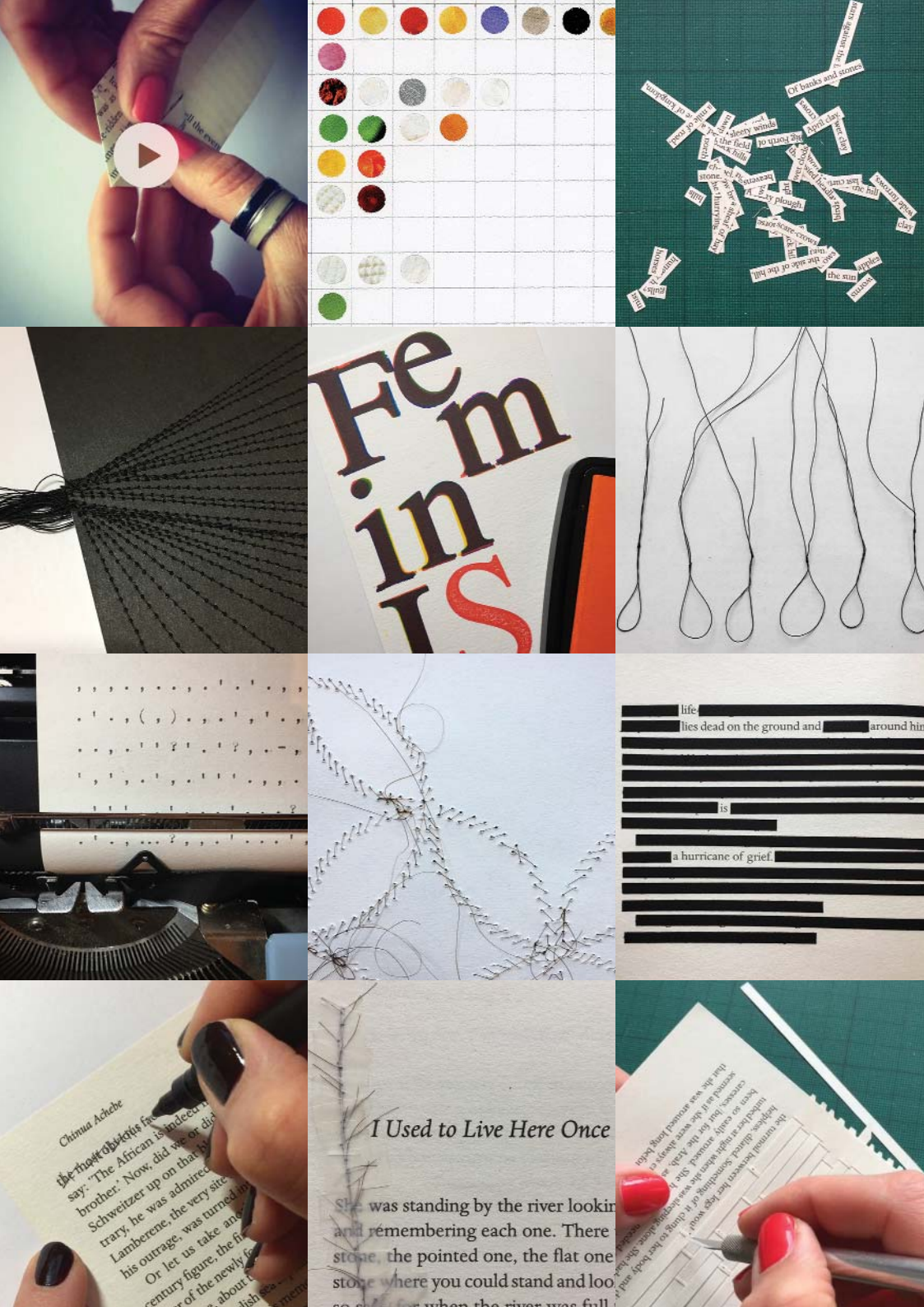


EAGLE GALLERY: 2020

CAROLYN
THOMPSON

POST
MODERNS

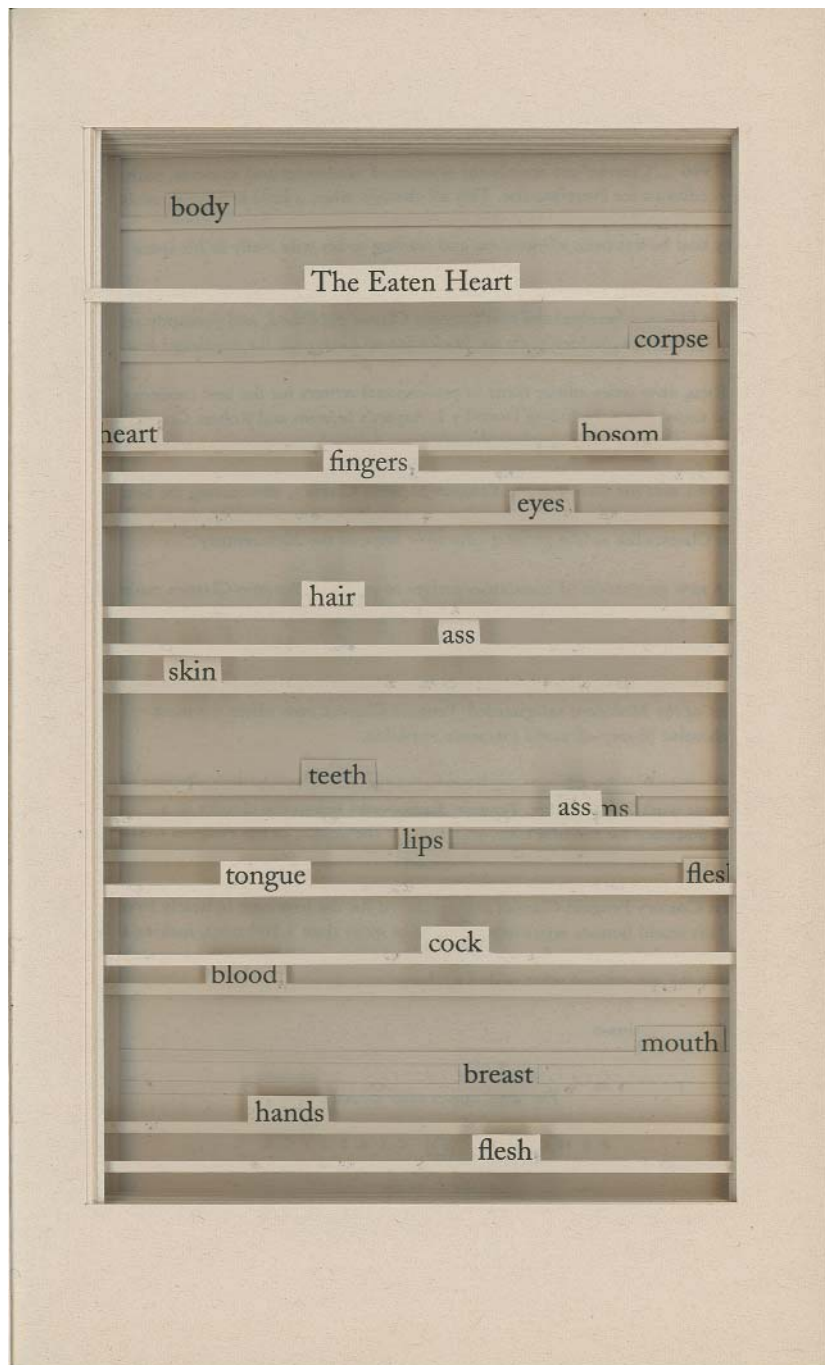


Carolyn Thompson: *Post Moderns*

Carolyn Thompson's recent work originates in a series of fifty small paperbacks published by Penguin Classics in 2018, under the title *Penguin Modern*. The books celebrate the radical spirit of the imprint, bringing together texts by seminal writers from throughout the last century 'who broke the rules, created new means of expression or made their voices heard against the odds'.

I am very grateful to Sean Ashton and Simon Morris for co-authoring the essay for this publication, and to Penguin Classics for their kind endorsement of Thompson's work. The cover of this publication is based on the Penguin Modern series design by Jim Stoddart.

opposite: *Night Terrors (Ghost)*, 2016 / overleaf: *The Eaten Heart*, 2013



Carolyn Thompson: *Breaking and Entering*

There is something called the 'trance' or 'fascination' of reading, the sensation of slipping effortlessly from the external world into the narrative on the page,¹ forgetting your immediate surroundings, lost in the words. But what if you lose yourself, not just in the content of the words but in the materiality of the book, falling into the space of the page, bumping up against individual letters, sliding down the 'tail' of one and knocking into the 'shoulder' of another, traversing the 'foot' of the next and stepping around the 'spine' of its neighbour, splashed with ink, smeared with glue, tripping over the binding thread? The tactile experience of reading is nearly always overlooked, eclipsed by the pressure of interpreting the meaning of the text. In her series *Post Moderns*, Carolyn Thompson brings it to the fore, dissolving meaning into materiality, alloying both into a new visual work.

Among the books I took with me on a recent excursion to Brittany was the Phaidon monograph on Gordon Matta-Clark. The latter studied architecture at Cornell University, developing his concept of Anarchitecture: "...a sort of game in which liminal, unstable urban spaces, 'metaphoric voids, gaps, leftover spaces' were construed as speculations on architecture."² "Why hang things on the wall", he says, "when the wall itself is so much more of a challenging medium?"³ The images in the book, especially those showing a tool-ed-up Matta-Clark at work on the white frame house in New Jersey to create his best-known intervention, *Splitting* (1974) – go beyond mere documentation of a process, showing the artist in the space as a performer, excavating walls, ripping, tearing, cutting and

generally eviscerating the structure. John Ruskin famously said that “when we build let us think that we build forever,” but Matta-Clark was more interested in architecture as something in flux. Thompson’s fascination with books reminds me of Matta-Clark’s fascination with the mutability of buildings. When literary critics go to work on a book’s content, the tacit assumption is that meaning is malleable, but few bring the *form* of the book into this equation, and even fewer, I’ll warrant, would propose turning it into a new thing by way of carrying out their criticism.

Instead of houses slated for demolition, Thompson makes an entire boxed edition of paperbacks her stage. I really thought the task she had set herself – to create a different response to each of the 50 works in Penguin’s Modern Classics series – wasn’t possible. When I met her in June 2019, she had completed 32 and I doubted whether a further eighteen ideas would be viable before the exhibition opened in September 2019 at Shandy Hall in Coxwold, North Yorkshire. Formerly the home of Laurence Sterne, author of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–1767), one of the first novels to blur the distinction between visual and verbal content, this place is claimed by some as the spiritual home of experimental literature. I would have found the task Carolyn set herself daunting as I only have about one idea every three years, so eighteen good ideas over a single summer would be totally beyond me. I convinced myself that some of her creative re-workings of each book would be forced, but I was wrong. I visited the exhibition twice to hear the artist talk about her work and there were no makeweight ideas, just echoes of other people’s, given a new resonance.

In his essay, ‘Tradition and Individual Talent’ (first published in the *Egoist* in 1919), TS Eliot writes that:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.

If one’s work must be seen in dialogue with what has gone before, then what is Thompson’s field? ‘Conceptual Writing’ perhaps covers some of the approaches taken in *Post Moderns*, but not in a canonically prescriptive sense. For example, in *After Capote: When Truman met Marlon* (2019), the astrology report she inserted into *The Duke In His Domain* (a transcript of an interview between Marlon Brando and Truman Capote), though it had to be composed, is more an act of collage in the irony of its juxtaposition than a literary intervention. Similarly, in *After Ekwensi: All the Single Ladies* (2019), the careful editing of sentences from Cyprian Ekwensi’s novel *Glittering City* into a list that describes just one woman, when its male protagonist is in fact an admirer of several women, feels less like a literary act for being executed on a sheet of concertina’d paper, like the product of a game of Exquisite Corpse.

In other words, the point of departure – what the artist starts with – is more prescriptive than the outcome. What she starts with is of course the book, considered as both a physical and conceptual entity, and the issue is how to undo it while retaining some fidelity to the original text. The fact that her responses assume a visual as well as literary form sets them apart from the analytic lengths to which the average reader would be prepared to go, their highly selective materiality lending them a sort of comic authority. Indeed, the obsessively particular and occasionally perverse methods chosen make her seem like the text’s *ideal* reader. “In the particular is contained the universal”, said James Joyce. In other words, the whole is

such charm and conviction,

how hot-headed

a slave to jealous passions

an aggressive girl.

deceitful, tricky, and untrue

raving mad.

extremely good-looking

very beautiful,

elegant, a knock-out.

a world-beater.

coffee-coloured hat

Her head

with half an ear

Her hair had been stretched and combed out,
but it was cut short,

She parted it on the left.

there was just one comb in it

with a burning face,

made of asbestos

her features were carefully chiselled,

She had a baby face.

Her skin was pale brown,

nearer brown than black.

the fair skin that went with most beautiful
Nigerian girls,

light skin

It was clear

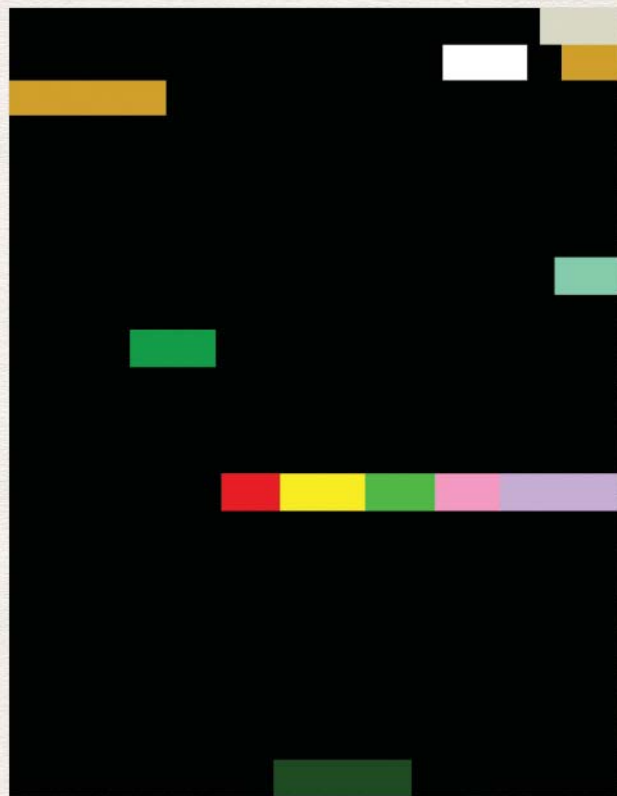
a clear skin that spoke of fresh fish

metonymically inferred from one of its attributes. Every work in *Post Moderns* identifies an attribute of a text, giving it back to us as a visual fragment that has a metonymic relation to it.

Such is the versatility of Thompson's approach, it is unsurprising that some of the works in *Post Moderns* use methods employed by other practitioners known for their deconstruction of the book form. For example, *After King, Jr., Marginalized/Segregated*, 2018 is reminiscent of Pavel Büchler's overwritten diaries, published by the Whitworth in Manchester as *Idle Thoughts* (2013), while *After Nin: Heavy Breathing* (2018) reminds me of the work of Language Removal Services and Derek Beaulieu's *a, A Novel* (2017). *After Beckett: Assimilating the Vowels and Omitting the Consonants* (2019) makes me think of Nick Thurston's print, *He Wore, He Might Find, & He Moved* (2009), while *After Acker: Residents* (2019) is redolent of Thompson's earlier *The Eaten Heart* (2013) and also the textual excavations of Brian Dettmer. *After Nabokov: Study for a Quilt Pattern* (2019) brings to mind Thompson's own *Black Mirror* (2011) as well as Derek Beaulieu's *Local Colour* (2008) and Alison Turnbull's *A Spring Snow: A Translation* (2002). There are many more connections that could be made. Suffice to say, this is an artist working in a prescribed field, but one with methods as diverse as the range of texts at one's disposal, each requiring new skills that must be mastered in order to pull off each 're-reading'. The desired tension between the visual outcome and its literary origin is especially satisfying when the logical structure of the visual cuts across that of its literary host, like an unruly but eloquent dinner guest.

Post Moderns could also be seen as a set of 'conceptualist performed readings'. My yoking together of these three terms may be useful for understanding how literature is here navigated

Music for Chameleons



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through the lens of visual arts training. The first term, 'conceptualist' refers to the privileging of the concept in the making of a work. As Sol Le Witt maintained in his 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art' (1967): "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art."⁴ This extends to the viewer's engagement with the work as well. The 'performance' is manifested in Thompson's conversion of literary content into material form: how she re-deploys the existing words of others with a sleight of hand and mind. These strategies may involve re-writing, re-reading or a purposeful *misreading* of the source material. But the emphasis is always on 'reading', or rather how to extend the *act* of reading, which is taken to be an aesthetic experience in its own right. Reading is usually a private act, but these performed readings are entered into from the start as experiences to be shared through public exhibition. The reading is undertaken by the artist with the specific goal of rendering it as an artwork, which could be considered an exaggeration of the biases all readers bring to a text. This is radically different to the kind of idle or disinterested attitude that most of us have on opening a book, before a certain passage grabs our attention and we enter a more engaged state. Thompson is *pre-engaged*, and through the multifarious forms her readings assume, she asks questions about what kind of reading goes on in a general sense in our culture: what one must 'do' in response to a text to honour one's engagement with it. Despite its playful character, then, there is a 'bibliocratic' politics at work in *Post Moderns*, one that is by no means at odds with Penguin's desire to market what might be considered 'difficult' literature for a middlebrow public.

The results are something like a three-dimensional version of Raymond Queneau's celebrated book, *Exercises in Style* (1947), in which the author tells the same story in 99 different ways,

examining how changes in tense, grammar and voice transform the meaning of what is said, as though to prove that, when it comes to writing a text, what is sayable is always a stylistic consideration rather than a simple matter of 'content'. Thompson does a similar thing with respect to our *reading* of a text, each 'solution' effectively standing as one of many possibilities that might be open to the reader should they wish to expand the scope of literary analysis into new ontological realms. She uses all the skills she has acquired as an artist to persuade us that it's worth doing: overwriting, handwriting, collaging, cutting, splicing, erasing, deleting, drawing, painting, paper engineering, layering, fading, typing, weaving, cancelling, excising, incising, folding, censoring, pinpricking, stitching and sewing.

She inhabits these books, their stories, their words, their ink and paper and makes her individual mark on them as a reader. Rather than just read the book and leave no trace of her engagement, Thompson creates a diminutive monument to each performed reading. And not forgetting the remnants, the many pages and bits of printed matter left over from her investigations, piled up on a shelf and very much part of the exhibition. Evidence of her invasive re-workings, these discards recall Matta-Clark's idea of creating new architecture through removing material. As he said in a draft statement for an early exhibition:

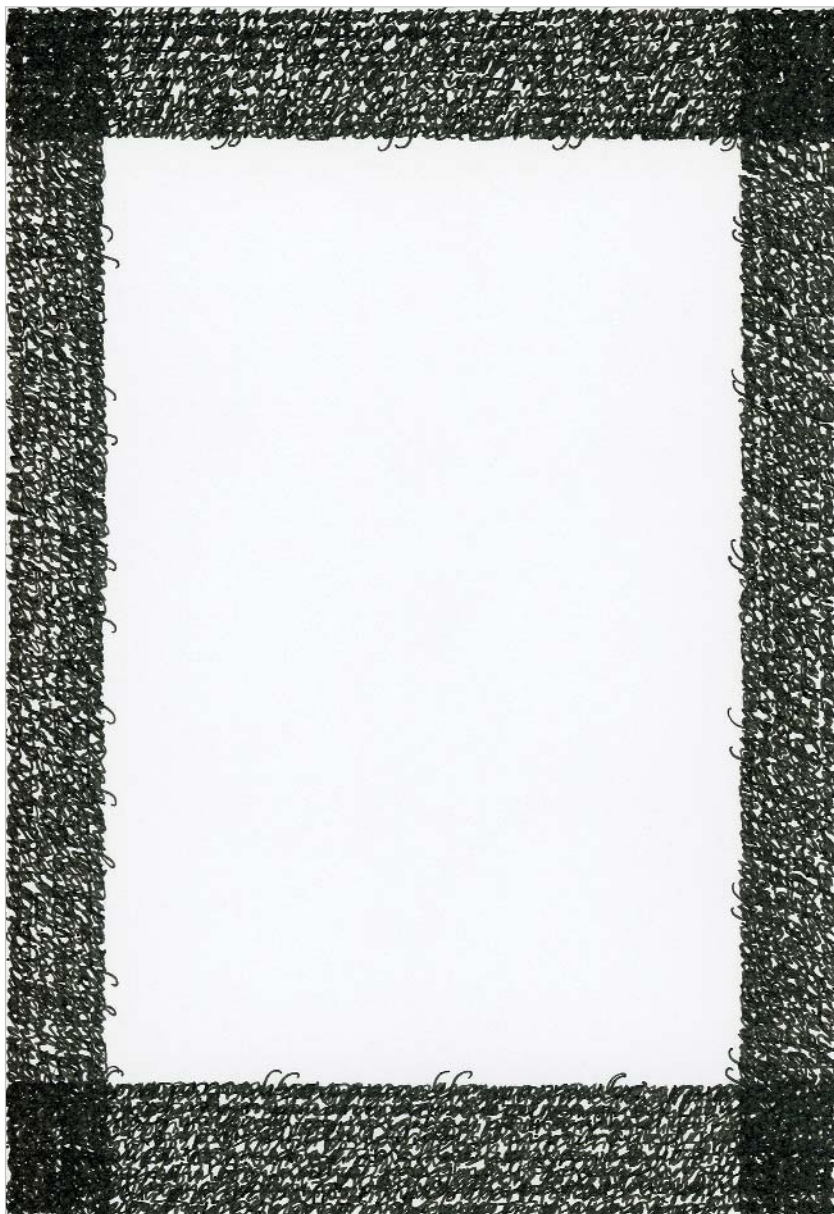
Completion through removal. Abstraction of surfaces. Not-building, not-to-rebuild, not built space. Creating spatial complexity, reading new openings against old surfaces. Light admitted into space or beyond surfaces that are cut. Breaking and entering. Approaching structural collapse, separating the parts at the point of collapse.⁵

Reading new openings against old surfaces. Breaking and entering
– I think that's a good way of thinking about what Carolyn Thompson has done to the edition of fifty short paperbacks in

Post Moderns. By breaking their existing forms, she allows readers new points of entry into the language, ideas and materiality of books, and with it the potential for different ways of reading.

Sean Ashton and Simon Morris 2020

- 1 See Andrew Bennett, 'Introduction', *Readers & Reading* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp.13–15.
- 2 Judith Russi Kirshner and words by Gordon Matta-Clark in 'The Idea of Community in the Work of Gordon Matta-Clark', *Gordon Matta-Clark* (London: Phaidon, 2006), p.154.
- 3 Thomas Crow, 'Legend & Myth', *Gordon Matta-Clark* (London: Phaidon, 2006), p.19.
- 4 Sol LeWitt's 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art' [1969], *Art in Theory, 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p.834.
- 5 From a rejected draft exhibition statement Matta-Clark authored for the exhibition at Vassar College, 1971 in Thomas Crow, 'Alchemy & Anthropology: 1962–71', *Gordon Matta-Clark*, (London: Phaidon, 2006), p.33.



PM1 *After King, Jr.: Marginalized/Segregated* 2018 leaf 1 of 2



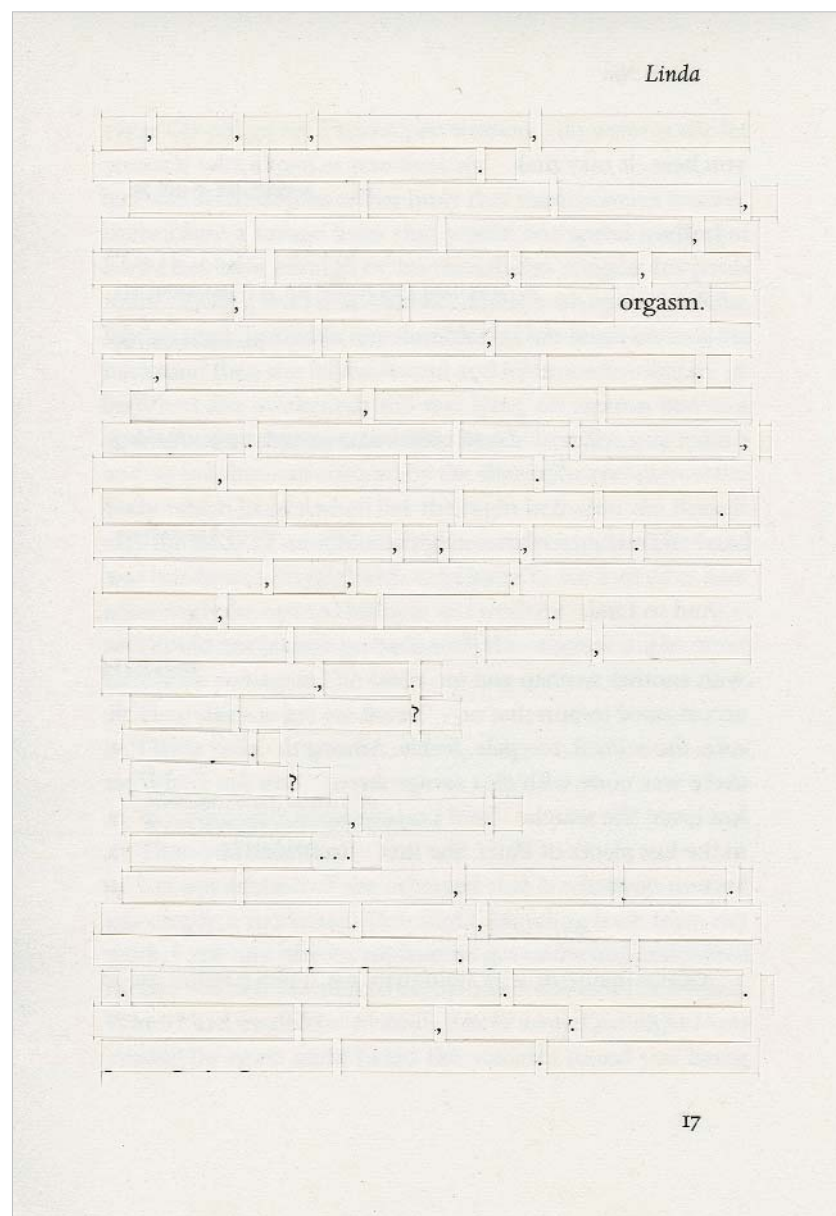
PM1 *After King Jr.: Marginalized/Segregated* 2018 leaf 2 of 2

MOON MY FRUIT

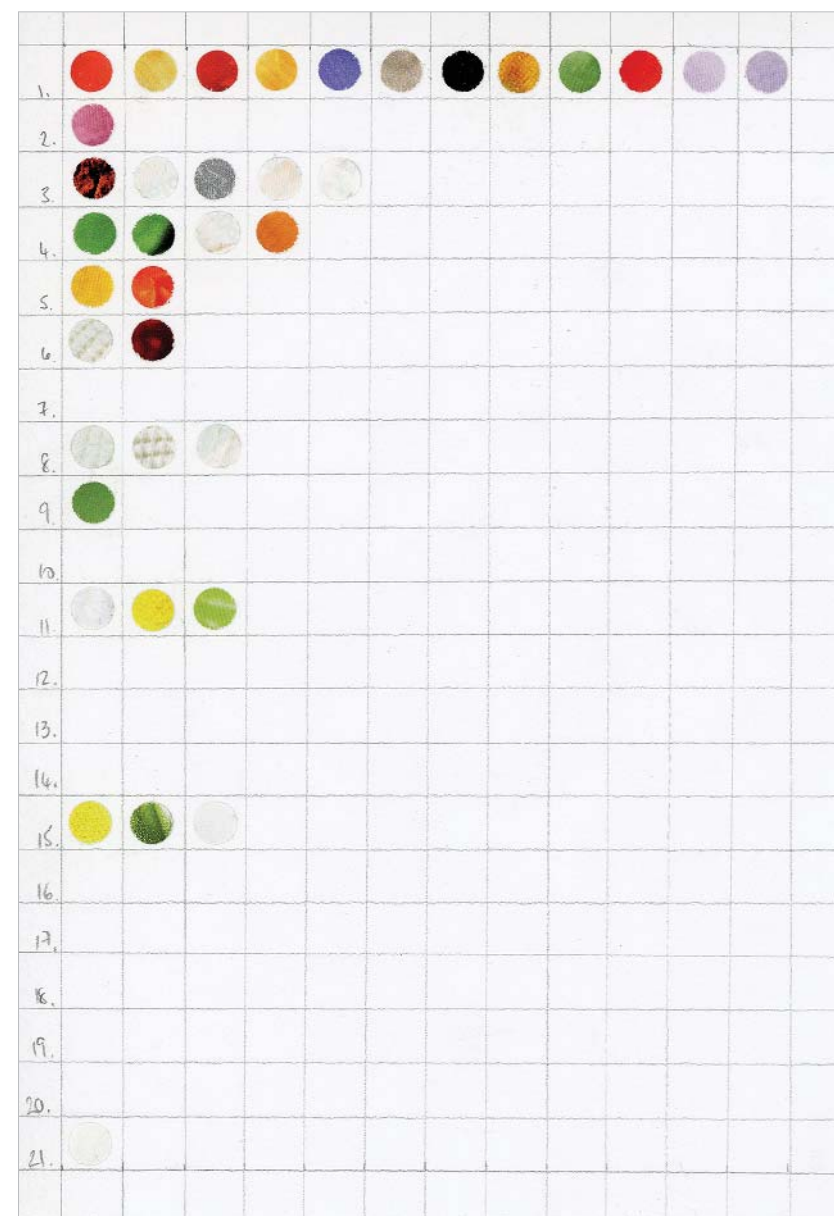
Moon my fruit
pork my Angel
touch my atom bomb
Bother my eggs
smoke my end
consider my genitals
Gibber my chicken
rise in my throat
grip my fairydom
Ape the stick
spit the pig
finger my swollen skin

Fiddle my bone
milk my honey
tongue my mortal heavens
Swivel my meat
ride my flesh
beat iron on pink iron
Invade my fate
clutch my cop
drive up on big serpent
Bunt the bean
lick the creep
deposit my suggestion

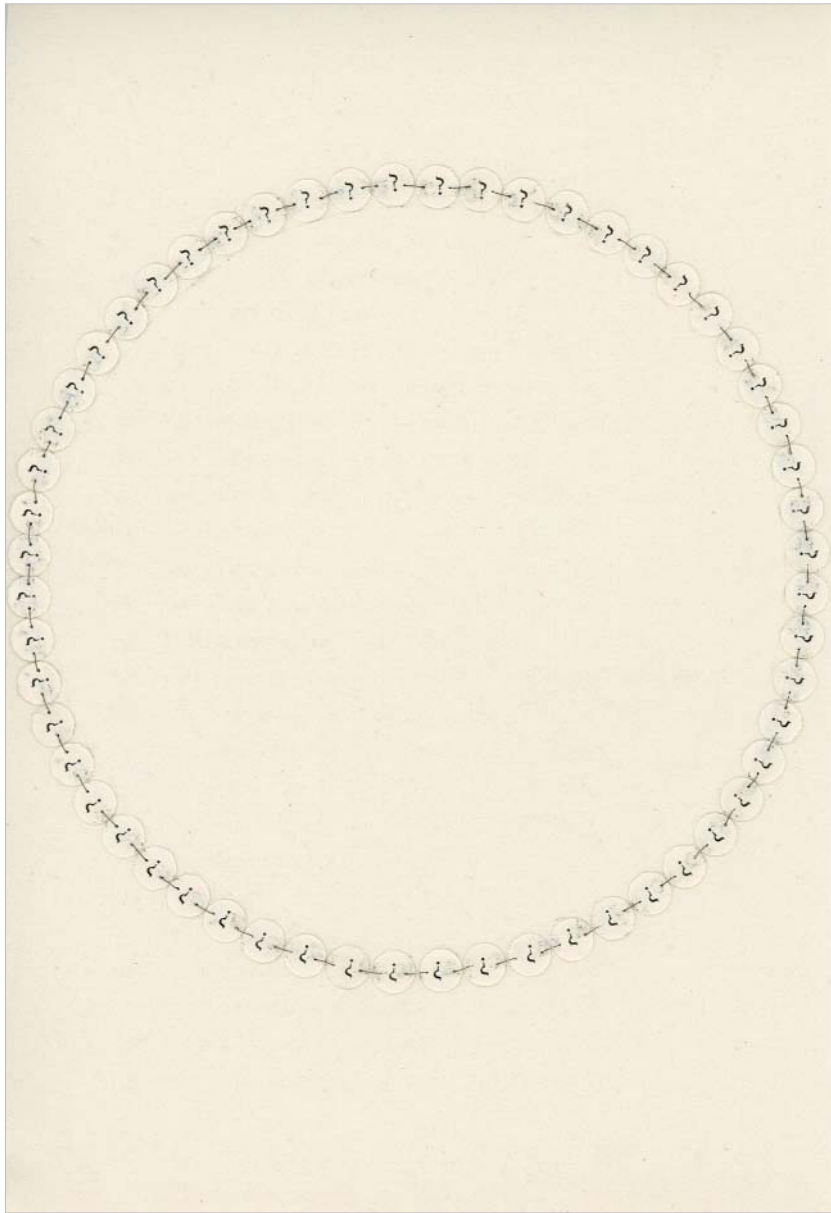




PM6 *After Nin: Heavy Breathing* 2018 leaf 1 of 5



PM8 *After Stein: Food Colouring* 2018 leaf 1 of 3



PM14 After Kafka: *The Word Felt Close at Hand* 2019



PM15 After Lispector: *A Woman's Fate* 2019

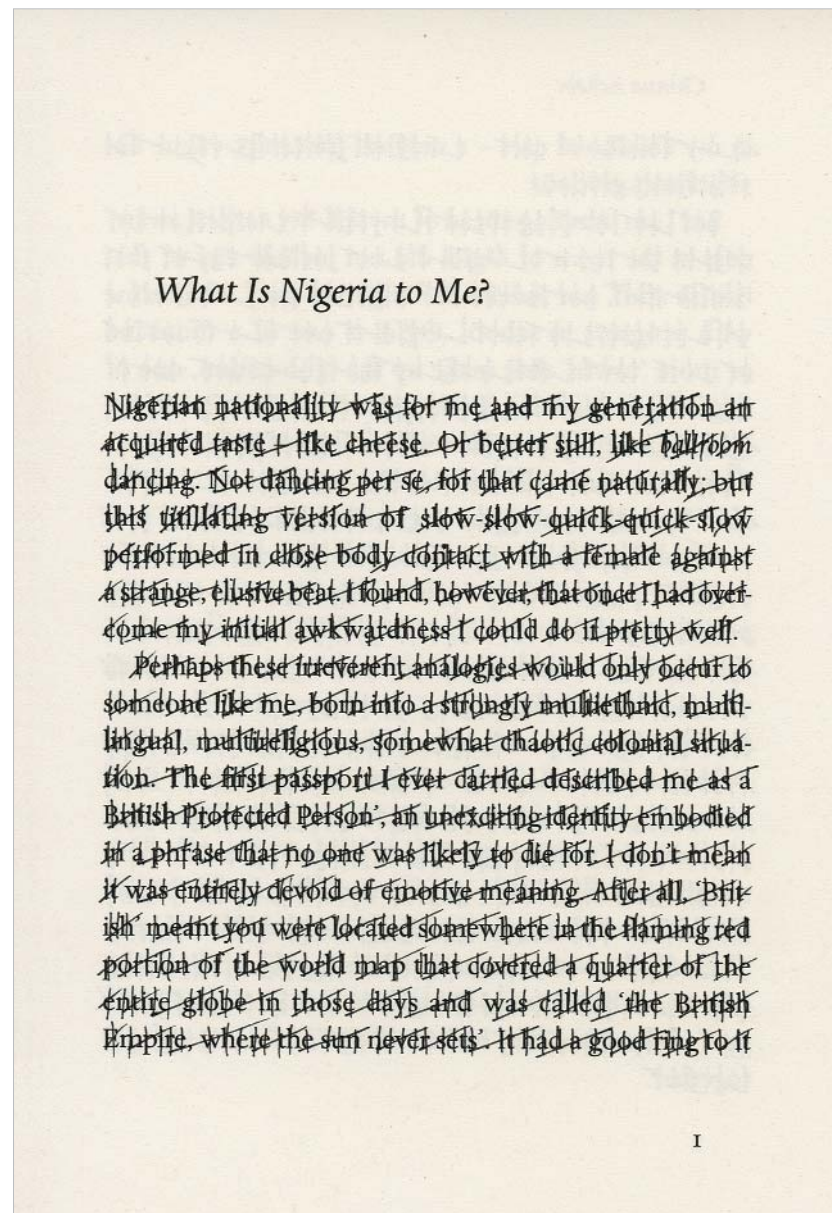
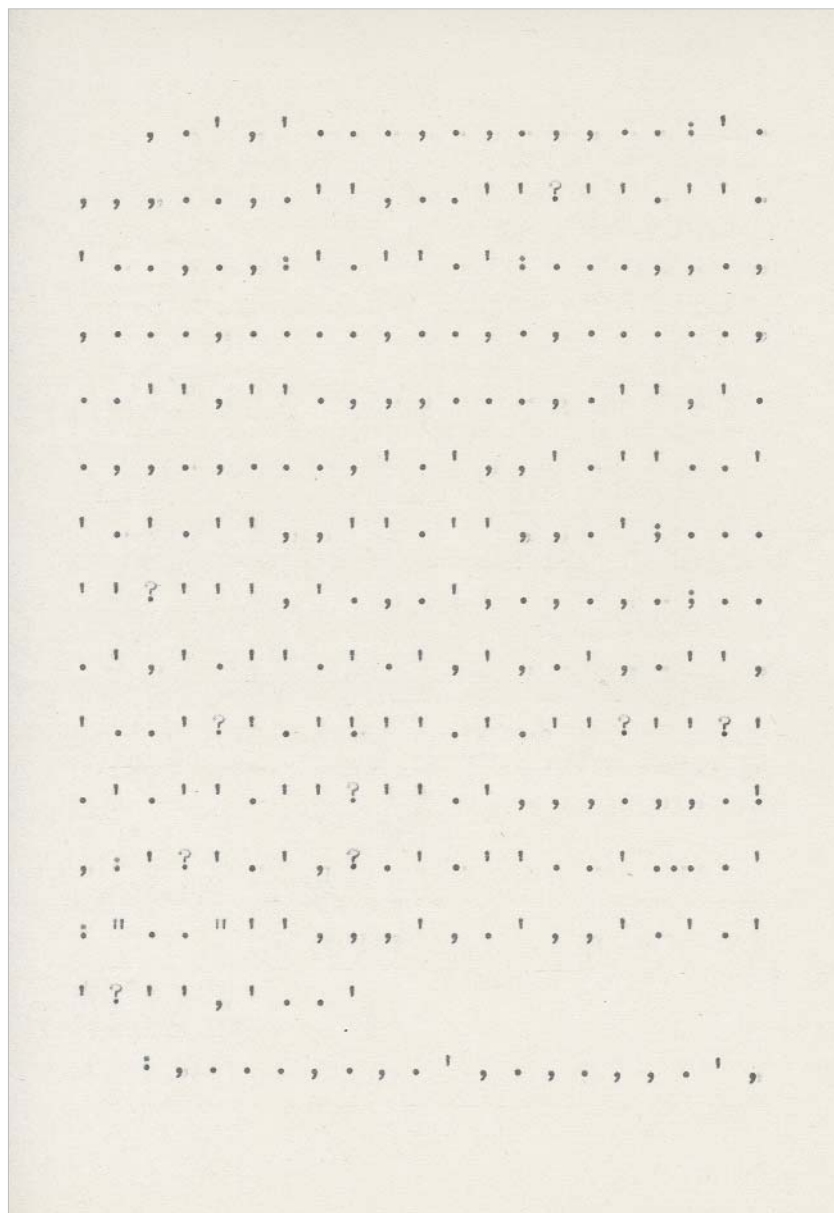
If, After I Die

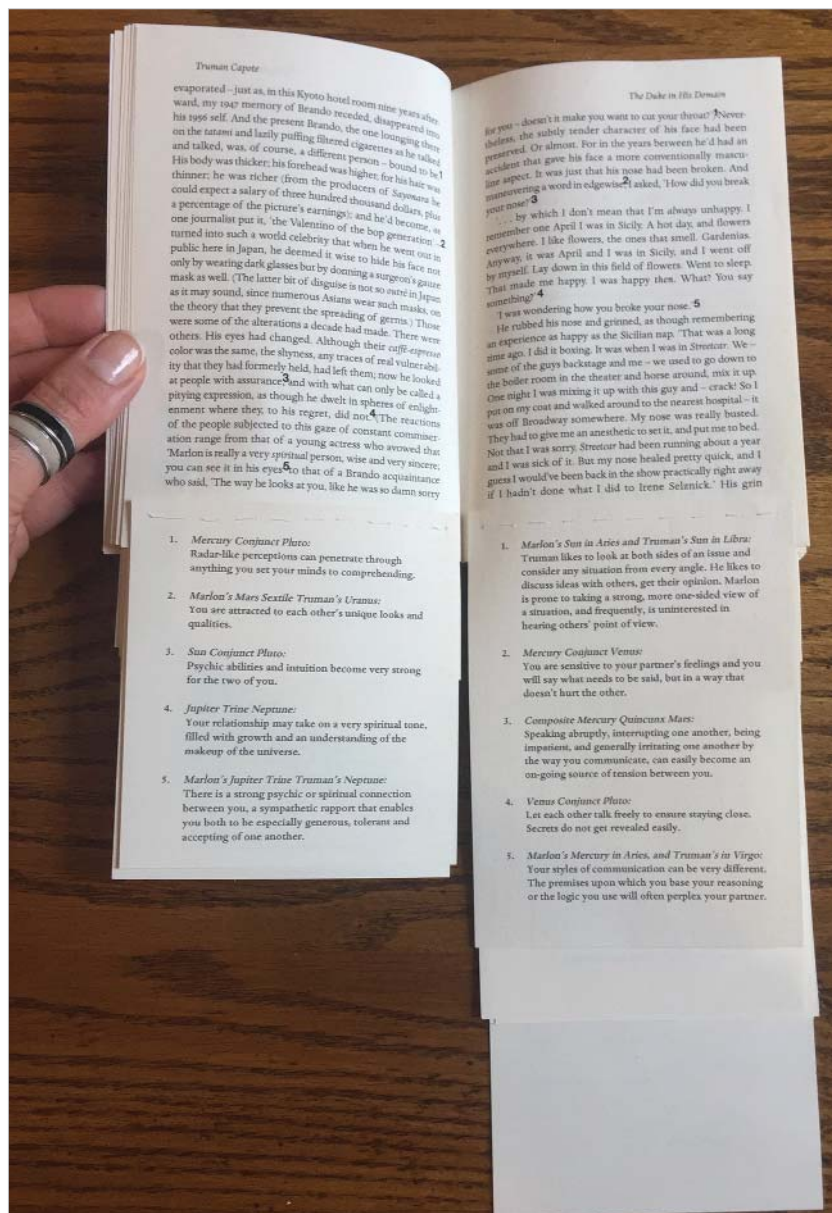
If, after I die, they should want to Hide my body,
There's nothing to stop them
I've just two good things, brains and yes my member
In between my ears and inside my trousers are
Holy.

I am easy to do away with
I lived like a beggar
I existed alone without any Friends
I never had a girl; I could not leave because I never needed
love.
Even love making to me never more than a consequence of
drinking.
I understood that this was, strangely different from
the others.
I understood it with the eyes, never with a smile.
To understand it – with a smile would be to find joys in
the living.

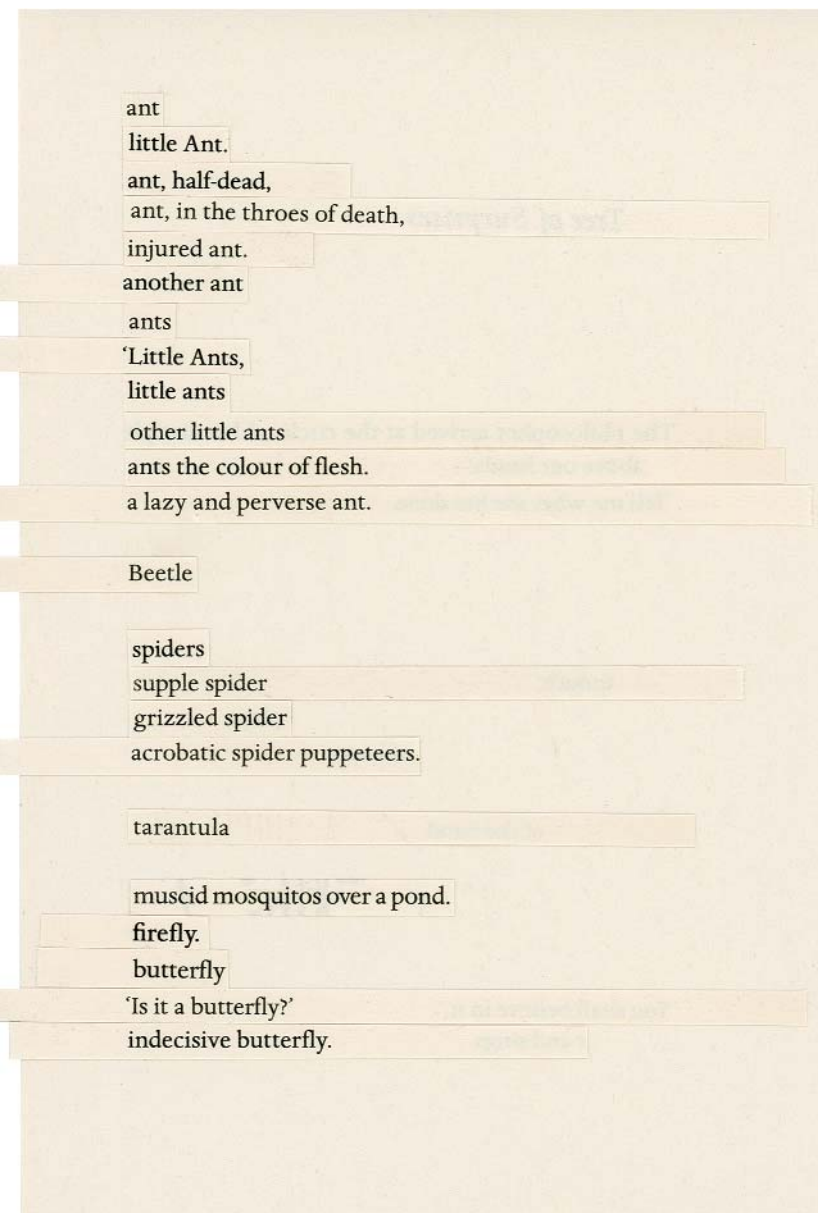
One day I felt terrible like a beast.
I closed my eyes and died.
And by the way, I was not the only corpse.







PM35 After Capote: *When Truman met Marlon* 2019



PM42 After Lorca: *Taxonomy* 2019 leaf 1 of 4

Andy Warhol

Beauty beauty beauty beauty beautiful beauty.
 beauty beautiful beautiful beautiful beautiful beauties.
 beautiful beauties beauty beautiful, beautiful beautiful
 beauty beautiful beautiful beauty. Beautiful beautiful
 beauties beautiful beauty beautiful beautiful beauty
 beautiful. Beauty beautiful beautiful beautiful 'beauty'
 beautiful beautiful beautiful beautiful beauty pretty
 beautifully gorgeous.

BEAUTY. beauty, beauty beauty beautiful beautiful.
 Beautiful beautiful beautiful beautiful beautiful beauty
 beauties beauties beautiful beauties beautiful beauties,
 beauty beautiful beautiful beauty beauty beautiful.

Beauties, Beauties Beauties Beauties Beauty Beauty
 attractive, beautiful beautiful beauty beauties beautiful
 beauty beauty beauty beauty beauty beauty, beauty.
 Beautiful. Beautiful beauties beauty beauty beautiful
 beautiful, beautiful beautiful beautiful beauty beauty.
 beauties beautiful beauty beauty beauty, good-looking
 beautiful beauty. beautiful, beautiful beautiful beautiful
 beauties, beautiful beauties beautiful monotony.

Beauties Beauties. Beauty beautiful beautiful beautiful
 beauties. Beautiful beautiful beautiful beautiful beauty
 'beauty', beautifully beautiful. Beauty beauty. beauty!



Penguin Moderns

In February 2018, we published Penguin Modern: fifty small-format paperbacks designed to celebrate the radical spirit of the Penguin Modern Classics series. We chose writers who broke the rules, created new means of expression or made their voices heard against the odds, all of whom remain provocative and relevant today. The list includes Martin Luther King, who wrote *Letter from Birmingham Jail* on the margins of a newspaper while serving time in an Alabama jail; cult literary icon Kathy Acker, who self-published her story about New York before distributing it to the local art community; Shirley Jackson, the gothic writer marginalized by the literary establishment; and Federico García Lorca, who was executed for his political beliefs during the Spanish Civil War.

As publishers, we don't often get to see what happens to books once they leave the bookshop, so we were thrilled by the creative, provocative way in which Carolyn Thompson has approached Penguin Modern. By cutting, puncturing, folding, sewing, spoiling, rewriting and reimagining these physical books, she has drawn on all the pent-up forces within the texts and released them through powerful visual artworks that challenge us to reassess how we respond to what we read.

Penguin Classics 2019

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