

READING EXERCISES

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Recently, many concerns have been expressed regarding the impact of socio-technological developments on our relationship with knowledge, language, and the written word: among these are the decline of reading, the crisis in the book publishing industry, the deterioration of students' linguistic and interpretative skills, higher education geared less towards being well-read and more towards an ever-expanding knowledge-based economy, the erosion of reflexive attention, even the threat of mass mindlessness. Although the current situation may seem alarming, most of these issues are not new. In 1988, philosopher and essayist George Steiner already expressed his concern over the imminent demise of book-culture in the face of the overwhelming number of new electronic information and entertainment media (at the time, chiefly television, radio, and video games), which he charged with "appropriating the resources of time and of perception which were once the domain of the book."ⁱ Symptomatic of a nostalgic attachment to classical modes of reading based on the idea of a profound, silent, and concentrated literary experience, this type of discourse has proliferated in recent years, forming a melancholic lament against the establishment of a "new regime of digital distraction dominated by the image and hyperlink."ⁱⁱ For example, Nicholas Carr asserts, in his book *The Shallows: What The Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (2010), that the information overload that we are exposed to through technology entails an inevitable

degradation of the reader's brain, and, correlatively, a radical shift in our modes of thinking associated with the arts, letters, and humanities.ⁱⁱⁱ Without denying the significance of these transformations, which are supported by a plethora of scientific studies,^{iv} the question arises, however, whether recognizing the upheavals affecting reading practices in the age of “screen culture” must necessarily mean mourning a bygone era. At this critical juncture in our cultural and intellectual history, is it not rather an opportunity to reconsider the act of reading in its intrinsic complexity, and, in doing so to restore its critical status?

This is precisely the question that the exhibition *Reading Exercises* addresses through artworks and projects that, each in their own way, speak to a renewed relationship to reading, conceived as a space for productive experimentation and critical investigation. In response to a situation whose stakes reach far beyond the academic sphere—and Western borders, for that matter—the exhibition examines how different strategies implemented by artists and thinkers affiliated to the art world are contributing to reopening the debate on what it (still) means and implies to read in our day and age. As the initiators of *No Reading After the Internet* (Amy Kazymierchuck, Alexander Muir and cheyanne turions) clearly underlined, there is a “particular urgency [...] in reforming publics and experimenting with the act of reading, as its own media form, in our moment.”^v In the same vein, by focussing on the *act* of reading itself, rather than on textual material, the book-object, or the space of the library,^{vi} *Reading Exercises* aims to examine a certain *performative* reinvestment in reading within current artistic and cultural practices.^{vii} As the title suggests, the exhibition specifically revolves around the notion of *exercise*—approaching reading as a physical, psychological, cognitive, pedagogical, epistemological, political, ethical exercise, for example. The expression “reading exercises” conveys the performativity of reading while underscoring its complex implications in terms of process and agency, among others.

In order to provide a more concise conceptual framework for this discussion, it is necessary to consider the primary meanings of the word *exercise*, namely “to put (any

agency) in operation, employ, or use; to train by practice; to practise oneself in.”^{viii} In its transitive form, the verb *exercise* also means exerting power, applying a skill, or making practical use of a right or privilege^{ix}. More commonly, exercise signifies habitual practice for the sake of gaining skill or strength (physical, ethical, intellectual, etc.) in a particular domain; thus, exercise can be envisaged as a type of durational process or “work.” If each of these definitions can, in principle, be applied to the act of reading, it is all the more interesting to note that the idea of exercise is already deeply ingrained in historical and theoretical concepts of this cultural practice.

Previously linked with the tradition of “spiritual exercises,” reading was, first and foremost, considered a form of mental gymnastics—of an ascetic, meditative, or contemplative nature—deemed as beneficial for mental health as physical exercise was for the body.^x To quote Q.D. Leavis, reading was then (and continue to be) considered “a bracing mental exercise.”^{xi} Yet, as cultural historian Roger Chartier underlines, “[r]eading is not uniquely an abstract operation of the intellect; it brings the body into play, it is inscribed in a space and a relationship with oneself or with others.”^{xii} According to Chartier, “reading is always a practice embodied in acts, spaces, and habits,”^{xiii} whose particular modalities and concrete effects must be taken into account. Consequently, the act of reading is not only neurologically, psychologically, and physically conditioned, but it also depends on a whole range of historical, cultural, social, and political factors.

From the outset, the act of reading implies a form of labour that brings to light the attentional challenges and physiological problems caused by the increased use of technological devices. While many educationalists, reformers, and critics in the 18th and 19th centuries considered intensive reading harmful to the body, as it implied long periods of immobility,^{xiv} today, this so-called endangered practice is associated with effort, endurance, and even physical strain. As the works in the exhibition clearly demonstrate, various processes of memorization, recitation, repetition, translation, retranscription, and re-interpretation are used as reading training (or *re*-training) methods. Whether they consist in copying out the entire Bible, learning a book by heart

until it is, in a sense, embodied, or asking a little girl to read aloud, without interruption, a complicated text by Wittgenstein, or even asking women to remain concentrated on what they're reading during orgasm, the reading exercises performed by the artists (or protagonists in their works) bring into play a relationship with temporality that goes against new “hyperreading”^{xv} habits centred on speed, quantity, fragmentation, and networking of information.

Notably, the exhibition gives a central role to reading out loud, the primary *way to read* in the West,^{xvi} which has experienced a manifest revival in recent years. Falling within what Walter J. Ong called “secondary orality”^{xvii} — a form of orality based on writing which coincides with the digital age—the practices and performances of reading aloud now proliferating in the contemporary art world not only draw attention to the personal agency of the reader, but it also highlights issues of identity as well as the socio-political stakes underpinning speaking in specific contexts. By making the reading experience into a semantic operation as well as a mode of subjectification, a means of empowerment, and a vehicle for social relationships, these artistic experiments contribute to the creation of “new enunciative strategies” and the formation of new interpretative—and ultimately political—communities.^{xviii}

In this regard, the contribution of feminist, queer, postcolonial, and ethnic studies is vital, as their theorists have managed to deconstruct the theoretical fallacy of a generic, neutral, and universal reader (implicitly male, white, and western), thus paving way for a “politics of reading” based on the recognition of differences (in gender, sexual orientation, race, language, social class, etc.).^{xix} According to Paul B. Armstrong, author of *Play and the Politics of Reading*, reading is a social experience through which the ways we see, think, and act are constantly confronted with those of other individuals or groups: “Reading consequently has a political dimension inasmuch as politics has to do with the exercise of power and negotiating of differences.”^{xx} Given the ideological and socio-cultural factors conditioning this practice, the ways that it is exercised (the *how*) prove to

be just as important as—or even more important, in certain cases—than the texts being read (the *what*).^{xxi}

Taking on a variety of forms and formats correlated with very diverse content, the “exercises” brought together in this exhibition subvert both the romantic vision of reading as a solitary pursuit removed from the outside world and that of a scholarly activity that draws purely on the intellect. As intellectual historian François Cusset notes so pertinently:

Reading cannot only be this crepuscular, nostalgic pastime which, while prevailing against predominant neoliberal ideology, nevertheless adopts its exclusive measure: the individual. Otherwise, the moribund republic of professors would, at the risk of dying, cut themselves off once and for all from contemporary, social mutations and from the pernicious but inevitable chaos of cultural industries, from which the most profound book always emerges.^{xxii}

It is finally the issue of universal access to culture and its commodification in a globalized world that Cusset’s article implicitly addresses. A privilege long reserved for a small well-educated elite, then perceived as a right to be defended against oppression and social control by keeping certain populations in ignorance,^{xxiii} reading has henceforth become accessible almost everywhere and on a mass scale thanks to digital media and online consultation tools. Nevertheless, it remains questionable whether this new availability of information genuinely produces more cultivated individuals; that is, whether the ability to read, see, and know everything has truly emancipatory effects. As Jean Larose suggests in his book *Google goulag*, is it not rather the power of this ability that we appreciate than the exercise of its consequences^{xxiv}? There is indeed an enormous difference between *possibility* and actually *doing*. Hence the importance for a university gallery with a critical research mandate—located, moreover, in a building that

houses a library undergoing a profound transformation—to examine what reading or being read to *does to us* and *makes us do* today, as individuals and as a community.

Translated by Louise Ashcroft

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NOTES

ⁱ George Steiner. “The end of bookishness?” *Times Literary Supplement*, July 8-14 1988: 754. Reference should also be made to the work of art historian Jonathan Crary on human attention, which suggests that the problem of distraction in fact dates back to the late 19th century, with the emergence of modern industrialization. Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, OCTOBER Books, 1999).

ⁱⁱ Yves Citton, *Pour une écologie de l’attention* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2014), 190 (my translation).

ⁱⁱⁱ Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What The Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010). In this book, Carr argues that reading on screen and using the Internet in general affect not only cognitive brain function but also its morphological structure.

^{iv} These studies are too numerous to list here. See the excellent synthesis by N. Katherine Hayles in her article “How We Read: Close, Hyper, Machine,” *ADE Bulletin* 150 (2010): 62-79.

^v <https://noreadingaftertheinternet.wordpress.com/about/>, accessed September 18, 2015.

^{vi} These aspects have been explored in several recent exhibitions, including *Postscript: Writing after Conceptual Art*, organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver and presented at The Power Plant, Toronto, in 2013; *Bibliothecaphilia* at Mass MoCA in 2015-2016; and *Reading Rooms* at the Kunsthalle Mulhouse in 2011.

^{vii} Peter Kivy supports the view that all reading can, from the outset, be considered as a “performance” in the sense of an action “performed” by the reader that generates an “experience.” Peter Kivy, *The Performance of Reading: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literature* (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 5. From a more pragmatic perspective, one can refer to the thesis of Stanley Fish,

according to which “it is the readers who make books,” to quote Yves Citton in the preface of the French version of Stanley Fish, *Quand lire c'est faire, l'autorité des communautés interprétatives*, trans. Étienne Dobenesque (Paris: Les Prairies ordinaires, “penser/croiser,” 2007), 5. Stanley Fish. *Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1980).

^{viii} “exercise, v.” OED Online. September 2015. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/66089?rskey=2q5k3j&result=2> (accessed October 04, 2015).

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading*, (London: Flamingo, 1997), 109-123. For a more in-depth account of the relationship between reading and the asceticism of “spiritual exercises,” see Brian Stock. *Ethics through Literature: Ascetic and Aesthetic Reading in Western Culture* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2007).

^{xi} Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), cited by Karin Littau, *Theories of Reading: Books, Bodies, and Bibliomania* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2006), 2-3, 36-37.

^{xii} Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 8.

^{xiii} Ibid., 3.

^{xiv} Littau, *Theories of Reading*, 38.

^{xv} See Hayles, “How We Read.”

^{xvi} Manguel, *History of Reading*, 41-53.

^{xvii} Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 3; 135-138.

^{xviii} François Cusset, “Ce que lire veut dire. La lecture, une affaire collective, une affaire politique.” *RdL. La Revue des livres* 10 (March-April 2013): 15.

^{xix} Littau, *Theories of Reading*, 122-124.

^{xx} Paul B. Armstrong, *Play and the Politics of Reading: The Social Uses of Modernist Form* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), ix.

^{xxi} *Ibid.*, x.

^{xxii} Cusset, “Ce que lire veut dire”, 16 (my translation).

^{xxiii} For more on this subject, see the chapter “Forbidden Reading” in Manguel’s *History of Reading*, which notably describes how “[f]or centuries, Afro-American slaves learned to read against extraordinary odds, risking their lives in a process that, because of the difficulties set in their way, sometimes took several years.” (280) Also of note is the novel *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) by Ray Bradbury, which features the burning of books.

^{xxiv} Jean Larose, *Google goulag: nouveaux essais de littérature appliquée* (Montréal: Boréal, collection papiers collés, 2015), 41-43.

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