1992.

“historical,” but also that their second mobilization in the neo-avant-garde has by now also become part of the historical past. If we consider the temporal scope of Buchloh’s *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry, 1955-1975*, we can see that Bürger’s landmark theory coincided with the closing of two decades of neo-avant-garde activity. Foster’s book, looking back from “the end of the century,” suggests this epochal closure even more explicitly. In thinking about the neo-avant-garde, then, we have to do with a *doubly* “historical” memory, encompassing both recall of the historical avant-garde itself and recall of neo-avant-garde reworkings of the original avant-garde. This is the sense in which Rosenberg’s phrase “the tradition of the new” remains pertinent: it names the paradox by which artistic newness reaches the present as an inherited and repeatedly reactivated repertoire (Rosenberg 1959, 3–27). Rather than drawing a bright line between the two avant-garde moments – “historical” and “neo-” – our present-day perspective, like a magnet in a field of iron filings, tends to align a historiographic picture in which the interactions and continuities between these two moments become more evident. While Foster and Buchloh are less dismissive of the neo-avant-garde than Bürger, and suggest, perhaps, a greater potential for continued resonance in contemporary art, they too deal with the neo-avant-garde primarily as a legacy, as an artistic repertoire of the recent past, sufficiently distant from the contemporary present as to have become “historical” in ways that are more proximate to the historical avant-gardes themselves.

This reframing of the historical/neo-avant-garde relationship sets the critical stage for my subsequent discussion of the two contemporary “artist novels” that are my primary focus: the Irish expatriate writer, publisher, curator, and artist John Holten’s 2011 novel *The Readymades*; and the 2014 novel *Headless*, published pseudonymously by “K.D.,” which is the textual-literary outgrowth of an elaborate conceptual art project by the Swedish artists Goldin+Senneby (Simon Goldin and Jakob Senneby). Through a paired look at these novels, I argue that they do not simply repeat avant-garde devices or merely lament the exhaustion of avant-garde novelty. Rather, they turn the avant-garde’s inherited repertoire into a narrative problem: how can radical artistic creation still be imagined when gestures of newness arrive already mediated by the historical and neo-avant-garde past? Holten’s novel will be read through post-Yugoslavian art’s concepts of the “fictional site” and “active escapism,” while *Headless* will be read through Bataille’s acephaly and Rousselian/Oulipian procedures of generative constraint. Making reference to historical avant-gardes such as Dadaism and Surrealism, both books therefore return to a question earlier posed by the neo-avant-gardes: in what sense can latter-day avant-gardism carry out the artistic and cultural work of radical creation, haunted as it is by the ghosts of avant-gardes past?

Both novels, appearing only a few years apart from one another, foreground a relation between a contemporary art project or movement and the unfolding of the novelistic

narrative, at least loosely centered upon an enigma or “mystery.” In both cases, the title of the novel alludes to an instance of the historical avant-garde: Marcel Duchamp’s “readymades,” in the case of Holten’s novel; and in *Headless*, Georges Bataille’s “Acéphale” (“headless”) secret society of the mid-1930s, an extreme, renegade offshoot of the Surrealist movement. Both books exhibit a hybrid, metafictionally reflexive form of authorship: Holten through the vehicle of a found and translated manuscript by an only dubiously reliable memoirist, a suicided Serbian artist, Djordje Bojić; Goldin+Senneby through an elaborate “ghost-written” structure in which the (real-life) English expatriate mystery novelist and food writer John Barlow is commissioned to investigate an offshore company called Headless, Ltd. Author John Barlow figures in the novel as the hapless commissioned writer-character “John Barlow,” whose authorship may ultimately have been usurped by “K.D.,” another writer, who may be Kara Donnelly, a client service manager of the Sovereign Trust (an actual global financial services company), engaged to complete the book due to John Barlow’s vertiginous descent into a mystery-induced delirium.

Despite similarities in some of their underlying structures and concerns, however, these two artist novels also reflect a salient difference in their mode of narrative production. Despite its art-world references and even publication context, Holten’s work remains predominantly *literary*, with the narrative internalization of the activities of the fictional Serbian art collection “The LGB Group” serving to convey the novelist’s thematic interest in the Yugoslavian civil war and its traumas, the relations between everyday life and historical violence, and the disruptions of psychic and sexual identity occasioned by expatriation. In contrast, the literary production of *Headless* is fully subordinate to and derivative from the extra-literary *artistic* activities of Goldin+Senneby and their network of academic informants, curators, actors, and other supporting figures. Staged art events are the literal, effective cause of the book’s incidents, as the novel elaborates in mystery form various sequentially organized art world events and incorporates, alongside fictional characters, named actual personages who participated in Goldin+Senneby’s carefully managed art actions. Holten’s book, thus, is a literary work with artist-group activity as its central fictional device; Goldin+Senneby’s (John Barlow’s, K.D.’s, etc.) book is an artistic work that assumes the ultimate form of a piece of published genre fiction – though actually published by an art press, Sternberg, rather than a commercial trade publisher of popular mystery novels. Only the latter, then, strictly corresponds to David Maroto’s useful definition of the “artist-novel” as a distinct genre or “new medium” of contemporary art activity: a production, Maroto writes, of “not-literature” as art, as one remediation of the contemporary art world’s “post-medium condition” in which “narrative is a consequence” (Maroto 2019, 38). By “consequence,” I understand narrative as the result or trace of an artistic procedure, institutional situation, or performance, rather than as the autonomous literary source from which the

artwork subsequently follows. Holten's novel is, if anything, a meta-“artist's novel,” exploring the fiction of what a novel would look like *were it to have been generated out of the activity of an artist group such as LGB*, which was, however, invented substantially for and within the framework of Holten's literary production, though also drawing upon his connections with the art scene of Berlin and elsewhere and extending out toward them.

2. Reading *The Readymades*

The *Readymades* tells the story of how an Irish artist, writer, and would-be publisher, “John,” somewhat at loose ends in Paris, meets a Serbian expatriate and inactive artist Djordje Bojić, spends a night drinking in a bar with the melancholy Serb, and gets drawn to him and his motley circle of friends. Hearing about his artist's past and a memoir that Bojić is trying to compose, John tries to solicit the manuscript for his small press publication venture, itself something of a fitful work in progress. It is notable, parenthetically, that Holten's actual press – publishing out of Dublin, Oslo, and Berlin and the publisher of *The Readymades* itself – is called “Broken Dimanche Press,” or BDP. Its name derives from the neo-avant-garde artist Yves Klein's publication *Dimanche: Le Journal d'un seul jour, Théâtre du vide*, which includes the famous picture of Klein in midair after jumping from a wall, captioned “the painter of space hurls himself into the void.” (Fraser-Smith 2018, 17). Holten's addition of the adjective “Broken” suggests a later, more sober perspective when the airborne neo-avant-gardist has yielded to historical gravity after all and crashed onto the hard pavement below.

John receives a scrawled message from the man that reads: “I am going to die soon and the world will follow me help me if you can.” When John finally tracks down Djordje and tries to visit him at his apartment to get the manuscript, he learns that his recent acquaintance has committed suicide. Unexpectedly, on an impulse, John forces the door to the apartment and pilfers the manuscript from the artist's disordered room before anyone can dispose of his effects. Through an online ad, John engages a translator, who sets to work on the manuscript. Djordje's former associates are less than enthusiastic about this memoir, as we learn, likely because of past crimes as Serbian soldiers in the Bosnian war and present connections to criminal activity such as drug dealing, while his artist-collaborator Gojković has art world commercial interests to protect. They try to scare the writer and translator away from publishing the potentially compromising memoir, and the translator is ambushed in the street and badly beaten. After two shorter initial sections narrating these various encounters, the rest of the novel “reproduces” the uncompleted manuscript narrating Djordje's life and friendships in Belgrade before the civil war, their experiences in the war in Bosnia, and the subsequent activities of the Serbian art group LGB (a fictional entity, but with recognizable traits of Belgrade art practices in the late 1990s), which utilizes a variety of neo-avant-garde “readymade”

tactics to try to instantiate a new “normality” after the traumas of war (Sretenović, Dimitrijević, Anđelković 2005; Yildiz 2022).

The found manuscript is entitled “To Warmann,” who in the story is Djordje’s Hungarian gallerist and lover, Imre Warmann. It narrates Djordje’s adolescence in Belgrade, his early gay sexual experiences, his army training and experience in the Bosnian war, his activity as an artist following his demobilization, his travels to Vienna and across Europe with the art group LGB (the initials of the three principal artists, including Djordje and two friends), and his dissolute life and eventual death in Paris. Warmann is an intermittent presence in the narrative, but he haunts Djordje in his unfortunate accidental death. After an exhilarating, early phase of their relationship, tensions and distance between the two men arise. Eventually, on a visit to Paris, Warmann dies from sexual auto-asphyxiation after a turbulent night with the artist, who is taking part in a drug- and alcohol-addled orgy while Warmann is breathing his last gasp. The death scene of Warmann – in which Djordje, as he writes, “had to go and fuck in the presence of death” – seems to bring back in full force the final traumatic memories of the war, with its sexualized violence, and to lead inexorably to Djordje’s self-inflicted end. However, Holten leaves in doubt the authenticity of this “return of the real” in Warmann’s *Liebestod* and Djordje’s *Selbstmord* – that is, in the overlapping figurations of erotic death and suicide. Warmann’s death and Djordje’s suicide are both drawn into the vortex of historical anteriority and repetition, because Holten has furnished his book with an opening epigraph from the late-19th-century art critic and gallerist Félix Fénéon, who registered in his provocative *Novels in Three Lines* (1906) the following *fait-divers*: “For reasons unknown, the son of a Hungarian parliamentarian, M. Warmann, asphyxiated himself in a boarding house on Rue Saint-Guillaume.” (Holten 2011, 5). Though Djordje’s suicide suggests that the violence of twentieth-century history ultimately overpowers the fragile symbolic practices of art, John’s tenuous reconstruction of the fragments of Djordje’s narrative and the fictional artworks of LGB developed by the (real) artist Darko Dragičević and reproduced photographically in *The Readymades*, may imply a weaker, more ambiguous instance of art’s “working-through” of the traumatic past.

In an important exhibition in 1996 entitled *No Wave: Art in Yugoslavia, 1992-1995*, the Serbian art historian Lidija Merenik introduced the concepts “fictional site” and “active escapism” to characterize key aspects of the otherwise diverse artistic tendencies of the time. In her catalogue introduction, she wrote that active escapism involves the “creation of a parallel-fictional reality and quite personal stories which actually would not have emerged if they had not been motivated by the existential reality itself which was sometimes able to surpass fiction itself.” (Merenik 1996, n.p.). Merenik’s terms shed light on an important feature of Holten’s novel and help connect my own interpretative engagement with the text back to the broader problem of avant-garde inheritance.

Holten employs literary devices typical of metafictional play with authorship and embedded narration; in the Anglo-American postmodern context, such are familiar from works by John Barth, Donald Barthelme, B.S. Johnson, Robert Coover, Gilbert Sorrentino, Ishmael Reed, and others, while echoing still-earlier work by Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, and the writers of the *nouveau roman*. But despite certain resemblances, Holten has done something different. Not only does he set in motion a (meta-)fictional literary apparatus; he also draws upon modes, themes, and settings peculiar to the visual art world of the “post-socialist, postmodern avant-garde,” as the Slovenian art theorist Aleš Erjavec characterized the distinctive “third” phase of the avant-garde in Yugoslavia. (Erjavec 2003b, 36–62). Holten’s book can thus, among its other threads, reflect on the legacies of the historical and neo-avant-garde as they are once more desperately (re-)deployed in the aftermath of socialism’s demise. In his collaboration with the artist Darko Dragičević, Holten has created a meta-fiction of the “fictional site” of an invented artist group LGB’s activities. The LGB group also exhibited art venues across Europe and in New York, accompanied in some cases by other typical art world practices such as opening talks and gallery performances (Otto Zoo, n.d.). *The Readymades* shuttles between literary and visual art, between the fabulated and the readymade, and between the artistic symbolic order and the traumatic-historical real bursting forth, in what the *nouveau réaliste* artist Pierre Restany calls “the automatic manifestation of the sensible” (Holten 2011, 344–345).

Seen through this interplay of fictional site and readymade practice, *The Readymades* signals its relation to the historical avant-garde from the outset through its title, which refers to Marcel Duchamp’s practice of appropriating prefabricated objects or images and displaying them as works of art. The most famous of these works, Duchamp’s notorious *Fountain*, was an industrially produced urinal, inverted and signed by the pseudonymous and punned artist “R. Mutt” then submitted to the exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in 1917, where it was accepted but not displayed, and subsequently went missing. We know of the “original” work primarily through a photograph in the studio of Alfred Stieglitz and its publication in the short-lived little magazine *The Blind Man*. Although this history of the readymade is only peripherally registered in Holten’s novel, it is notable that surrounding the provocation of Duchamp’s *Fountain* are several additional features that resonate in Holten’s book: reflexivity concerning the definition and boundaries of the artwork; the employment of pseudonymous authorship; the premise of lost and/or fictional artworks; and the relay of mediations – including citational and photographic – that gestures toward but also forecloses access to an “original” artistic work or autobiographical experience. The LGB group, too, as Holten has constituted it, would appear to encapsulate different aspects of Duchamp’s complex practice of the readymade: Miloš Lubarda (“L”) poetically modifies found photos, documents, and captions; Aleksandar Gojković (“G”) founds a Paris-

based gallery and plays the institutional and art-market game with speculative success; while Djordje Bojić paints “non-retinal” (Duchamp) concepts, rendering words such as “Zukunft” (future) in pictorial form.

Through citation of three actual (“readymade”) artist texts, one fictional manifesto of the LGB group, and the testimony of a rape victim before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia as separately numbered and typographically distinct pages patched in from another (fictive) book, Holten suggests the art-historical pedigree and broader historical context of his Serbian art group. He associates them, sequentially, with the historical avant-garde (Dadaism, Zenitism), the neo-avant-garde (*nouveau réalisme*, “neo-Dada”), and contemporary post-avant-gardism (relational aesthetics), as well as with the war crimes and violence following the breakup of Yugoslavia. These heterogeneous, spliced-in pages, though appearing intermittently amidst differently numbered narrative pages, are nevertheless presented as continuously numbered among themselves, running from pages 340 to 352 and hence pointing to their extraction from a single published source despite the testimonial transcript clearly not fitting with the art-related texts. Through these five interpolations as print-readymades – pages from another book sewn into the novel – Holten rejoins a broken historical thread leading from the nihilistic revolt of Dadaism, with its background in the early twentieth-century catastrophe of World War I, to the violence and trauma of the Yugoslavian civil war in the century’s final decade.

The first of these extra-bibliographic interpolations, numbered pages 340 and 341 and with a black frame around the page reproduces Hugo Ball’s Dada manifesto of 1916, which opens by declaring Dada to be “a new tendency in art”. The incorporation of this textual “readymade” and the deletion of the narrative’s page numbers in favor of the manifesto’s pagination suggest that the “nonsense” of the avant-garde breaks into narrative and suspends it, releasing an original, creative force. Ball’s text refers to his passionate attempt to cleanse language of its conventions and create new words that would not be compromised by the worn-out lexicons of commerce, bureaucracy, militarism, journalism, and literature. His pronouncements are burdened by the weight of this inheritance and charged with the pathos of breaking free into a nonsensical-newsensical space of original words. A few pages later, another spliced-in text appears, by the neo-avant-garde artist and critic Pierre Restany, who declares at the start of his text “40° Above Dada” that “Dada is a farce, a legend, a myth” (Holten 2011, 343), thus implying that Ball’s attempt at an absolutely new beginning had failed and that the new avant-garde would need to go beyond Dadaist negativity to (re)make things anew. Restany’s *nouveau réalisme* turns to the readymade for inspiration. “Marcel Duchamp’s anti-art gesture,” Restany concludes, “assumes positivity.... The readymade is no longer the climax of negativity or of polemics, but the basic element of a new expressive repertory.” (Holten 2011, 344). Continuing the art-historical echoes, Holten

incorporates a text by Nicholas Bourriaud, associated with the notion of “relational aesthetics” much in play in the contemporary art world of the 1990s and early 2000s, thus concurrently with the events of the novel. In fact, Bourriaud’s text introduces his 2008 exhibition “La consistance du visible,” which is flippantly mentioned by one of Holten’s characters as “some crap.” Bourriaud’s exhibition text cites Restany’s neo-avant-garde call in 1960 for “the automatic expression of the real” in “the radical gesture of ‘direct appropriation’... ‘the automatic manifestation of the sensible.’” (Holten 2011, 344–345). These various art-historical and art-critical reiterations suggest an ironic perspective on the Dadaist Ball’s claims to originate language, dramatizing instead the avant-garde’s self-consuming diminution as it has aged across a century of intermittent returns (Adorno 1981, 95–116; Paz 1974).

Two more texts are spliced in this manner into the main narrative: a manifesto of the LGB group, putatively from 1995 in Belgrade; and testimony about the war crime of rape before the International Criminal Tribunal in 2000.² These two texts are positioned as documents of “leaving the twentieth century,” to borrow the Situationists’ phrase (*Internationale Situationniste* 1964, 5), in which the topics of the manifesto appear to derive from a desire to escape from the horrors narrated in the latter text’s recorded testimony. The second paragraph of LGB’s manifesto picks up the theme of war, “We dismiss any need for war, starting as we must with war,” and this is further amplified in the fourth paragraph:

As artists we have experienced war and know its consequences. The fall of man is in his very self-belief – art then... cannot delude itself with questions of progress... How many generations does it take for a society to build train networks that end in Auschwitz, Dachau, Buchenwald, etc.? How civilized are we that our civilization merits the rape and pillage of other civilizations, conducted in our name, by soldiers and young men whose life should be spent not in uniform but in a creative everyday civilian world of red doorknobs? (Holten 2011, 346)

Although the manifesto’s implication is that history might be, if not reversed, at least psychically “exited from” through the practice of art – perhaps offering space and time to atone and heal – the note is pessimistic and, as the subsequent fate of Djordje and his friends suggests, rightly so. LGB’s manifesto concludes with a one-sentence quotation from Russian absurdist writer Daniil Kharms, who died of starvation in a prison psychiatric ward in 1942 during the siege of Leningrad: “We have to get going. Lord, but

² I have not been able to identify this specific testimony in the United Nations’ database for the tribunal, and such testimony is not typically as continuously narrated as it is in Holten’s text, but rather is regularly punctuated by questions and objections. Holten’s “testimonial” text may or may not be an authentic document, but it is in any case verisimilar to the testimony given to the ICTY.

how quickly it gets dark here” – implying that an exit from the terrors of the twentieth century may not so easily be found, much less ready-made (Holten 2011, 347).

3. *Headless* Novel Unbound

By contrast with Holten’s literary internalization of art activity, Goldin+Senneby’s novel *Headless* derives from an expansive international art project investigating offshore finance; the literary work is only one of the objectified outcomes of the project, which also included installations, lectures, discussions, performances, blogs, documentation, etc. On the artists’ website, they characterize the overall work as an “eight-year long performance tracing an offshore company on the Bahamas called Headless Ltd.” (Goldin+Senneby 2009, n.p.). Elsewhere on their website, they write:

In the body of work known as *Headless* (2007-2015) Goldin+Senneby approach the sphere of offshore finance, and its production of virtual space through legal code. Investigating strategies of withdrawal and secrecy, they trace an offshore company on the Bahamas called Headless Ltd. A ghostwritten detective novel continuously narrates their investigations. The novel *Headless* by K.D. was published by Triple Canopy in 2015, but the main artistic proposal was the making of the novel as an “ongoing performance” (2007–2015), including staged situations and exhibitions such as *Gone Offshore* (2008), *Headless, From the Public Record* (2009), *Headless at Regus* (2010), *Lot 36: Fiction on Auction* (2010), and *The Decapitation of Money* (2010). (Goldin+Senneby 2015, n.p.)

Another key feature of the whole *Headless* enterprise is that at no time did the artists appear at any “public situation” related to the project. They commissioned ghostwriters to author texts, engaged actors to recite statements, and brought in academics and art professionals to elaborate on the implications of the project. Through the artists’ withdrawal from the physical scene of activity, the project itself became “headless,” taking place only through surrogates and hired hands. The cultural economist Ismail Ertürk, a participant in Goldin+Senneby’s work, specifies that these surrogates were in no way to be understood as the artists’ “collaborators,” but rather functioned more like living materials and tools:

When asked by the curator Jacob Fabricius how they could describe the collaboration with me in the context of their other collaborations in the *Headless* project, Goldin+Senneby responded, as usual, by quoting a spokesperson who had previously answered a similar question about their working method by saying that there is only one collaboration in Goldin+Senneby’s work and that is between Goldin and Senneby. (Ertürk 2021, 100)

These various “performances” feed back into the novel-in-progress, in which real participants in the art events figure alongside fictional characters whose home is the genre-fiction world of the detective novel, with, however, real-world mystery novelist and food writer John Barlow playing the detective and even incorporating his vacation blog

posts, written from the Bahamas, into the novel's meandering text (Barlow n.d.). In the generative relation of artwork and fictional narration, thus, Goldin+Senneby deploy a singular form of "headless" authorship, concealed behind authorized representatives and fictional "shells," which mimics the evasive ownership structures of offshore finance. *Headless* is therefore acephalic from the outset in two linked senses: it displaces the authorial "head" through a chain of delegates, and it withholds the governing plot "head" that would normally organize a mystery around a final solution. From a literary point of view, it would be easy to identify precedents to analogous forms of authorship in the proliferating narrators and unidentifiable, "nameless" author of Samuel Beckett's *Watt* or his *Molloy-Malone Dies-The Unnameable* trilogy, and in the play of narrative recursion and linearity in the fabulations of Jorge Luis Borges or Alain Robbe-Grillet's "new novels" and films. Goldin+Senneby's interest in the specific *literary* outcome of their project was, however, ancillary to their broader artistic exposition of the dynamics of global finance and the contemporary forms of money.

In fact, as the publisher Alexander Provan recounts, the whole narrative rested on a certain pun-like conjunction discovered on an internet search related to offshore finance:

Goldin and Senneby were [...] developing a project related to offshore companies. For months, they had been investigating Headless Ltd., which had been registered in the Bahamas through Sovereign [Trust]. They had discovered Headless through a happy accident of Googling, while researching Acéphale, the secret society founded in the early 1930s by Georges Bataille. They became fixated on the possibility of some connection between Acéphale, which is a French transliteration of the Greek for "headless," and Headless, the company. (Provan 2014, 12-13)

Provan quotes Barlow as having remarked that "the novel had to portray this abstruse and purposefully mystifying enterprise hinging on a speculative connection between Headless and Acéphale. But it also needed to be a murder mystery capable of being published and read as such – more Dan Brown than Paul Krugman." (Provan 2014, 14). If, however, the center of a detective fiction is typically a corpse, here the corpse is missing its "head": the structuring function of a mystery plot, a resolvable enigma toward which the detective may direct his growing knowledge and deepening interpretation of facts.

As a detective, Barlow is in more than one sense "clueless." In *Headless*, the "crime" is diffuse, scattered across multiple sites and times, and entangled with the shadowy "legality" of headless offshore ownership; crime is not a punctual event to be recreated and narrated, but an ongoing, globally distributed process. If there is any corpse involved in *Headless's* plot, it is rather an "exquisite corpse," the avatar of a surrealist game, in which a segment of writing or drawing is continued by another author or artist who has only seen the stub of the previous part. In a later collectively authored work, in fact, *The Exquisite Corpse of August Nordenskiöld*, about an 18th-century Finnish-Swedish alchemist and utopian writer, Goldin+Senneby explicitly charged their participants to

follow this surrealist interleaving procedure in generating another artist's book dealing with gold, money, and alchemy. (Goldin+Senneby, Einarsson 2017)

Goldin+Senneby set about to create, through narrative elaboration, a motivated connection between two semantic fields – offshore economy and Bataille's sacrificial theory and practice – only contingently linked through a shared name. Or more accurately, using a variety of stand-ins, they narratively elaborate the ultimately frustrated search for such motivated connection, which circulates throughout as the plot's (always already) lost object, its ever-elusive object of desire. The book dramatizes the disintegration of both the investigator ("John Barlow") and the investigation itself as this vacant object is pursued with ever-greater urgency. In doing so, however, the artists hint at a deeper, non-narrative *conceptual* connection between Bataille's attempts to recover a "heterological" general economy from industrial capitalism's "restricted economy" and the "headless" structure of offshore companies, which might be thought to subsume, in ironic form, Bataillean headlessness into the autopoietic flows of contemporary global finance (Harrington 2024). Their procedure is akin to the methods of the eccentric early twentieth-century writer Raymond Roussel, beloved by the surrealists, and to the writers of the Oulipo group, who explored various language-based "generative devices" to break literary invention free from habituated conventions and contents. (Foucault 1986; Matthews, Brotchie 2005; Motte 2015). Connections, conjunctions, and coincidences abound in Roussel's and Oulipo's narratives. Yet these eventuate from purely formal, linguistic happenings (in an extended sense, "rhymes" and "puns" at various scales) hidden beneath and behind manifestations of narrative incident, which take place in strange, ungrounded settings and temporalities. "Headlessness" characterizes the condition of "non-knowledge" that follows from the narrator-investigator's (and successively, the reader's) failure to secure meaningful passage between characters, settings, temporal intervals, and themes as disclosed in narrative. In works such as Roussel's *Locus Solus* or *Impressions of Africa* or Georges Perec's *La Disparition*, which recounts the mysterious disappearance of the letter "e" from the French language, we are left only with accumulating indices of a progressive failure to know – a process of reading as "losing our heads" that is set in train, as well, by the acephalous premises of Goldin+Senneby's *Headless*.

The storyline of *Headless* is relatively schematic, however ensnarled and self-interrupting its articulations may be. The author John Barlow is contacted, remotely through email, by artists Goldin+Senneby to investigate an offshore company in the Bahamas, Headless Ltd., and write a novel about the process of his investigation and what he finds. He travels on expense account to the Bahamas and starts to follow out certain leads he stumbles upon, including the curious relation of the company in question to the concept of the "acéphale" and perhaps, more dimly, to Bataille's secret activities in the 1930s and his death in the early 1960s, which coincides with the offshore incorporation

of the shadowy Headless Ltd. Barlow's search gets entangled with two fictional characters, through whom he falls into increasing intrigue and danger: a corrupt Nassau police official, who for years has pocketed payments made by a wealthy Brazilian to support his illegitimate son, and the Brazilian's legitimated daughter, a former Bahaman police detective who disappeared after committing a bombing to destroy evidence against her brother, who was being framed by her malicious police colleague. Through his investigations of Headless, Barlow blunders into the midst of this deadly rivalry. Meanwhile, the commissioning artists send him various materials and instructions for how to write the next chapters of the book, incorporating, for example, new art events that they have (remotely) staged and new (real) figures that they have engaged to take part in them. Frustrated and increasingly paranoid from his unfruitful investigation of Headless Ltd., bewildered by erratic communications and peremptory demands of his artist-clients, Barlow loses control of the novel he has been contracted to write and descends into self-neglect and delirium. At the end of the novel, having become obsessed with a violently obscene text by Bataille recounting the ritual live burial of a baboon with only its exploding, red anus exposed above ground, Barlow stabs the fictional stand-in of the real-life economic geographer Angus Cameron, a prominent academic participant in Goldin+Senneby's project, while Cameron is delivering a lecture at the London Zoo. Barlow is arrested and hauled away as two fictional characters who have been bystanders at the event say their farewell – vaguely implying that Headless, or at least some related offshore interest, has been pulling the characters' strings all along.

The prologue and epilogue make this acephalic structure explicit by enclosing the whole Headless Ltd. mystery in a reference to Bataille's secret society *Acéphale*, which in the late 1930s may have conspired to commit a human sacrifice of a voluntary victim in the forest of Marly, west of Paris. Many of the would-be participants later kept silent about the activities of the group and reliable information is scarce; it seems likely, however, that no sacrifice, or at least no human sacrifice, ever took place (Bataille 2017; cf. *Acéphale* 1995). The prologue imagines a group of people meeting at a provincial railway station at night and walking out into the forest to enact a ritual – we presume that this is Bataille and the members of his secret society. At prologue's end, they are trembling in ecstasy as they long for a direct encounter with death. Yet as we will soon learn in the novel that follows, the sacrificed body is nowhere to be found: the only corpse that presents itself subsequently is the “exquisite corpse” of Headless's own self-generating text and its multiple layers of displacement, dissimulation, and mediation. Following the abortive detective narrative, the epilogue returns to the forest in the prologue, but several decades later than when Bataille and company once haunted it. John Barlow, now out of jail and having abandoned his career as a writer, still wants to know if he had “really got it all wrong” or if he had in fact glimpsed some terrible, abyssal truth in his investigative pursuit of Headless Ltd.

Barlow agrees to meet the artists Goldin+Senneby “at the station where Bataille met up with his disciples for their midnight walk into the forest shortly before Acéphale was disbanded.” “Why?” he asks, “Why do this, after what happened?” (K.D. 2014, 339). In the epilogue, Barlow is still in the hermeneutic snares of the headless plot he was put in charge of authoring, and he wants the artists to clear things up definitively. The three men meet and go into the forest, agreeing to snap some photographs of Barlow by the tree where Bataille’s human sacrifice might have occurred, or, as Barlow puts it, “where it all didn’t happen.” (K.D. 2014, 340). Having gone deep into the forest, however, the artists melt away: Barlow calls out to them and receives no answer. The epilogue concludes inconclusively:

He hears what seems to be someone saying his name.

“Yes?”

He waits for a reply, not quite sure where the sound came from.

He waits.

The noise of the forest continue [sic]. The drips. A bird. The distant snap of a twig.

He waits. (K.D. 2014, 344–345)

Has Barlow once more been left in suspense by the elusive Swedish artists? Are they surreptitiously snapping his picture standing by a lightning-struck, “decapitated” oak tree? Or has he, like Borges’s too-clever detective in “Death and the Labyrinth,” been led to the scene of the crime where he himself will be the murder victim? Has Barlow gone definitively mad, in an even worse breakdown than his violent attack at the London Zoo? Or will the Bataillean sacrifice finally be carried out, “off-scene” beyond the novel’s last page, decades after its original “unhappening”?

Headless’s readers will never know. This refusal of resolution, already prepared by the novel’s headless authorship and premise, leaves Goldin+Senneby’s relation to the avant-garde/neo-avant-garde past as one of teasing evasion. The book tarries in merely possible and contingent connections, while neither denying nor confirming its present-day filiation with the avant-garde legacies of the past. The artists discreetly withdraw from the site of Bataille’s sacrificial tree and reside offshore from the scene of authorship, perhaps plotting to resume their performance at an undetermined future date, with a new cast of characters and extras.

Taken together, *The Readymades* and *Headless* suggest that the contemporary artist-fiction does not inherit the avant-garde as a stable style or as a simple program of renewal. It inherits a field of procedures – readymade appropriation, fictional authorship, manifesto, performance, secret society, generative constraint – that must be narratively reassembled under altered historical conditions. Holten’s novel turns that inheritance toward the problem of post-Yugoslavian violence: its fictional site and (putatively) readymade pages offer a fragile symbolic working-through that cannot undo history but can register the desire to exit from it. Goldin+Senneby’s project reverses the relation

between novel and artwork: art actions generate a mystery narrative whose headless authorship mimics the opacity of global finance and the unresolved allure of Bataillean sacrifice. In both cases, the avant-garde's "tradition of the new" survives as a burdened tradition, one in which novelty is available only through citation, repetition, displacement, and belated reenactment. In the end, however, the expanded field of artist-fiction may represent not so much a definitive retreat from avant-garde ambition as a critical test of its contemporary afterlife: an emergent form in which literature and visual art together probe what remains of radical creation once the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde have both become historical.

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