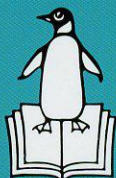


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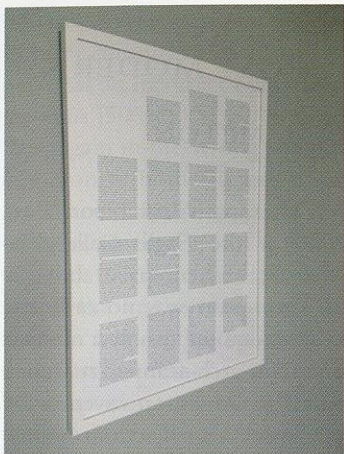
## CAROLYN THOMPSON: 'POST MODERNS'

reviewed by MICHAEL HAMPTON

DURING the course of a visit to Carolyn Thompson's exhibition 'Post Moderns', held in the spring of 2020 at the Eagle Gallery in Farringdon Road, London EC1 (a well-established space above a gastropub), it soon became clear that Thompson was no ordinary reader, but a reader/artist. Furthermore, it was quite possibly a mistake to view her as a reader at all, but more as an arch scanner/surgeon, capable of making skilful textual incisions to books, an inventor of prosthetic figments. Her source material was the collection of fifty slipcased paperbacks comprising *Penguin Modern*, published in 2018. A set of the books was presented on the front desk of the Eagle's L-shaped room, implying that the visual contents were the unpacked toy furniture, fabricated by Thompson in a hands-on encounter with this literary doll's house.

The treatments carried out by Thompson on the individual titles in the set could be placed into four conceptual categories: Alteration, Distillation, Accentuation and Concretisation, with some of the fifty works fitting into more than one class. Her interventionist techniques included overwriting, redaction, *découpage* and reorganisation (of text), pencil line drawing, inkjet print, Letraset, hand-sewing, pin-pricking and gouache, while her use of hair and fibres stood out as idiosyncratic. Looking at this group of elaborated paperbacks revealed that in some cases the *accrochement* – where Thompson's attention had been caught or snared – was often literal, but on occasions complex too. Henry Eliot, Penguin Classics' editor, in an endorsement in the catalogue, recommends her practice enthusiastically, for 'By cutting, puncturing, folding, sewing, rewriting and reimagining these physical books, she has drawn on all the pent-up forces within the texts and released them'. But what did the contents of the show really look like?

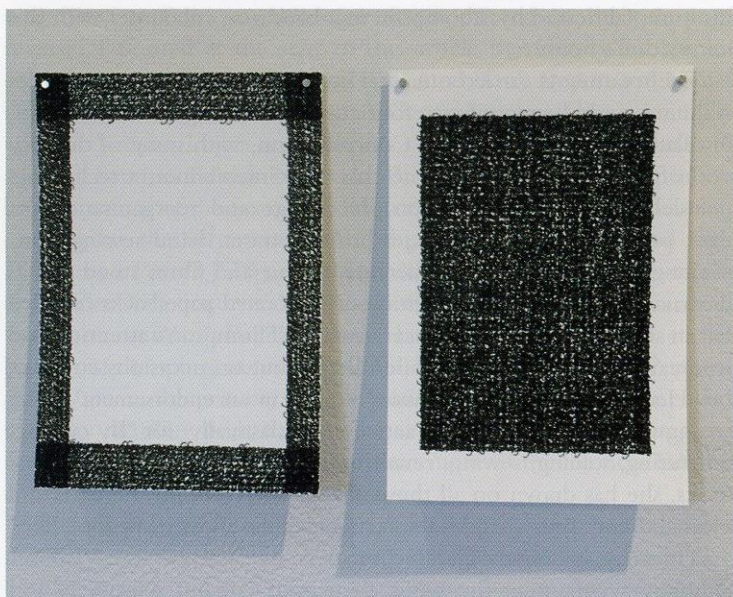
Titles by Federico Garcia Lorca, Andy Warhol and Vladimir Nabokov went under the knife, their texts cut out selectively and reframed. In *After Lorca: Taxonomy* numerous references to creatures



After Beckett: *Assimilating the Vowels and Omitting the Consonants*

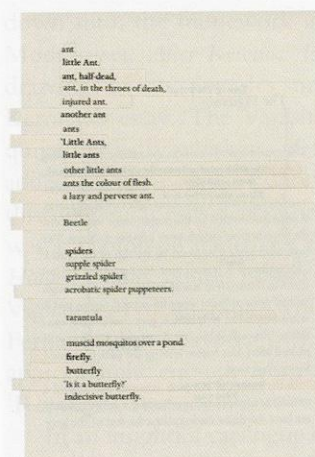


After Friedan: *Is This All?*

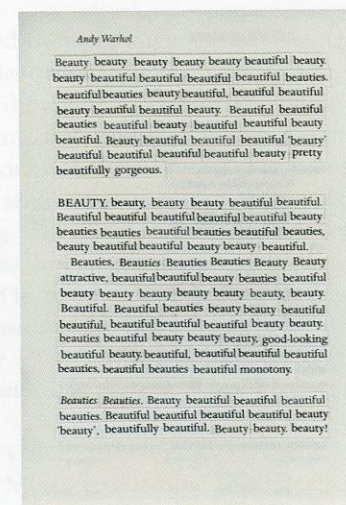


After King Jr.: *Marginalized/Segregated*

were stripped out from his poetry sequence 'The Dialogue of Two Snails', and made into a four page bestiary; *After Warhol: Beautiful Monotony* was a single leaf onto which permutations of the word 'beautiful' were butted together to create a deadpan prose poem; while *After Nabokov: Study for a quilt pattem*, possibly referring to Alison Turnbull's swatch narrative of Yukio Mishima's *Spring Snow: A Translation*, was a colour chart mapping Nabokov's use of names for pigments, gridding them off from the three short stories contained in *Lance*. In contrast to this strategy, several pieces had been redacted or blacked out. *After King Jr.: Marginalized/Segregated* featured the word 'marginalized' repeatedly inked onto the margin of an 11cm x 16cm page until it effaced itself, a tribute to Martin Luther King's prison habit of writing in the margins of newspapers. The other leaf in this homage formed a veil by means of repetition of the word 'segregated', perhaps an oblique nod to John Quarles' *Regale lectum miseriae*, or, *A kingly bed of miserie [sic] of Charles, late King of England, of blessed memory*, of 1649, with its four black intaglio woodcut pages, or 'mourning curtains'? The masking was more definite in *After Berger*:



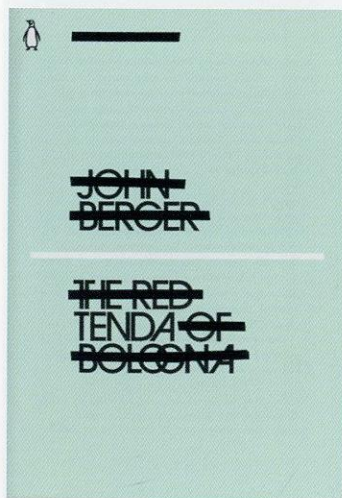
After Lorca: *Taxonomy [leaf 1]*



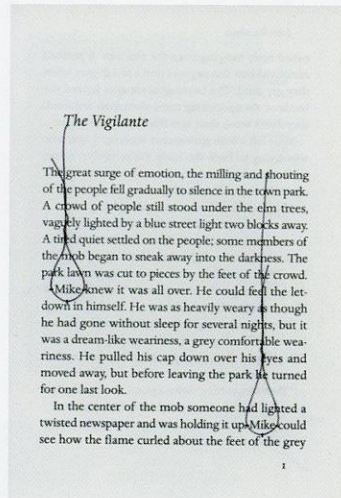
After Warhol: *Beautiful Monotony*

*Tenda (A love story)*, which used redaction to pick out a new narrative within a narrative.

Thompson didn't only focus on language, but also took us through the looking-glass to the realm of neat punctuation. In *After Nin: Heavy Breathing* (sourced from Nin's *The Veiled Woman*), the catalogue detailed 'a woven lattice from blank strips of the book, covering the text except where punctuation marks appear that describe a breath taken in the narrative, together with the word 'orgasm'', which was paradoxical, since that sensation is usually wordless. This was one of the points where absurdity bobbed to the surface of Thompson's practice, a thread which continued in her take on Samuel Beckett's grim story 'The End', a showcase for labour-intensive graphic tasking. In the poster-sized print *After Beckett: Assimilating the Vowels and Omitting the Consonants* the original text is disrupted by linguistic shuffling, staging Beckett's complaint about the difficulty of speech by reducing each of the fifteen vestigial pages to gibberish. It would be wrong though to regard Thompson as just a parasitical presence, since in several of these afterings she moved decisively away from, rather than



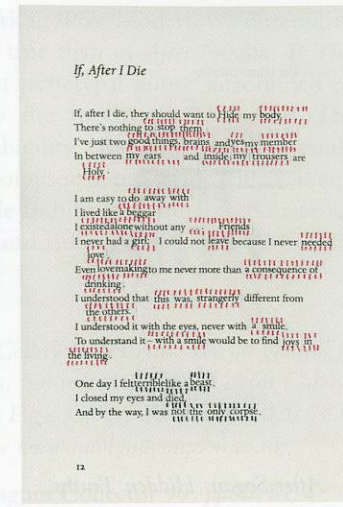
After Berger: *Tenda (A love story)*



After Steinbeck: *Enough Rope*



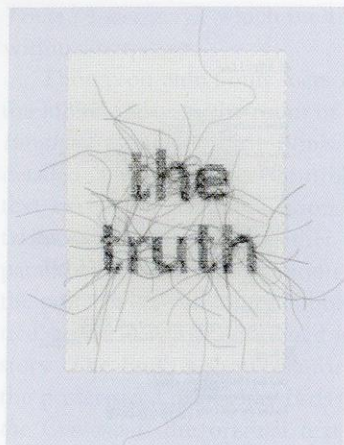
After Nabokov:  
*Study for a Quilt Pattern*



After Pessoa:  
*I was not the only corpse*

down into, the framework imposed by the content of the Penguin Modern set. *After Kerouac: Extinction* was a pair of exquisite pencil drawings of rats, fantasies stimulated by the description of tramps in Kerouac's essay 'The Vanishing American Hobo'. These rats, with quivering hairy whiskers, were accompanied by captions which only added to the poignancy and the sense of ecological doom which threatens such outsiders. Threading filament of one kind or another was a Thompson trademark throughout: hair woven into *After Sagan: Hidden Truths*; cotton nooses added to two pages of Steinbeck's 'The Vigilante'; red stitching (which denoted blood), carefully applied to Fernando Pessoa's poem 'If, After I Die'; and human hair draped appropriately enough from the last page of Jean Rhys' fable-like 'Rapunzel, Rapunzel'.

In an insightful catalogue essay, 'Carolyn Thompson: Breaking and Entering', Sean Ashton and Simon Morris profiled and contextualised her work. They noted how 'The tactile practice of reading is nearly always overlooked, eclipsed by the pressure of interpreting the meaning



After Sagan: Hidden Truths



After Rhys: Let down your hair

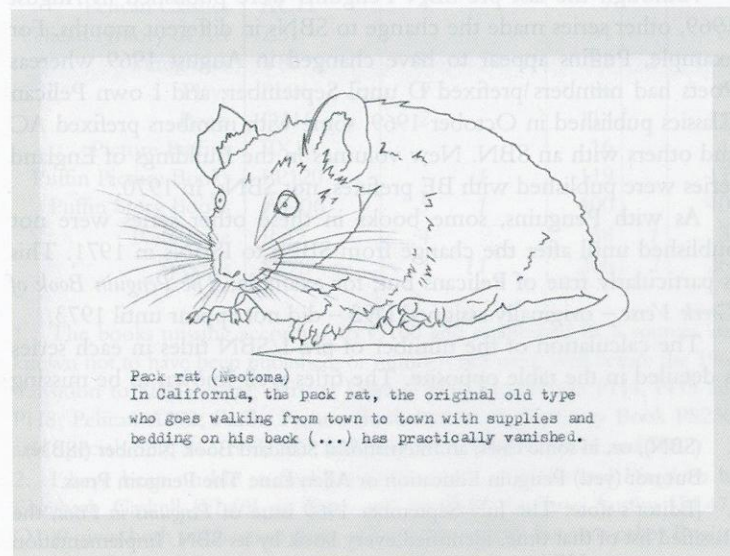
of the text'. This continued a vital debate about whether books should be treated as semi-sacred artefacts or as disposable objects; for history is littered with bibliographic accidents and recycling: Duns Scotus' parchments being turned into kites by 17th century Puritans; a maid using volume 1 of Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution: A History* to light the fire; or, most significantly for book arts today, Marcel Duchamp's installation *Unhappy Readymade*, a geometry text-book deliberately exposed to sun, wind and rain for twelve months.

The 'Penguin Modern' boxed set in its elegant container looks right at home in the pop age, and it wouldn't be at all far-fetched to see it adorning a shelf in a lifestyle or home design magazine. Yet Thompson's crafty anatomical incisions and DNA elaborations did not tie her end-products to any decor or specific era. Though they were all titled *After ...*, their look actually implied a reversibility of time, a swirling eddy within the so-called contemporary, where the originary merged with its postmodern supplement, leaving a complex physical trace; for the afterness was not only temporal, but also a femmage. This styling managed to recognise both the author and his or her theoretical death, while dancing blithely on their grave!

Ashton and Morris call each work in 'Post Moderns' 'a diminutive monument'. Nowhere is this more true than in *After Friedan: Is This All?*, a folksy stitched sampler of an archetypal house surrounded by a floral border and captioned by the motto 'Is This All?' The feminist query vibrated with ambiguity, for the question could equally be asked of Carolyn Thompson's practice, which seems infinitely varied, infinitely applicable to bibliographic found material, Penguin paperbacks or otherwise, and laden with the promise of far bolder remodelling to come.

Images courtesy of the Artist and Eagle Gallery EMH Arts. We are grateful for their permission to reproduce these works. For more information about Carolyn Thompson's Post Moderns series, contact Eagle Gallery EMH Arts, 020 7833 2674 or [emmahilleagle@aol.com](mailto:emmahilleagle@aol.com), or see [www.carolynthompson.co.uk](http://www.carolynthompson.co.uk).

Penguin Moderns were reviewed in Penguin Collector 90, pp80/81.



After Kerouac: Extinction [detail]