Help! The New Written Art Object
Alice Khan, a novel by Pauline Klein
Maryse Larivière

Numéro 77, hiver 2013

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/68371ac

Citer cet article
PAULINE KLEIN
ALICE KAHN

HELP! THE NEW WRITTEN ART OBJECT
Alice Kahn, a novel by Pauline Klein

MARYSE LARIACIÈRE

Book cover: © Janet Cardiff & George Miller,
Dark Pool (detail), 1995.
Alice Kahn’s unfolding play of references shadows Sophie Calle’s autofictions, but it would not be the first time a novel directly references Calle’s work.* Alice Kahn is equally indebted to André Breton’s Nadja since both novels depict their heroine as supreme object of desire. Consequently, Alice Kahn is yet another brilliant addition to the tradition of written art objects of the likes of Michèle Bernstein, Catherine Millet, and Chris Kraus, who construct literary projects with minuitiae, using their feminine experience as material, with ambition to create abstract formal considerations not so far from Mallarmé’s Un coup de dés jamais n’abîmera le hasard,* or as our heroine puts it: “Un coup [...], un silence, un hasard à la Alice Kahn.”

Alice Kahn also owes something to Voltaire’s Candide and Oscar Wilde’s Dorian Gray in that its duplicitous heroine presents herself as an ingenue. Yet, as the heroine is an uncanny incarnation of the author, it is easy to believe that Pauline Klein’s project is a calculated and deliberate manoeuvre to discreetly enter the terrain of sensitive topics such as the place of women in the art world. A ludicrous comment on feminism, the novel ultimately shares affinities, both in style and content, with Qu’avons-nous fait de la révolution sexuelle? by Marcela Iacub, who, in her book, also gives the naïve character a semblance of a neutral and innocent voice in order to approach difficult questions of gender inequality without making waves, to ultimately “argue that the sexual revolution of the 1970s was, in part, a failure in that it abandoned its emancipatory ambitions.”

The confessional tone of the novel brings to mind the author, Pauline Klein, who always desired to be invisible. Even more so after working as a gallery assistant in New York. Adding to the hall-of-mirrors effect, the book conjures Klein’s desire to produce art without having to be an artist, and her insecurity about being in the public eye, while speaking on her experience not so much of the art world, but more specifically of the ways in which women conform to stereotypes. Yet could this mysterious author be a ghostwriter?

Wait, the title—who is this Alice Kahn? Alice Kahn is a ghost artist, another imaginary character created by the narrator, and who sometimes happens to be Anna. In order to fulfill her role as Anna for William, using fake credentials the heroine gains employment at a gallery, writes (real?) articles about fictional exhibitions by Alice Kahn for an art magazine, and promotes false rumours about Kahn’s practice. Alice Kahn’s practice consists of interventions in which she introduces a work of art of her own within an already existing exhibition without anyone noticing. Functioning as parasites, her artworks infiltrate the practices of other artists, thereby acquiring the aesthetic and monetary value of her host.

Another art practice, again a parasitical one, is at work within the story. A little more discreet, situated between the project of the author and that of Alice, is the construction of Anna by the narrator. Almost pathologically, the heroine—who is not Pauline, nor Anna, nor Alice—is inventing a new self outside of herself, like an object. She carries her self out. She talks to her like a puppet, refers to her as a statue, as a doll, using the third person to talk about, to talk to, her other self. Even her voice sounds like it is emerging from an out-of-body experience. There is no mirror in Anna’s home. Only Anna to look into, to see herself. One could almost refer to reverse personification, considering that she treats her Anna like something nonhuman. This is like a sculpture, or should I say, Anna is.

The only one who does not dissipate her art practice is William, an exhibiting, somewhat established photographer. Throughout the novel, we are reminded by the narrator about his struggle in the face of a creative block. Oh, but just when he thinks he has discovered Anna’s trickery about Alice’s art practice, and stops caring about finding out who the real woman behind Anna/Alice is, he picks up his camera again. At this point in the novel we are told: “Fall has come, and it is too cold to wear dresses.” As such, the heroine can now wear one of her invisible costumes and completely vanish. Fin.

6. Klein, Alice Kahn. 41. Translation: “A trick [...] a silence, a chance in the style of Alice Kahn.”

Maryse Larivière is currently a PhD candidate in Art & Visual Culture at the University of Western Ontario. Her most recent solo exhibitions were presented at Parker Branch (London) and Clint Roenisch (Toronto). She has also exhibited her work at Cité des Arts de Paris, Diaz Contemporary in Toronto, and Centre Clark and Skol, both in Montréal. Her writing has appeared in Art New England, Grace and Pages of Vapour. Larivière is the co-founder of Pavilion Projects (Montréal), which has exhibited contemporary art projects since 2003.