

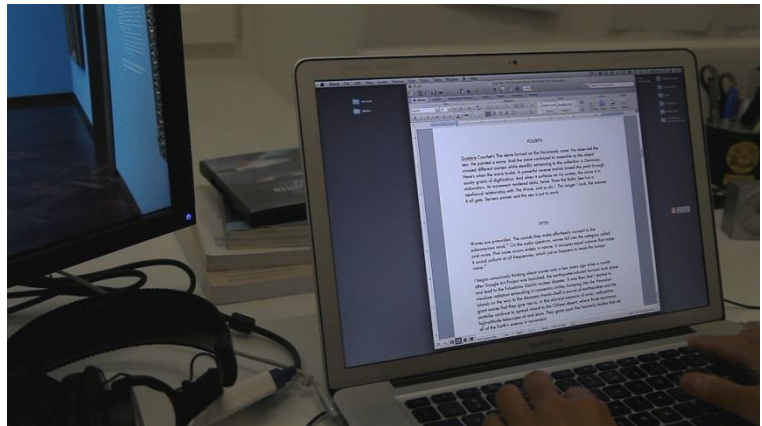
HYPERALLERGIC

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The Intimate Art of Active Reading

by Dale Megan Healey

In her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Austrian novelist Elfriede Jelinek asked, “Is writing the gift of curling up with reality?” In considering this full-body gesture, she wondered how a writer can document reality and still be immersed in it. Usually I think of a reader passively “curling up” with a



good book, but to attribute this image to both suggests that reading is never a passive gesture either. I teach literature at an art school, and I tell my students to treat reading like making something, even if the “making” is just underlining a passage. To me, active reading has always meant writing directly on the page of a book. The experience is richer when the reader somehow uses her body and makes her own thoughts visible in the same physical space as the writer’s words.

It’s hard to get my students to handwrite anything, however; harder still to get them to use a printed version of a text when it’s available online. Of course there are programs that allow them to mark up a text digitally, but I’m instantly skeptical. ‘You can’t *touch* words on a screen!’ I weakly claim, but why should I assume that touching words on paper is a more adequate interaction? A reader, especially if she’s also an artist, *makes* meaning and translates that meaning off the page, even into mediums that exist on a screen.

I am searching for ways to push past my knee-jerk resistance, and searching for artists who explore the changing relationships between our machines, our bodies, and our literature. “Virginia Woolf said that she wanted her novel *The Waves* to be made of

some continuous stream, not solely of human thought but of the ship, the night all flowing together.” These are the opening words in [Lisa Tan’s video “Waves”](#) (2014–15), which is part of the New Museum’s [2015 Triennial: Surround Audience](#). The piece begins with the



sounds of typing. I watch her hands on a laptop and hear her read aloud from the essay she’s in the process of writing. Tan listens to the flow of her own words, makes revisions, and scrolls down the page. It feels intimate to witness her thoughts unfold, even though I only see a laptop on a desk. Moments later she confidently reads the finished piece: “With waves on my mind I want to hold hands with what [Woolf] says. As it is, I’ve been anchoring myself to certain literary figures — writers who try to drift away from language and into something else.”

Why do I assume that using a pencil on a hard copy of a text will create the richest experience for my students, who are also learning about and attempting to create art in a digital realm? Being engrossed in a book means resisting distractions. I presume that the space on a screen is different: even in the most riveting text, the possibility of opening a new tab is too tempting. On a page, the space the text inhabits can’t change. But Tan’s video projects make me think about “tabs” that open in the physical world too. The place where you’re reading — whether a crowded subway or a quiet library — can be full of both distractions and influences, and the difference is not so clear. “Waves” is part of a series with two other videos that respond to the work of Clarice Lispector and Susan Sontag. “They all unfold like conversations,” she says on her [website](#).

“Seemingly inconsequential things pop-up and take hold — a phone call interrupts, the sun starts to set, a stranger asks a question, desires shift, urgencies arise, translations are needed, and the ocean meets the shore.” These supposed interruptions are part of the reading.

“Waves” includes a Skype conversation in which Tan remembers a quote she once heard from the 19th-century poet Charles Baudelaire. “Baudelaire said, ‘If I want to write a poem about the sea, I take a bath,’” she tells her friend. The next image is a

virtual tour of a museum on a computer screen. She zooms in to examine the brushstrokes of a painting and zooms out to show live people. Would Baudelaire disapprove of this virtual experience? To write about the sea, he needed to touch some semblance of it. “Waves”



considers that these semblances are not limited to the physical world. Paintings of the sea, sound waves, and radiation are all possible poetic evocations of the subject.

While Tan’s projects directly interact with literature, another artist, [Anya Liftig](#), uses a collage of selected texts as background for a live performance. Both artists make me think about the future of reading, and Liftig’s work in particular reminds me of a reader underlining a text: she uses her body to make meaning visible. In February, I



attended her and Tess Dworman’s [“Liftig and I: The Experimental Dance Television Hour”](#) at the Center for Performance Research, which included readings from Rebecca Solnit, Tennessee Williams, and other writers. Liftig performed in the large, dark theater from inside a lit-up tent. She made shadows on the fabric walls using her hands and toy animals, while the audience caught glimpses of her through the front opening and the tent’s windows. A voiceover read aloud a passage about writers being loved by people they’ve never met: “This is the odd compact with strangers who will lose themselves in your words and the partial recompense for the solitude that makes writers *and artists* and writing *and art*. You have an intimacy with the faraway ... ”

I recognized the excerpt from Solnit’s [The Faraway Nearby](#) but couldn’t place it. During the performance I wrote the line in my notebook, and I didn’t realize until I looked it up

later that Liftig had edited it to include artists. Hearing a familiar text out loud reminded me of how much influence the image of words on a page has on the way I recall an idea or a story. So often if I'm trying to remember something that struck me from a book, I find the selection by remembering what the page looked like when the feeling first arose. It's a memory not of what I was imagining, but what my eyes were physically seeing. Liftig's performance was like a familiar song that becomes unrecognizable in a new context, or a lyric essay interpreted as a television sitcom (after all, this is the Experimental Dance Television hour).

A projection of Liftig's face and shoulders filled a screen behind the performance, while onstage she placed tiny plastic sea creatures along her cheek and neck. The voiceover recited a monologue from the 1970s satirical soap opera *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* in which the main character has a breakdown over the



“waxy yellow buildup” on her floor. “The words and images add a certain context, but one which I think is porous,” Liftig told me about the piece. “The image of the marine life miniatures filling in the crevices of my face and neck has a slow, sinking feeling — which is akin to the feeling I sometimes have about being a woman who is pursuing a career in art. Sometimes it feels like I am being buried under the weight of expectations, barriers, and assumptions.”

The piece seemed born of the same impulse that causes readers to underline something in a book. Liftig was bringing words that had once moved her in the private space of reading off the page and into a room, to join others. The final voiceover was an excerpt from a 1971 speech given by Germaine Greer during a debate about women's liberation with Norman Mailer. “Could a female artist be driven by the desire for riches, fame, and the love of men?” Liftig's voice quietly asked. “You had no answers, and so you turned later to the function of women and found that they fell into two parts: that they were either low, sloppy creatures or they were goddesses. Or, worst of all, we were meant to be both. Which meant that we broke our hearts trying to keep our aprons

clean.” Like Tan, Liftig created a continuum between the world in which these words were written and the one in which they were now being received. In Greer’s original delivery of the speech, she was irreverent and powerful; Liftig sounded exasperated and defeated. Inhabiting these words in a performance space in Brooklyn over 30 years later, Liftig expressed how relevant this message remains for a woman artist.

Tan closes “Waves” with an image of a cloudy sky above an ocean shore, and she reads a final quote: “Woolf said, ‘I am writing *The Waves* to a rhythm, not to a plot.’” The camera pans up to the sky as the sound of the ocean lingers. As Liftig’s performance closed, lobster claws entered the frame of her



projection while Waxahatchee’s elegiac song “Be Good” began to play. The claws poked at Liftig’s cheeks and at times looked painful, but other times supportive, as if she were resting her face on her own fists. Both pieces remind me of how, sometimes, the best books end when it feels like the author has run out of words. A writer curls up against what is ineffable, having come as close as anyone could, until a reader responds with her own image, a movement, or a sound.

Lisa Tan’s “Waves” is on view as part of the [2015 Triennial: Surround Audience](#) at the New Museum (235 Bowery, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through May 24. Anya Liftig and Tess Dworman’s [“Liftig and I: The Experimental Dance Television Hour”](#) took place at the [Center for Performance Research](#) (361 Manhattan Avenue, Greenpoint, Brooklyn) on February 19 and 20. Liftig will perform as part of the [Month of Performance Art – Berlin](#) on May 3, with guerrilla performances at the Bode Museum to follow.