

**Lynda Jessup, Erin Morton and Kirsty Robertson (Eds.), *Negotiations in a Vacant Lot: Studying the Visual In Canada* (McGill–Queens University Press, 2014)**

Page spread from *Negotiations in a Vacant Lot: Studying the Visual in Canada*, edited by Lynda Jessup, Erin Morton and Kirsty Robertson.  
PHOTO: SONYA FILMAN



## Review by Alison Cooley

*Negotiations in a Vacant Lot: Studying the Visual in Canada* assembles a selection of essays that probe the relevance of the categories “Canadian” and “art” in a globalized neoliberal society founded on values of individualism, economic and technological progress, property ownership and utilitarianism. Central to the book’s argument is the contention that “Canadian art history,” as the discipline is currently practiced, replicates neoliberal values, often in the name of concepts like “creative economy.” Drawn from several discussions that have been taking place since 2006 at the Universities Art Association Conference (UAAC) and Canadian Art Association (CAA) conferences, and crystallized in a 2009 workshop at the University of Toronto, the assembled texts all aim, in some way, to re-envision the discipline. The book’s editors, Lynda Jessup, Erin Morton and Kirsty Robertson, begin the text with a provocative introduction – one that sets out to trouble the existence of such a thing as Canada. Among other things, their compelling introduction muses on inclusion and the canon. They ask whether simply adding underrepresented works to the Canadian canon actually destabilizes its underlying principles. They also include the thought-experiment-like suggestion that, instead of opting to insert Indigenous art into an existing canon of historical Canadian art, the National Gallery of Canada could instead curate a Canadian gallery “from an Indigenous perspective of what a ‘National Gallery of Canada’ might mean.”

The assembled texts range wildly in their scope, from Kristy A. Holmes’ inquiry into the intersection of feminist art and nationalism in the 1960s and ’70s to

Susan Cahill’s case study of an exhibition of Afghan war rugs at the Textile Museum of Canada. Each essay differs in tone and approach, but the uniting feature among them is an attempt to demonstrate how the study of visual culture in Canada might be done in a way mindful of the dangers of nationalism and neoliberalism. The best contributions go further than mindfulness of art’s mobilization as a tool for creating narratives that support the dominant ideologies of the nation state to propose some solutions to the entanglements artists and cultural workers regularly face in their attempts to position their work within the overarching organizational schema of “Canadian.”

Some of the tactics are simple gestures – wordplay and reversals of language emerge as successful strategies for shifting the conversation. For example, the editors’ decision to avoid pigeonholing the subject matter of this book by calling it “Canadian art” (which might suggest some uniting } feature of Canada and art), opting instead for “the visual in Canada.” Mark Cheetham, in his piece on the trend of likening Canadian artists to artists of other nationalities (Homer Watson as the “Canadian Constable” and Jack Chambers as the “Canadian Puvit de Chavannes”) plays with this cross-cultural comparison by also comparing the two with each other, and Chambers with Gerhard Richter, highlighting the way that such likening could disrupt geographical and temporal boundaries.

Heather Igloliorte’s article is a powerful assertion of the link between art and sovereignty. This link is discussed elsewhere in the text, but it is often as a critique of the colonial impulse to assert sovereignty

over Canada through artistic practice and display. In Igloliorte’s essay, however, art production is a tool for the affirmation of Inuit sovereignty, achieved through an emphasis on the articulation of Inuit principles of collective purpose (*pilirigatigingiq*), consensus (*Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit*) and serving the common good (*Pijitsirarniq*). Richard Hill provokes with an examination of Jimmie Durham’s practice as a way to think through the assimilatory agenda that comes through neoliberal capitalism. Hill suggests an attention to the “local, the specific, the out of the way and the impractical” can provide a resistance to being co-opted into white, middle-class, politically neutralized models of citizenship. There are some beautiful kernels of almost-tangible advice here.

As I read this book, however, I was left wondering at the real lack of solutions to the struggles of visual culture in a globalized era that remains decidedly racist and complacent in (if not ferociously supportive of) the construction of its arbitrary borders. Wouldn’t it be amazing if the editorial team for this volume had mobilized some of their funding towards something radically experimental – say, a reorganization of a national collection from an Indigenous perspective of Canadian nationhood? Or, what if this text had taken the form of a toolkit for academics and curators supporting artistic practices that reject or transgress borders? What if this had been a book about re-imagining studying the visual in Canada that didn’t only include Canadian scholars writing on Canadian topics? Weirder and more provocative still, and in the tradition of wordplay and subversion already living in this tome, what

if the book was structured in such a way as to avoid using the word “Canada” altogether?

I’m dreaming. These possibilities are so far outside the purview of this kind of academic text. But if the goal is to re-imagine, unsettle or intervene in the way art is mobilized in our society as a tool for nationalism, I do wonder why there is not a little more dreaming in this book. While it advances solid criticism of museums and galleries, of individual writers, artists, granting bodies, and other institutional structures, a critique of the academy itself is sorely missing (Alice Ming Wai Jim’s brilliant study of the “ethno-cultural” art history survey course aside). After all, aren’t periodization and geographical distinction academic constructs?

Reading Jennifer VanderBurgh’s article, included in this text’s last chapter, which queries the role of Telefilm Canada in deciding what film and TV gets supported here by virtue of its success at fulfilling certain criteria of Canadianness, I’m reminded of the parallels between that particular funding body and the funders that supported the production of this book. The Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Canada Book Fund, and publisher McGill–Queen’s/Beaverbrook Canadian Foundation Studies in Art History all prioritize Canadian authors and Canadian subjects, even citing the use of Canadian sources as key to their eligibility for funding. Rather than speculate on

how the Canadian academic funding structure might have implications for the radicality and experimentalism of this text, I’d like to borrow VanderBurgh’s words on Telefilm as a kind of oblique reflection: “As long as the methods by which [...] texts are produced, distributed, and received in Canada is determined by state incentives, regulations, and policies, the nation-state is an inherent part of the texts produced in this location.”

## Petra Collins (Ed.) *Babe* (Prestel, 2015)

Page spread from *Babe*, edited by Petra Collins.  
PHOTO: SHAUNA JEAN DOHERTY



### Review by Shauna Jean Doherty

Twenty-two-year-old Canadian photographer Petra Collins is the founder and curator of *The Ardorous*, an online platform that showcases the works of female artists who, through their varied practices, resist contemporary ideologies of femininity. According to Collins, the founding of *The Ardorous* was the product of necessity, filling a gap in existing online content by creating a place where women’s bodies are not policed but positively and freely represented. Now, a selection of works selected by Collins from the website has traversed the digital domain and landed in the new printed art anthology, *Babe*.

The book has a bubblegum pink cover scrawled with 30 white signatures, each belonging to an artist featured in the publication. One hundred and seventy-six pages in length, *Babe* offers a rare glimpse into the minds, lives and bedrooms of female artists, some emerging, some recently established. Through their diverse aesthetics and media, which range from photography, to drawing, handwritten letters, and collage, this contemporary girl gang collectively attempts to challenge the rigid expectations imposed on women and their bodies.

Representing a generation that came of age alongside the Internet, *Babe* bears witness to these young women as they navigate online images, analyzing and appropriating visual tropes specific to the digital world. Screenshots are a consistent aesthetic motif throughout the anthology, serving primarily as intimate documents, depicting Google searches, call display, sexts and selfies, which at times struggle to acquire meaning beyond digital ephemera. Cellphones figure prominently in *Babe*. In Petra Collins’ own photographs, models are rarely seen without digital devices in hand, often in the process of photographing themselves. While Collins’ images capture a custom that has become culturally ubiquitous, they hardly negate the stereotypes about young women that the book claims to denounce.

Many of Collins’ other projects criticize how ideal notions of femininity require women to control natural signs of their post-pubescent bodies, a point she makes through her depiction of body hair and menstrual blood.<sup>1</sup> In *Babe*, this paradigm continues to be the focus. Images by Arvida Byström take menstruation as their central figure. In her diptych, *There will be*

*blood* (undated), a woman is pictured disposing of a used tampon, while the attendant image captures another woman casually reading a book at a coffee shop with her blood-stained underwear visible. Sandy Kim’s *blood pussy, nyc* (2013) also normalizes the image of a menstruating vagina, by matching period blood with a backdrop of plush red bed sheets. In the mode of conventional portraiture, these photos render the subject of menstruation entirely banal, which contributes to the publication’s campaign against the shaming of natural female phenomena.

*Babe* expands upon and diverges from Collins’ own photographic aesthetic. Some of the featured artists reach beyond the typical sensuous and whimsical presentations of young female subjects. Works by London-based Harley Weir, for example, are surreal, conceptual and decisively unpretty. Her close-up shots of fish lips, a human mouth, an eyeball and a bellybutton are unnerving and raw. The titles Weir attaches to her abstract images, including *Jerusalem* (2013), *Palestine* (2013) and *Israel Easyjet* (2012), suggest that they document a worldview outside of the romantic notion of girlhood typically portrayed within North

American popular culture. Weir's contributions extend the potential limitations of the anthology's title. *Babe* does not exclusively refer to the subjects of the images enclosed in the book but references the authors of the works themselves. *Babe* reclaims the term, taking it out of the hands of cat-callers and placing it within the discourse of women who celebrate other women.

Photos by Nakeya Brown also successfully resist conventional signifiers of a saccharine girlishness. Hers are some of the most visually and conceptually sophisticated images in the anthology. Soft pastel colours are used as the misleading backdrop for her honest photographs. In *The Art of Sealing Ends, Part II* (2014) the artist's pink nails and powder blue lighter contrast sharply with the flame that threatens to ignite the three disembodied braids in her hand. In *The Art of Drying* (2014), Brown carefully hangs a layer of long hair, pinning it across a clothesline. The mores of black women's hair rituals are the primary subject of Brown's practice, which explores ideal beauty within the context of blackness. These works also function as a counterpoint to the vast majority of photographers and subjects featured in *Babe* who are predominantly white. The imbalanced selection of works by Caucasian artists

undercuts the editor's attempts at creating an "inclusive" landscape as proposed in the book's introduction.

Collages by Minna Gilligan, Beth Hoeckel, and Shana Sadeghi-Ray add a welcome materiality to the assemblage of digital works. Hoeckel's collage is particularly intriguing, combining cosmic landscapes with detached limbs, cut out from magazines published from the 1940s and the 1970s. Her female figures' faces are all obscured in *Currents* (2013), *Face to Face* (2012) and *Waffle* (2013) as they occupy fantastical spaces created by Hoeckel's strategic arrangements.

The letters, drawings and paintings reproduced in *Babe* exude an air of somber vulnerability unexplored by many of the photographs. The letters are particularly grim; stories of sexual assault, shaming, self-doubt and body policing are shared on pink pages surrounded by stickers and doodles. The anecdotes recount exchanges between young women and older men where an uneven power dynamic persists. These handwritten notes disclose experiences of objectification that the images in *Babe* visually and conceptually reject.

Despite attempts otherwise, the criticality of this publication is lost among the whimsical signifiers of girlhood that dominate; spilled nail polish, bejewelled tiaras,

braces and piles of hair. The line between femininity, feminism, sexuality and subjugation are clumsily traversed, which results in the book's uncertain portrayal of empowerment. As Collins observes of North American society, women are repeatedly relegated to the status of adolescence, as a means to sublimate fears of powerful and threatening womanhood. The fact that the majority of images featured in the anthology centralize the young female form undermines attempts to place the text outside of this discourse. At times, self-representation becomes self-surveillance in this book; as these female artists attempt to represent themselves outside of patriarchal constraints, they end up enacting the very conventions that they seek to undo.

#### Endnotes

1 Collins was widely recognized in 2013 for designing a graphic T-shirt with illustrator Alice Lancaster for American Apparel that featured a line drawing of a woman masturbating her menstruating vagina. The shirt initiated a public discussion of the aesthetics of menstrual blood and the undo social shame attached to it. In the same year, Collins's Instagram account was deleted, cited for violating community standards, for a self-portrait that showed her public hair.

**Anna-Sophie Springer & Etienne Turpin, Eds. *Fantasies of the Library* (K. Verlag and Haus der Kulteren der Welt, Berlin: 2014).**

**Anna-Sophie Springer & Etienne Turpin, Eds. *Land & Animal & Nonanimal* (K. Verlag and Haus der Kulteren der Welt, Berlin: 2014).**

**Review by  
Amish Morrell**

*Fantasies of the Library* and *Land & Animal & Nonanimal* are the first two books in K. Verlag's "Intercalations" publications series, described by the editors as "an experimental foray exploring the structure of the book as potential curatorial space." Defining the process whereby a layer of stratified rock is pushed up against or inserted between existing layers, thus disrupting an existing system or chronology, "Intercalations" juxtaposes and interweaves thematically connected content from different academic and artistic disciplines, arranging these components

as they might be organized within in an exhibition. Austere and elegant in their scale and design, they are both highly successful experiments in the book as form and intellectual fetish objects that at points rely heavily on an overly familiar canon of critical ideas.

The first volume in the series, *Fantasies of the Library*, is made up of imaginative ideas about what libraries could be like. These include ideas discussed within philosophy, literature and others realized by artists. Springer's essay, "Melancholies of the Paginated Mind: The Library as Curatorial

Space," focuses on examples ranging from Jorge Luis Borges, Robert Musil, Aby Warburg, Walter Benjamin and André Malraux to Ray Bradbury and Ed Ruscha, among countless others. Organized around this essay are shorter projects that are more contemporary in their focus. Among them is an interview with Megan Shaw Prelinger and Rick Prelinger, whose San Francisco-based library includes more than 50,000 esoteric and obscure publications – from newsletters published in camps run by the Civilian Conservation Corps (a federal make-work project enacted

Page spread from *Fantasies of the Library*, edited by Anna-Sophie Springer and Etienne Turpin. IMAGE COURTESY OF K. VERLAG, BERLIN AND TORONTO



in the US during the 1930s) to safety bulletins and amateur films – and which relies on a geospatial system of cataloguing that starts in San Francisco and ends in outer space. Springer’s visual essay “Reading Rooms, Reading Machines” explores a range of alternative libraries, including Katie Paterson’s *Future Library* – whose books won’t be available for 100 years, when a forest of 1,000 trees produces enough paper for all of them to be printed – and Soviet workers’ club reading rooms designed by Aleksandr Rodchenko, among others. The effect is a somewhat solipsistic one in that *Fantasies of the Library* becomes a book about books (or a book that is an exhibition in book form), and is saturated with a nostalgic impulse, not just for the tactility of print, but also for particular ways of thinking that are enacted through and within the space of the library.

*Fantasies of the Library* draws from examples of how various thinkers organized their books in ways that created associations, new poetic revelations and critical insights that wouldn’t have been possible within conventional chronologies and disciplinary structures. This practise establishes a form and method for the Intercalations series. Its volumes function as a study of and experiment in how knowledge is organized, and, as the editors describe it, “the paginated mind,” suggesting that Intercalations exists as a kind of “imaginary museum,” juxtaposing artifacts and artworks from different historical periods in textual and photographic form.

I’m of two minds about this project. On the one hand, both of these books offer what I think is one of the most cogent realizations of certain highly elusive philosophical ideas, such as Walter Benjamin’s sprawling and unfinished *Arcades Project* and his theory of the dialectical image, and Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas*. These earlier projects deeply inform the structure and methods expressed in both *Fantasies of the Library* and *Land & Animal & Nonanimal*, and presumably will continue to shape future editions of the Intercalations series. As someone who has spent a lot of time trying to make sense of these very ideas, Intercalations offers me a way of doing philosophy that is more like the work of an artist or curator than a scholar, and imparts a sense of openness and curiosity. On the other hand, this method, and the actual content of *Fantasies of the Library* to a great

extent, revolves around the work of 20th-century male modernists, making me wonder why this seems to be the only pool of credible thinkers from which we can draw.

The parts that stuck in my mind tended not to be the ideas of certain early 20th-century philosophers, but strange and obscure details accumulated within both books. One of the most compelling sections of *Land & Animal & Nonanimal* is a conversation between series co-editor Etienne Turpin and landscape architect Seth Denizen, in which Denizen describes a model for soil classification that accounts for matter that is not understood as soil in current taxonomies – landscapes consisting of stratified layers that include buried urban refuse, concrete, pavement, contaminated soil, dredged marine sediment, entombed bodies and incinerator ash – and thus appears as black holes on soil maps. Spread throughout the interview, highly detailed maps and graphs describe how much steel, hardwoods, embalming fluid and bodies are put into the earth each year through ceremonial burial, the global displacement of crude oil and bitumen for the paving of US highways, along with other kinds of anthropogenic soil. Much like *Fantasies of the Library*, the content of *Land & Animal & Nonanimal* also closely mirrors the formal structure that guides the series, but it is less abstract and less grounded in the virtual, imaginative spaces of books and ideas; instead it addresses the spaces and bodies around us, and the physical matter of which they are constituted.

The thematic focus of *Land & Animal & Nonanimal* is the idea of the Anthropocene, a concept that is increasingly being used to designate a period that encompasses the present, where human activity has permanently altered the Earth’s ecosystems. While this designation recognizes the irreversible impact humans have had on the planet, it places human life against the backdrop of a universalized non-human nature in a categorical break from earlier periods of human history. An unpublished article that I’m not supposed to cite before it goes to press, but is scheduled to appear in a book about extinction that will be published by the University of Minnesota Press sometime next year, addresses these ideas, and more interestingly, how scientists sought to use the theory of geological periodization to support the idea of different racial lineages, which was of great interest to proponents of slavery during the 19th century. One

of the issues at stake today is whether the Anthropocene should be defined by the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, or in relation to the expansion of colonialism and imperialism that began earlier and resulted in the genocide of Indigenous populations, the enslavement of millions of people, and the transformation of ecosystems around the globe that accompanied massive human resettlement. By the time you read this review, two more editions of Intercalations, seemingly related to the Anthropocene, will be available: *Reverse Hallucinations in the Archipelago* and *The Word for World Is Still Forest*. And another two editions are forthcoming in 2016. As the idea of the Anthropocene continues to be an overarching theme within the series, one might hope that the imagination of the Anthropocene itself comes under scrutiny, instead of assuming it to be as apolitical and reassuringly universal as it appears on the surface.

The Intercalations series is grounded in the idea of the book as an exhibition, juxtaposing these two different ways of presenting ideas. The result is a heightened awareness of how these forms shape our understanding of the objects they contain and describe. But despite some of their heady references, *Fantasies of the Library* and *Land & Animal & Nonanimal* rarely become mired in the kind of abstract theorizing one might expect. Instead they approach the philosophical problems that lie behind each volume in a less direct manner, through their unusual and varied content. In *Land & Animal & Nonanimal* Natasha Ginwala describes how, in 1999, surgeons extracted 4,000 plastic bags and various objects from the belly of a cow. She writes that this “...proves that the animal, more than merely a being-in-the-world, is also literally capable of swallowing up the world...” While this could be read as a metaphor for humans and our relation to land and to other species, it also reflects how the volume decentres its implicit subject, the human animal; an editorial gesture that enables a productively oblique way of exploring what it means to be in the world and of the world. But this practice of decentring could go further, eschewing the currency of pedigreed scholarly references, and enabling other voices and histories to intercalate themselves within established discourses. My sense is that forthcoming editions of Intercalations will do just this.