

Books

Experimental magazines, absurdist writing and new fiction, the publishing highlights of 2011

David Senior

Bibliographer at the Museum of Modern Art Library, New York, USA.

I went up an elevator in a building – most notable for the degree it had not been renovated – on 6th Avenue, around 46th Street, in midtown Manhattan, on a mid-August afternoon. It led me to an open floor of a bare office space. By the large set of windows in the otherwise empty expanse of the room was a desk and a person. **Aaron Flint Jamison** had set up an ‘office’ to distribute his magazine, *Veneer*. It was seemingly a rather sad scene – part *Bartleby*, part *Death of a Salesman*. But, simultaneously, it was a playful intervention and a willful admission of production at the margins. This was not Chelsea, this was not Art Basel, this wasn’t even the New York Art Book Fair. It was a formal decision towards an isolation that is already implied in *Veneer*’s hermetic contents (the spray-foamed issue was one of the most annoying items I’ve ever received as a librarian), simple distribution (mail to friends, subscribers) and the limits of a limited budget. It’s hard to sell an experimental format. Generally, bookstores don’t know what to do, distributors smell a hard sell and the artist becomes at once the designer, (sometimes) printer, publisher and salesperson of the materials. It’s thankless and impossible and absurd. Jamison made a new issue of *Veneer* earlier this year – it arrived back to him from the printers with the cover upside-down. He proceeded to tear off the cover of each one, eat the costs and offer the besmirched issues for free + shipping. It’s thankless and impossible and absurd. It is the failed economy of making a book. People try – bless their hearts. Does it make sense? No.

Speaking of nonsense, he has also teamed up with designer/librarian/bookseller **Scott Ponik** to create a library space within a new contemporary arts centre in Portland, Oregon, called **YU**. They are thinking hard about what kind of library they want it to be and are slowly building up a list of titles. Libraries were *de rigueur* in 2011 – or at least they were in the small world of artists and designers relating back to books and publishing as part of their practice. I don’t mean that sarcastically. It seems like the library provides an opening for a physical space that mimics

About this article

Published on 01/01/12

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Aaron Flint Jamison, editor of *Veneer* magazine, 2011 (photograph: David Senior)

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a book itself – a passage into an elsewhere that includes as many narratives and conversations as possible books. Seems like a worthwhile structure, right? **Dexter Sinister** have rethought their process and realigned into what they have described as a Serving Library. It will comprise the materials they publish and work with in some physical space, and will be organized through times when the space is activated by classes, talks and also an appointed ‘librarian’. Details are still in the works. Again, plans that are rife with suspect economics – building a library space for people to visit, raising money for it to subsist and to grow? That’s the business of Carnegies – not artists and designers, and especially not during our tidal movement onto digital shores of past and future books and current economic implosions.

Mladen Stilinic´ had a retrospective in Budapest at the Museum Ludwig that opened in April. The catalogue is an extensive tour of the artist’s work and a great introduction to the artist for those not familiar. In regard to young contemporary artists and their absurd publishing practices, perhaps Stilinic´ can be seen as one possible hero. Starting in the early 1970s, Stilinic´ along with a group of other artists, turned to little books as a mode of distributing text works, performance documentation and collective activities within their city of Zagreb and wherever else the hand-to-hand distribution would have the books travel. The books contain absurdities – text and image pieces that move across logic and into Ludwig Wittgenstein or Samuel Beckett land. Nonsense moves quickly – in this case, fugitive from the authoritarian language of the state in Tito’s Yugoslavia in the 1970s – a humour on the gallows, both ontological and poignantly pragmatic. There was no sense in making his publications at this time, the audience was very small for this material and all the artists were broke and scraped together what they could to assemble the materials for publication.

In 2011, examples of absurd and stubborn persistence seemed welcome and inspiring.

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