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title: **I would prefer not to**

1. Of course, my title is taken from the book *Bartleby the Scrivener* by Herman Melville and I wanted to start with three of my favourite books which might give an idea of where my interests lie.

Bartleby & Co. by Enriques Vila-Matas - 83 anecdotes of writers who refuse to write

Tell Them I Said No by Martin Herbert – artists who say no to the incessant demands of the art world

Readers Block by David Markson. In this spellbinding, utterly unconventional fiction, an aging author who is identified only as Reader contemplates the writing of a novel. As he does, other matters insistently crowd his mind – literary and cultural anecdotes, endless quotations attributed and not, scholarly curiosities – the residue of a lifetime's reading, which is apparently all he has to show for his decades on earth. Here are three snippets from his novel:

- If forced to choose, Giacometti once said, he would rescue a cat from a burning building before a Rembrandt.
- A neighbor once came upon William Blake and his wife Catherine reading *Paradise Lost* aloud in their garden. Sitting naked.
- Not far into the story, Robinson Crusoe swims out to the wreck of his ship with no clothes on. In the selfsame paragraph Defoe has him filling his pockets with biscuits.

I'm interested in writing by not writing and how that can be manifested in a variety of iterations.

2. My publishing imprint, information as material was established in 2002.

iam is an independent imprint that publishes work by artists and writers who use extant material — selecting it and reframing it to generate new meanings — and who, in doing so, disrupt the existing order of things.

3. *Interpretation*, 2002

I started the *Interpretation* project on the basis of a question I was asking myself. If an author had provided a set of detailed footnotes or endnotes, could you as a reader, conceptualise, get a sense of what they were writing about from those references...in fact could you go further and actually reconstruct someone's text from their references and the order they came in. So, I invited two literary theorists to write essays on topic of their own choosing. I then erased their main text and sent the constellation of call out numbers and the footnotes to the other writer, for them to reconstruct. In the images I'm showing you, the original text was laid out on cream paper, the erased text on white paper and the reconstruction on grey paper. The artist Sharon Kivland wittily referred to this project as 'an academic blind date'.

I worked with a psychoanalyst around this time for approximately five years on a number of creative projects together. I felt in a way, my role as an artist was performing as a psychoanalyst. You would create a safe space, a space of analysis, a space where others felt comfortable to participate. You create a project which others agree to perform within...just in the same manner the analysand comes to the analytical session and lies on the couch. In the Freudian model, the analyst sits behind the patient, they are there but not there, present and absent simultaneously. The analyst reaches forwards and gently touches the patient's forehead and they begin to free-associate. But, what I really like about this model where my work is often constructed by others, is you can't completely control what is going to happen and it's in the slippages, I feel the real interest lies. The Dadaists said: "the yes and no, they belong together" and from that, I took them to mean, art is a tension between the controlled and the uncontrolled. In those moments of randomness and chance, when the participant in your project, either mistakenly or purposefully misunderstands your instructions, that is where the magic lies.

4. Lucy Sante & the Resurrectionists

Lucy Sante, wrote about the Resurrectionists for *Gagosian Magazine* in 2013. The Resurrectionists would highlight hidden poetry in mundane fiction in order to demonstrate how unimaginative the writers of best-sellers were.

A copy of *Zadig*, bought for a dime from a street pedlar in Wink, New Mexico, was allegedly the spark that created the Resurrectionists, one of the most celebrated revisionist cabals, a shadowy group devoted to finding the poetry hidden in the works of prosaic authors. The Resurrectionists enjoyed

waxing militant, calling for the abolition of “simple load bearing literature, which trucks ideas from the factory and dumps them at your door” and the exposure of “functionaries who pretend to be writers.” The members never made their identities public, although rumors flew during their heyday, from the late 1950s to the mid-70s. This anonymity, which seems to have begun as whimsical cloak-and-dagger affectation, was before long cemented by threats of lawsuits from touchy authors.

In 1965, *Green Berets* author Robin Moore was apparently set to take them to court in Florida on grounds of plagiarism and libel, but at the eleventh hour the court balked at a case directed at an undetermined number of John Does. Before that, Ayn Rand was said to have hired detectives to flush out the poets’ identities in advance of a harassment campaign; evidently she failed. It may be hard at this late date to understand how wealthy, best-selling authors could become so exercised by a marginal avant-garde prank, but the Resurrectionists seem to have had a way of exposing raw nerves, “psychoanalysing” the books they selected and uncovering unconscious residue the authors would rather had not been noticed. Their take down of Michael Crichton’s *The Andromeda Strain* (1969) was so devastating he reportedly told friends that he was done with writing altogether. “I am stupid. My words are mere wind,” he is said to have tearfully confessed to his handball partner.”

I don’t even know if this is real or just from Lucy Sante’s imagination. I don’t know if the example of a poem culled from a novel on her website is a real one or one just manufactured by Sante to illustrate her point. I can’t find anything else online about the Resurrectionists and the fact it all started in a town called ‘wink’, which is a real place in New Mexico - in case you are wondering - does make me wonder if Sante, when writing this, had his tongue firmly in his cheek.

However, another brilliant artist has literalised this concept: Natalie Czech from Berlin.

5. Natalie Czech

I think this image was from an article in Life Magazine showing the strangely coloured light as a result of nuclear tests that had occurred near the island of Hawaii.

6. Andy Warhol/Allen Midgette

"One night in Max's, I was sitting between Paul and Allen-we were all supposed to be leaving the next day to give a few lectures out west, and I suddenly just didn't feel like going, I had a lot of work to do. After I'd been complaining about it for a while, Allen suggested, "Well, why don't I just go as you?" The few moments after he said that were like one of those classic movie scenes where everybody hears a dumb idea that they then slowly realize maybe isn't so dumb. We all looked at each other and thought, "Why not?" Allen was so good-looking that they might even enjoy him more. All he'd have to do was keep quiet the way I did and let Paul do all the talking.

The next day, Paul and Allen with his hair sprayed silver flew out to Utah and Oregon and a couple of other places to give the lectures, and when they came back, they said that it had all gone really well. It wasn't until about four months later that somebody at one of the colleges happened to see a picture of me in the Voice and compared it to the one he'd taken of Allen on the podium and we had to give them their money back. When the local newspaper out west called me for a statement, what could I say except, "It seemed like a good idea at the time." But the whole situation got even more absurd. Like, once I was on the phone with an official from one of the other colleges on that tour, telling him how really sorry I was when suddenly he turned paranoid and said: "How can I even be sure this is really you on the phone now?" After a pause while I gave that some thought, I had to admit, "I don't know."

We went back to the colleges that wanted us to redo the lectures, but some of the places didn't want us anymore - one college said, "We've had all we can take off that guy." But I still thought that Allen made a much better Andy Warhol than I did-he had high, high cheekbones and a full mouth and sharp, arched eyebrows, and he was a raving beauty and fifteen/twenty years younger."

Like I always wanted Tab Hunter to play me in a story of my life-people would be so much happier imagining that I was as handsome as Allen and Tab were. I mean, the real Bonnie and Clyde sure didn't look like Faye and Warren. Who wants the truth? That's what show business is for-to prove that it's not what you are that counts, it's what they think you are." Andy Wahol, *POPism: The Warhol '60s*, p.247f

At one extreme, there is Andy Warhol, who ‘want[ed] to be a machine’,” his idea developed further by Christian Bök as ‘robopoetics’. Bök’s concept refers to a condition where “the involvement of an author in the production of literature has become discretionary. He suggests the poets of tomorrow are more likely to resemble computer programmers than writers, making poetry through coding and algorithms.

8. SLIDE: Michel Foucault Originality? trans-discursive positions

Michel Foucault suggested there have only been three original thinkers in the past 200 years who are Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx because they made what he called trans-discursive positions...because they created schools of knowledge that went on to create their own further schools of knowledge. For example, Freud is one of the key founders of psychoanalysis and yet there is now Freudian analysis, Jungian analysis, Kleinian analysis, Lacanian analysis, the EEP, the ICA, the ECF etc., etc. Psychoanalysis has spread through the twentieth century and in to the twenty-first like a virus. So, if there is virtually no chance of any of us being original, I don’t find that dispiriting, I find that liberating...it gives us the permission to just experiment freely without the weight of originality on our shoulders.

Copying is often denigrated as an activity. However, several important thinkers have recognized the value of copying the words of others. Walter Benjamin extolled the virtues of copying:

“The power of a country road is different when one is walking along it from when one is flying over it by airplane. In the same way, the power of a text is different when it is read from when it is copied out. The airplane passenger see only how the road pushes through the landscape, how it unfolds according to the same laws as the terrain surrounding it. Only he who walks the road on foot learns of the power it commands... Only the copied text commands the soul of him who is occupied with it, whereas the mere reader never discovers the new aspects of his inner self that are opened by the text, that road cut through the interior jungle forever closing behind it: because the reader follows the movement of his mind in the free flight of day-dreaming, whereas the copier submits to its command.”

Gertrude Stein suggested that the only real way to know a book is to copy it: “I always say that that you cannot tell what a picture really is or what an object really is until you dust it every day and you cannot tell what a book is

until you type it or proof-read it. It then does something to you that only reading never can do.”¹

The celebrated author W. G. Sebald allegedly gave the following advice to his creative writing students:

“I can only encourage you to steal as much as you can. No one will ever notice. You should keep a notebook of tidbits, but don’t write down the attributions, and then after a couple of years you can come back to the notebook and treat the stuff as your own without guilt.”²

James Joyce, billed as the Shakespeare of modernism, wasn’t immune to borrowing from others either:

‘I am quite content to go down to posterity as a scissors and paste man,’ Joyce told the American composer George Antheil - ‘for that seems to me a harsh but not unjust description.’

Being unoriginal isn’t necessarily such a bad thing. The following anecdote from Kenneth Goldsmith provides interesting food for thought on why the ‘uncreative’ maybe the new creative: “A few years ago I was lecturing to a class at Princeton. After the class, a small group of students came up to me to tell me about a workshop that they were taking with one of the most well-known fiction writers in America (Joyce Carol Oates). They were complaining about her lack of imagination. For example, she had them pick their favorite writer and come in next week with an “original” work in the style of that author. I asked one of the students which author they chose. She answered Jack Kerouac. She then added that the assignment felt meaningless to her because the night before she tried to “get into Kerouac’s head” and scribbled a piece in “his style” to fulfill the assignment. It occurred to me that for this student to actually write in the style of Kerouac, she would have been better off taking a road trip across the country in a ‘48 Buick with the convertible roof down, gulping Benzedrine by the fistful, washing ‘em down with bourbon, all the while typing furiously away on a manual typewriter, going 85 miles per hour down a ribbon of desert highway. And even then, it would’ve been a completely different experience, not to mention a very different piece of writing, than Kerouac’s. Instead, my mind drifted to those aspiring painters who fill up the Metropolitan Museum of Art every day, spending hours learning by copying the Old Masters. If it’s good enough for them, why isn’t it good enough for us? I would think that should this student have retyped a chunk — or if she was

¹ Grabbed from Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (New York: Vintage, 1990), p.113

² Stolen from Darren Wershler’s essay ‘Conceptual Writing as Fanfiction’ which was originally sourced from Richard Skinner. “Max Sebald’s Writing Tips.” Richard Skinner (blog). 14 Jan. 2013.

ambitious, the entirety — of *On the Road*. Wouldn't she have really understood Kerouac's style in a profound way that was bound to stick with her? I think she really would have learned something had she retyped Kerouac. But no. She had to bring in an "original" piece of writing." Action it.

Goldsmith had made a proposition for 'getting inside Jack Kerouac's head' and I decided to action it.

Kerouac's frenzied typing over 21 days..

My slow, deliberate copying over a year, at a rate of a page a day.

9. *Pigeon Reader*, 2012

Rodney Graham Dr. No insert, 1991. A bookmark with text that can be inserted between pages 56 and 57 of the original first edition to extend and loop a scene in which a poisonous centipede traverses Bond's naked body.

& Yann Searandour, *A Needle in a Haystack*

And, we need to be aware that even writing what is typically considered 'original' material might, in fact, involve ventriloquizing someone else's words, as in this humorous case described by the author Mark Twain:

"Oliver Wendell Holmes [...] was [...] the first great literary man I ever stole anything from — and that is how I came to write to him and he to me. When my first book was new, a friend of mine said to me, 'The dedication is very neat.' Yes, I said, I thought it was. My friend said, 'I always admired it, even before I saw it in The Innocents Abroad.' I naturally said: 'What do you mean? Where did you ever see it before?' 'Well, I saw it first some years ago as Doctor Holmes's dedication to his Songs in Many Keys.' [...] Well, of course, I wrote to Dr. Holmes and told him I hadn't meant to steal, and he wrote back and said in the kindest way that it was all right and no harm done; and added that he believed we all unconsciously worked over ideas gathered in reading and hearing, imagining they were original with ourselves." vi

The precedents are undoubtedly there, throughout history. What distinguishes copying today, however, are the digital tools and the networks of the internet, which make possible shifting large chunks of language from

one place to another in an instant. In the digital age heaps of language – to borrow from Robert Smithson – are reorganised, remediated and reconstructed all the time. In the process, the distinction between the writer and machine is becoming increasingly blurred.

10. **Conclusion:** While employing diverse approaches to copying, these experiments take no interest in copying as a form of reproducibility. Instead, they explore the iterative possibility implicit in every act of copying as a unique form of criticality; they expose the potential of copying as a critical strategy. Their self-reflexive iterability is a method of writing and, at the same time, of interrogating the very paradigms of writing. Works included here demand that we read differently by colliding the present/past, here/now, reading/writing, 2D/3D, old and new, authorship and ownership. They are all about re-framing, re-contextualising, not so much asking age-old questions, as finding new ones that best reflect the contemporary moment. To achieve that, they reconfigure reading as a form of writing, erasure as a mode of inscription, and copying as a form of critique.

I would like to finish with warning over the dangers of working in this field:

Nanni Moretti image

In March, 2013 I was giving a talk on experimental literature in Prague in the Czech Republic. To date, I've published over ten books, but not a single word of them is my own. I'm involved in blurring the boundaries between art and literature. I use the existing words of others (extant material) — I select it and reframe it to generate new meanings — and, in doing so, disrupt the existing order of things. After my talk, my host George - a beautiful man who is the spitting image of the Italian filmmaker Nanni Moretti (Moretti's face breaking into a smile in *Dear Diary* is probably the most joyful cinematic image I've ever seen) - seems concerned. He asks me the same question repeatedly: "do you ever get extreme reactions to your talk?" I shrug him off: "not really - it's only words after all!" Later, after a few beers at Hotel Akropolis George told me what was on his mind. He said: "I didn't want to tell you earlier in case I offended you, but now, after a few beers, I don't really care..." George went on to explain what had transpired at the end of my lecture...a student had approached George in a very agitated state. He was bright red in the face and his chest was heaving, he was so furious. He spluttered: "how...could...you...invite...a...professional...plagiarist...to...talk...to..."

us?” George tried to explain the work of Sherrie Levine and the methodologies of appropriation art to the student which only made them more angry. George then tried a different tack and said: “why didn’t you ask Simon a question in the q&a, tell him what was on your mind?” The student replied: “I couldn’t...I was too upset...I couldn’t talk to him...I would have punched him in the face.”