

a, A Novel

Derek Beaulieu

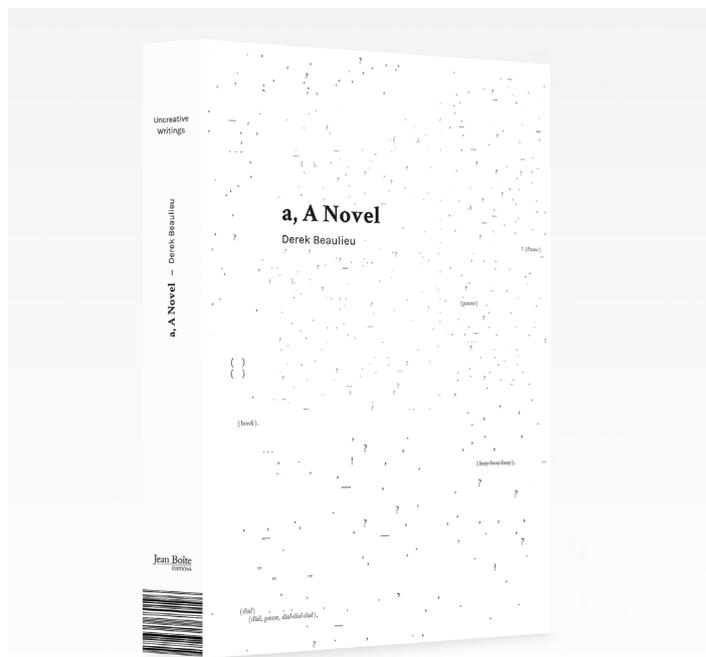
With an essay by Gilda Williams

Collection Uncreative Writings
Jean Boîte Éditions, Paris, 2017

Bilingual French / English
496 pages
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Derek Beaulieu's *a, A Novel* is an erasure-based translative response to Andy Warhol's eponymous novel. Beaulieu carefully erases all of the text on each page of the original work, leaving only the punctuation marks, typists' insertions and onomatopoeic words. The resultant text is a novelistic *ballet mécanique*, a visual orchestration of the traffic signals and street noise of 1960's New York City. This visually powerful half score/half novel highlights the musicality of non-narrative sounds embedded within conversation.

Published in December 1968, Andy Warhol's *a, A Novel* consists solely of the transcribed conversations of Factory denizen Ondine (Robert Olivo). Ondine's amphetamine-addled conversations were captured on audiotape as he haunted the Factory, hailed cabs to late-night parties and traded gossip with Warhol and his coterie. The tapes were roughly transcribed by a small group of high school students. Rife with typographic errors, censored sections, and a chorus of voices, the 451 pages of transcription became, unedited, "a new kind of pop artefact". These pages emphasize transcription over narration, hazard over composition.

In his book, Derek Beaulieu offers a radical displacement of Andy Warhol's work. He erases the novel's speaking characters—members of the mid 1960's New York avant-garde—and preserves only the musicality of their conversations. Beaulieu perfectly provides a tangible example of Theodor Adorno's theory elaborated in his essay *Punctuation Marks*, in which he argues that punctuation marks are the "traffic signals" of literature and that there is "no element in which language resembles music more than in the punctuation marks".

This visual poetry is accompanied by an essay by Gilda Williams, "Breaking Up is Hard to Do. Men, Women, and Punctuation in Warhol's Novel *a*". Her deep knowledge of both Andy Warhol's work and the history of contemporary art explores the complicated history of the original novel and highlights the urgent and precise spirit of Derek Beaulieu's work—the work of an artist who situates Uncreative Writing at the core of contemporary literature and artistic labour.

Commissioned by Jean Boîte Éditions, *a, A Novel* explores the most contemporary forms of Uncreative Writing in 451 pages of visual poetry.

a, A Novel is the first book by Derek Beaulieu published in France.



Derek Beaulieu - photo © Andy Nichols

Derek Beaulieu born in 1973 in Montreal, lives and works in Calgary (Canada). He is a poet, publisher and anthologist.

Author of nine books of poetry, six volumes of conceptual fiction, two collections of critical writing and over 175 chapbooks, Derek Beaulieu's work is consistently praised as some of the most radical and challenging in contemporary Canadian writing.

Beaulieu has shifted his focus in recent years to conceptual fiction, specifically visual translations/rewritings. His book *Flatland* consists of visual patterns based on the typography of Edwin Abbott's classic novel *Flatland* (information as material, 2017) and his book *Local Color* (ntamo, 2008) is a series of color blocks based on the original text of Paul Auster's novella *Ghosts*.

Derek Beaulieu was the 2014-2016 *Poet Laureat of Calgary* in recognition of his 20 years of writing and poetic publishing.

“How exactly did Andy Warhol load the page with ‘murmurs and babbles’, ‘starts and stops’, ‘noises and interruptions’? The answer, abundantly evidenced in Derek Beaulieu’s *a, A Novel* (2017) – this digitally erased version, which leaves only the additions of punctuation and incidental sound – is that a relied enormously on its team of uncredited transcribers. The active contribution of this fluctuating group of poorly paid young women is habitually ignored: negligible at best, risible at worst. Beaulieu’s pages envision a renewed assessment of their work, foregrounding the labours of this under-paid and under-aged Factory underclass.”

Extract of “Breaking Up is Hard to Do.
Men, Women, and Punctuation in Warhol’s Novel *a*” by Gilda Williams.



Gilda Williams - photo © Ricky Adams

Gilda Williams is an art critic, editor and teacher born in New York and based in London since 1994. She teaches at Goldsmiths College, University of London; and Sotheby's Institute of Art. Her most recent books are *ON&BY Andy Warhol* (MIT/Whitechapel, 2016), an anthology of 50 key texts on and by the artist, and *How to Write about Contemporary Art* (Thames&Hudson, 2014). Williams is a London correspondent for *Artforum* magazine and her writing has appeared in *The Guardian*, *Tate etc.*, *Time Out*, *Art in America* and *Sight and Sound*, among many others.

collection

UNCREATIVE WRITINGS

Uncreative Writings is a collection of conceptual poetry and literary ready-mades. This collection invites a range of authors and artists to reveal language in the digital age : its quantity, its fragmentation, its visual dimension, its accessibility and its almost unlimited disposability.

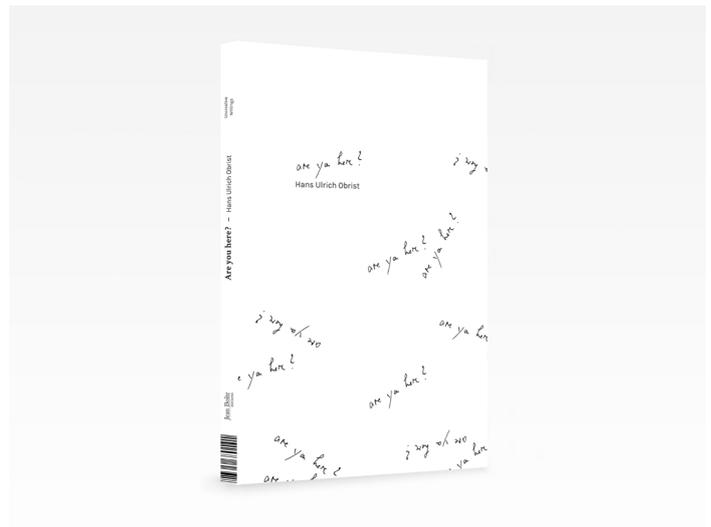
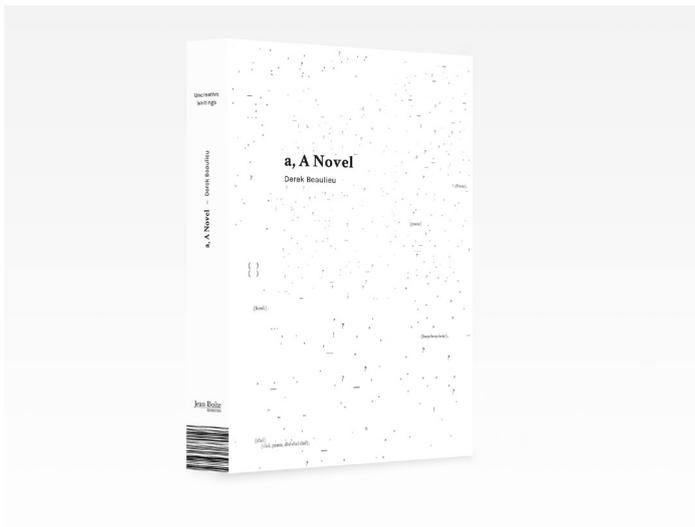
These conceptual writings and experimental texts are in line with a secular history : how ideas are exchanged, commented upon, selected, reused, recycled, adapted, updated, quoted, extracted, duplicated, gifted, distributed, signed and pirated. This is setting the stage for a literary revolution.

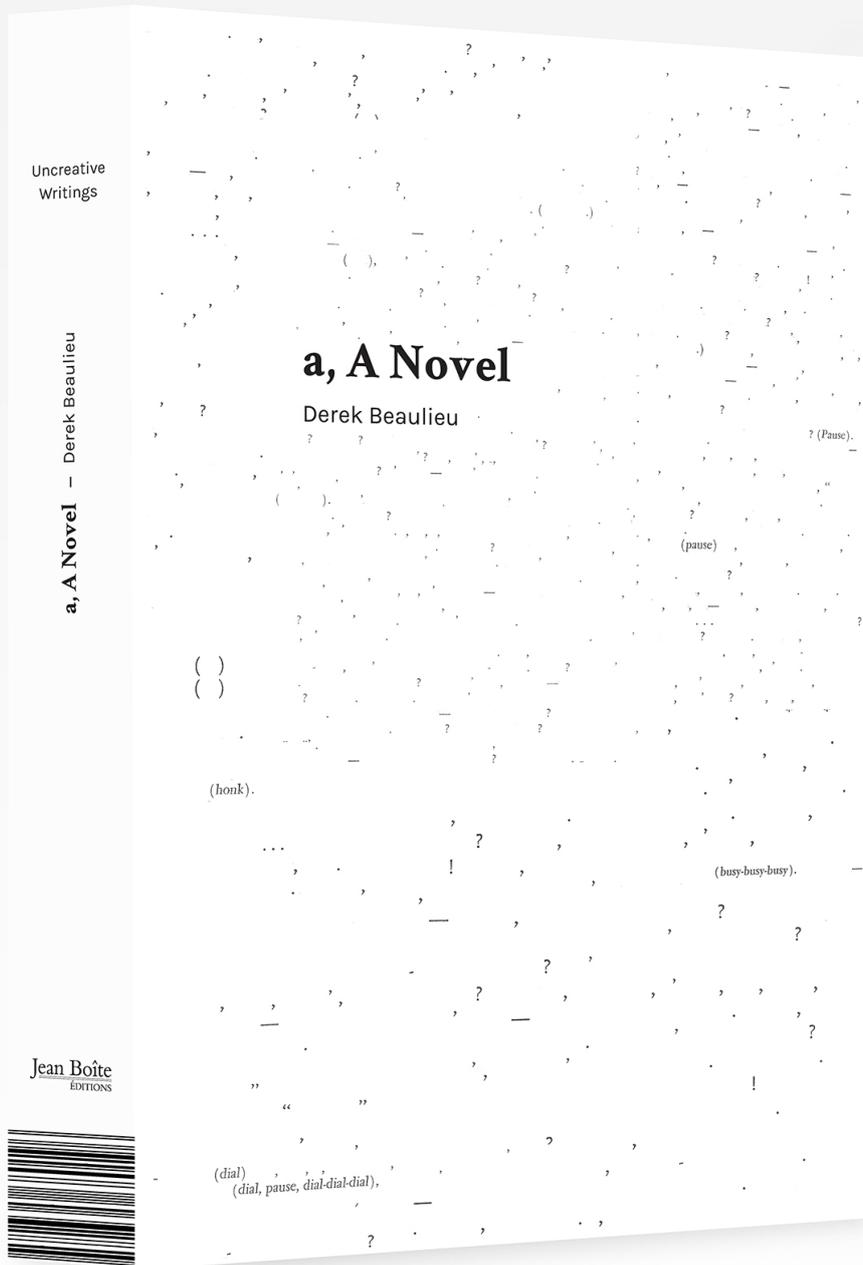
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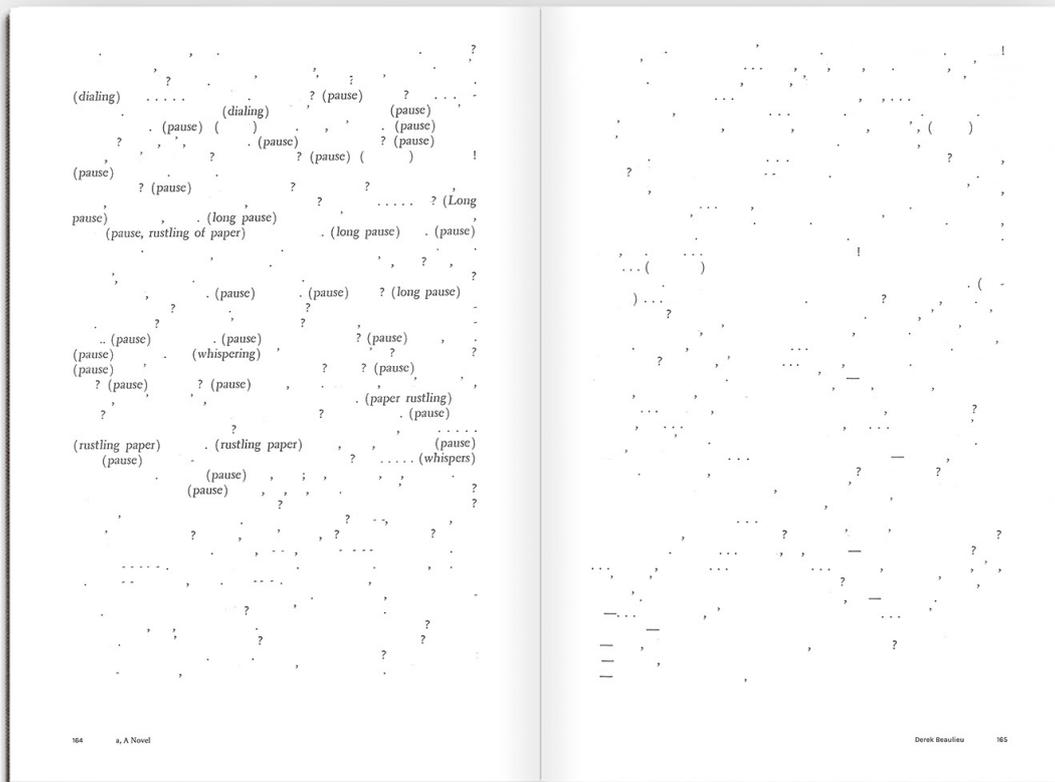
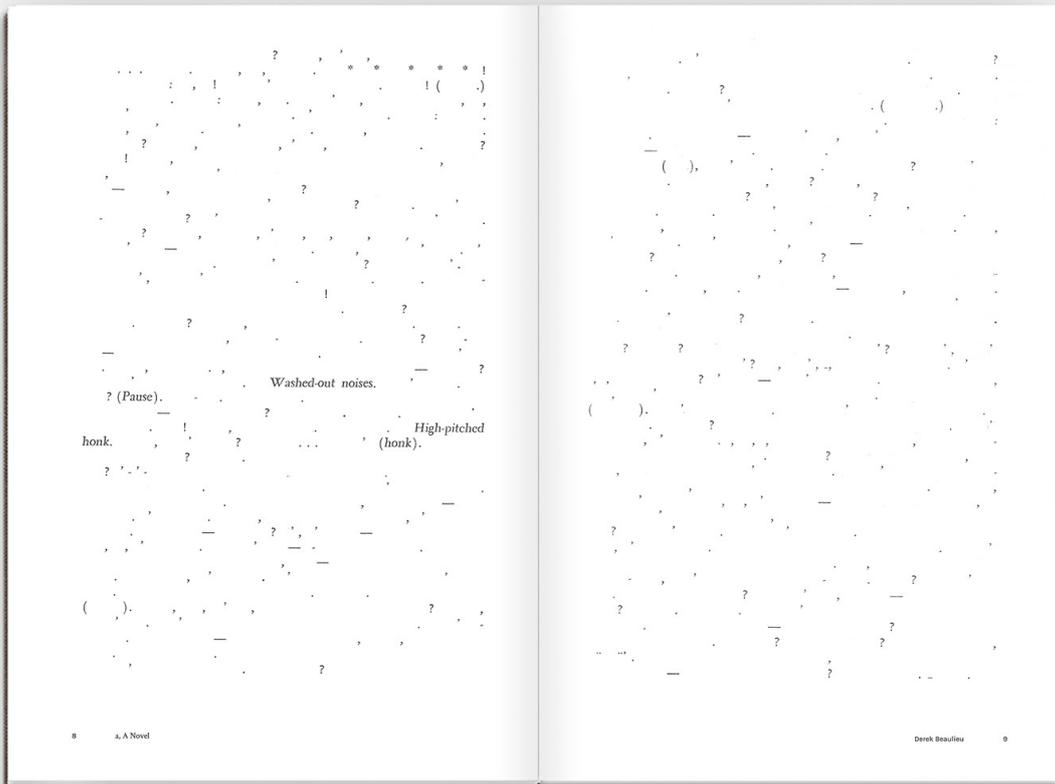
a, A Novel — Derek Beaulieu

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Mon cerveau est comme un magnétophone qui aurait une seule touche, pour effacer.
Andy Warhol, Journal.

Tout ce que l'homme expose ou exprime est une note en marge d'un texte totalement effacé.
Fernando Pessoa,
Le Livre de l'Inconnu

Comme il est dur de rompre

Des hommes, des femmes et de la ponctuation dans le roman *à* d'Andy Warhol

de Gilda Williams

Punctuation

Avant que les émotions n'apparaissent, il y avait notre bonne vieille ponctuation. Longtemps avant que la majuscule «D» ne devienne un sourire à pleines dents renversé sur le côté, les traditionnelles virgules, deux points, et tirets indiquaient au lecteur à quel moment sourire, pleurer ou froncer des sourcils. Un point virgule inséré dans le dialogue d'un roman du XIX^e siècle – soit la plus petite interruption dans le cours d'une conversation fluide – était l'équivalent typographique d'un froncement de sourcil. Les symboles typographiques eux-mêmes seraient des abréviations de sentiments : le point d'exclamation viendrait du mot latin «io», signifiant «joie», le «!» étant placé au-dessus du «o». Pouvez-vous imaginer un monde sans ponctuation ?

Les règles du bon usage de la ponctuation sont sujettes à débats houleux entraînant souvent des verdicts sans appel : seul un idiot se targuerait d'une bonne prose qui ferait fi des signes de ponctuation. «La ponctuation est inutile quand on écrit bien», proteste le romancier Cormac McCarthy, dont les écrits laconiques n'admettent que des points et quelques rares virgules. Un guide stylistique anglais de 1939 listait pas moins de 157 règles de ponctuation. «La ponctuation devrait être vue et non entendue» déclarait un autre ouvrage de règles,

My mind is like a tape recorder with one button – ERASE.
Andy Warhol, From A to B and Back Again.
THE Philosophy of Andy Warhol

Everything stated or expressed by man is a note in the margins of a completely erased text.
Fernando Pessoa,
The Book of Disquiet

Breaking Up is Hard to Do

Men, Women, and Punctuation in Warhol's Novel *à*

by Gilda Williams

Punctuation

Before emojis, there was plain old punctuation. Long before capital "D" meant "big toothy sideways grin", ordinary commas, colons, and dashes instructed readers when to smile, weep, or frown. A semi-colon inserted in the dialogue of a 19th-century novel – the briefest hesitation in fluid conversation – was the expressive equivalent of a raised eyebrow. Typographic symbols themselves might be abbreviations of feeling; the exclamation point may originate from the Latin word *io*, meaning "joy", with the "i" written above the "o". Can you imagine a world without punctuation?

The laws of correct punctuation stir heated opinion, often producing severe verdicts only a fool riddles solid prose with careless little marks. "If you write properly you shouldn't have to punctuate", admonishes novelist Cormac McCarthy, who admits only periods and the occasional comma into his sparse writing. A 1939 English style guide listed no fewer than 157 rules for punctuation. "Punctuation should be seen and not heard", commanded another rulebook, suggesting that disobedience would merit the discipline due a misbehaving child. Elsewhere these non-verbal signs are likened to musical symbols: directing the text's rhythm; indicating when to change pitch or volume; eventually slowing the pace down and taking a rest.

En écho à *Life*, une note interne de Piri Halasz, critique d'art pour le *Times*, accusa «l'art et le style de vie» de Warhol d'avoir «permis l'atmosphère propice au meurtre de Kennedy».

Andy était encore convalescent lorsque la publication de *à* débuta. Le roman «non-écrit» de Warhol fut judicieusement mis en vente le 13 décembre 1968, juste à temps pour Noël – le «cadeau bidon» par excellence, pour citer Mulroney. Les critiques furent unanimement négatives. *The New York Review of Books* se montra sans appel en publiant à son propos :

[...] la dépravation du sexe, la dépravation des sentiments, la dépravation des valeurs et l'hyper-dépravation du langage; [...] dans ses pages dévotées sonnent le glas de la littérature américaine.

«marqua aussi la fin du patronage de la Factory par Billy Name. Après avoir achevé son travail sur les épreuves du roman, le jadis indispensable directeur de la Factory se retira dans la pénombre de sa chambre noire, une retraite échelonnée sur deux années qui s'achève par un mot collé sur la porte : «Andy – Je ne suis plus là mais je suis bien. Amis, Billy» – ce qui raya définitivement le nom de Name de la Factory.

«Ondine ce jour-là fut vraiment étrange... comme une personne normale»

Dans «Literary Warhol» (1989) – la toute première analyse des écrits de Warhol – Phyllis Rose note que les histoires de Warhol «commencent avec la célébrité et terminent dans la précarité». Ce commentaire pourrait tout aussi bien s'appliquer à la trajectoire d'Ondine. Après quelques trois années à jouer le sulfureux Pape du Greenwich Village de *Chelsea Girls*, Ondine s'installa tranquillement dans l'âge mur, après avoir trouvé un emploi comme postier à Brooklyn. L'un des souvenirs les plus poignants de Warhol fut sa dernière rencontre avec Ondine à l'occasion de l'enterrement de Judy Garland à l'été 1969. Andy pensait enregistrer le flot de commentaires «drôlement hystériques» de son ancien compagnon. Mais sans amphétamines pour activer son esprit et délier sa langue, Ondine frappa Warhol par l'ennui mortel de sa conversation, avec des commentaires d'une banalité confondante tels que, «Il fait chaud aujourd'hui, n'est-ce pas?»

Voilà Ondine ce jour-là fut vraiment étrange; c'était comme si j'avais été avec une personne normale. [...] Bien sûr, c'était une bonne chose qu'il ne se drogue plus (j'imagine), et j'étais content pour lui (j'imagine), mais c'était tellement ennuyeux : il fallait se le dire. La fulgurance avait disparu.

De toute évidence, le génie d'Ondine s'était déjà quelque peu perdu de la bande à la page, et a immortalisé en quelque sorte la fulgurance de

Le langage est éliminé, l'écriture est effacée.



Epilogue

Andy Warhol never taped others without their knowledge, in the same way that he rarely took a candid photo. He wasn't so much interested in people as in how recording machines transformed them. By the early 1970s Warhol's habit of non-stop recording took a sinister turn, in the form of Richard Nixon's ever-rolling reel-to-reel machine and the secret recordings which eventually cost him the White House. In 1973 Rose Mary Woods, the President's private secretary, claimed to have "accidentally" erased 18-1/2 critical minutes of audiotape. But Woods' attempt to play the blundering female – stupidly pressing DELETE for minutes on end, or mindlessly sprinkling punctuation like confetti – fooled no one, and Woods was cast by the media as Nixon's in-house co-conspirator. The disguise of the inept girl-typist had worn thin.

And Ondine? Without Andy's mike beneath his chin, without a haven at the Factory, the former underground star took to introducing college screenings of *Chelsea Girls*, later becoming a hot-dog vendor at Madison Square Garden. Yet Warhol never entirely forgot him. In 1985 the artist visited Julian Schnabel in his studio; playing there were Maria Callas records. Andy's mind drifted back to those glimmering Silver Factory days from two decades earlier: the only memory, they say, that brought tears to Warhol's eyes. As he/Hackett write in *The Diaries*, while listening to the opera music Andy could almost see Ondine whisking around in the shadows of the studio. Beaulieu's pages are like photographs erased save for those flickering shadows. Or like sparks flying off Ondine's once-volcanic life, captured by Cathy, Iris/Rosalie, Brooky, Maureen and Susan, then suspended on the page, midflight.

a, A Novel

Derek Beaulieu

Derek Beaulieu's *a, A Novel*, is an erasure-based translative response to Warhol's controversial masterpiece, leaving only the punctuation marks and onomatopoeic words. Here, the resultant text is a novelistic ballet mécanique; an orchestration of the traffic signals and street noise of the 1960's New York City. *a, A Novel* mines writing for the musicality of the urban environment, the complex of non-narrative sounds embedded within our conversations.

In addition to this 451 pages poem, Gilda Williams is enlightening Beaulieu's *a, A Novel* with her deep knowledge of both Andy Warhol and contemporary art questions. After reading her afterword, anyone should feel how this work of pure Uncreative Writing is a beautiful answer to contemporary shifts in literature and, here, feminism.

a, A Novel de Derek Beaulieu est une traduction du roman éponyme d'Andy Warhol qui joue entièrement sur l'effacement. Sur chaque page de l'œuvre originale, Beaulieu efface scrupuleusement le texte, ne laissant que les marques de ponctuation, les didascalies et les onomatopées. Ce roman-partition, sans narration parasite, met en scène la musicalité de nos conversations avec une puissance visuelle inédite.

En complément de ce poème de 451 pages, Gilda Williams nous donne un éclairage inattendu sur *a, A Novel*, de part sa connaissance de Andy Warhol et des enjeux en art contemporain. Au delà de la mise en perspective de ce travail d'écriture sans écriture qui est une réponse forte aux changements contemporains de la littérature, Gilda Williams décrit ici un geste féministe.

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