

Deconstructing the Novel: The Critical Function of the Artist's Book

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The criticism of both art and literature have been commonplace pursuits for centuries, having been around in some manner for nearly as long as people have been making works of art to critique. Often, the expectation for a critique of an artist's or an author's work is rather monotonous; frequently taking the form of a dry written review that provides a basic summation followed by an assessment of whether or not the piece in question was a success. Though this time-honored method of providing criticism is perhaps the most straightforward means of review and is usually quite helpful, it is lacking in its own ability to capture attention and excite an audience. The unspoken yet widely accepted rule in practice here would seem to be that a review of a work of art cannot be a work of art itself. While this conventional method of dull critique is still widely used in today's newspapers and scholarly journals, the past fifty or so years have given rise to a new manner of expression that, in certain instances, provides literary criticism through a creative medium. The phrase 'artist's book' is a little difficult to clearly define, due largely to its habitual use as an umbrella term for anything that combines the even broader genre of art with the form or qualities of the book. However, one specific subsection of the artist's book category, where an artist takes a preexisting work of literature and alters it into a new work of his or her own, is significantly less vague to define. This branch of the artist's book genre, occasionally called the 'appropriative' style, does not only yield a work of art through its completion, but also supplies the artist's personal commentary and criticism of the original text being treated. By literally deconstructing a piece of literature, book artists are able to insert their own thoughts and impressions directly into the novel they are working with, creating a critique that is so intimately connected to the work being analyzed that book and review become one inseparable form. In particular, this paper addresses three specific examples of the appropriative

artist's book: *A Humument* by Tom Phillips, *Tree of Codes* by Jonathan Safran Foer, and *Legendary, Lexical, Loquacious Love* by Eve Rhymer, each of which represents a different approach to altering and critiquing a work of fiction. Through this increasingly popular form of expression, the medium for delivering literary criticism is being actively revitalized, bridging the chasm that has existed between critique and artistry.

Before delving into specific examples of how the artist book may function as a work of criticism, it is first necessary to provide some background regarding this peculiar art form. Even within the art world, the artist's book is a rather under-acknowledged subject. This owes to a combination of factors, such as it being a relatively new genre, the difficulty of attractively displaying it, as well as its habitation of a no man's land somewhere between the genres of art and literature. Having been popularized during the 1960s as cheap to make and as "one manifestation of the dematerialization of the art object and the new emphasis on art process," the artist's book was also used as a means for artists outside the museum and gallery circuit to showcase their art.¹ Though the original intent was to use a medium that would be easily accessible to the common public, the difficulty of displaying a book (since its very composition inhibits more than one set of pages being seen at a given time) in addition to the problem and expense of reproducing these unique works would ultimately ensure the artist's book's relative obscurity. It also cannot help, at least from a strictly academic perspective, that these works fall squarely between two separate disciplines; those of literature and art history. Save those few educated in both departments, anyone approaching the artist's book for academic purposes would

¹ Joan Lyons, ed., *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook* (Layton, UT: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985), 7.

Though popularized during the sixties, artists' books had been around for over a century previous, with the illuminated works of William Blake from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries often being considered some of the first examples of this genre.

be only half qualified for the project from its beginning, which could easily be reason enough to wash one's hands of the genre entirely. For the same reasons that make the artist's book difficult to handle, however, the artist's book is also excitingly unfamiliar and intriguing. In the words of Clive Phillpot, the former director of the Museum of Modern Art's Library, artists' books are of a "mongrel nature ... distinguished by the fact that they sit provocatively at the juncture where art, documentation, and literature all come together."² Phillpot's statement here is representative of the opinions of many who have chosen to study the artists' book: it is a genre that defies a singular categorization, a reality that can prove to be occasionally frustrating, but always 'provocative' due to its very nature.

This paper focuses solely upon those artists' books that are created through the alteration of a preexisting text. Yet how should the distinction between this particular subset of the artist's book and the broader grouping as a whole be made? Because of the wide variety of forms that the artist's book may take, a number of different scholars have made attempts to categorize the different subcategories of this genre. Anne Burkhart's system of classification in particular is especially well thought out and articulate,³ and it provides a simple title for the type of artist's book addressed here. Of the eleven philosophical approaches to creating an artist's book that Burkhart outlines in her article "Mongrel Nature," the category that stands out as most appropriate for this subset of the artist's book is the one entitled 'Appropriations.' To define this

² Clive Phillpot, "Books by Artists and Books as Art," in *Artist / Author: Contemporary Artists' Books*, eds. Cornelia Lauf & Clive Phillpot (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 1998), 33, quoted in Anne L. Burkhart, "'Mongrel Nature': A Consideration of Artists' Books and Their Implications for Art Education," *Studies in Art Education* 47, no. 3 (2006): 249.

³ Burkhart's system of classification was created by combining aspects of two other systems previously suggested by some of the leading scholars of this field: Johanna Drucker's nine category system and Clive Phillpot's thirteen category system. Drucker's and Phillpot's systems are more commonly referred to, but Burkhart's offers a more direct connection to my particular subject.

category, Burkhart writes that “some artists appropriate and alter books in varying degrees, from simple highlighting to manipulating it until it is nearly unrecognizable. Methods of alteration include printing, cutting, painting, masking, folding, reshaping, layering, and collaging.”⁴ It is this appropriative type of artist’s book that is the topic of this paper’s discussion, and by examining how the following artists utilize the techniques illustrated above by Burkhart, one sees how the action of artistic appropriation quickly becomes an act of artistic criticism.

Armed with this phrase ‘appropriative artist’s book,’ the next point of business is to assess some of the ways that this art form may be used to create a work of literary criticism. One technique, which shall be called the ‘additive’ method, may be seen in the work of Tom Phillips, particularly in his classic artist’s book, *A Humument*. Like all of the artists examined here, Phillips created his work not upon a blank canvas, but from the pages of someone else’s completed work of literature. In the case of *A Humument*, the book from which Phillips built his work was a ninth edition printing of W.H. Mallock’s 1892 novel *A Human Document*. Concerning his methods for treating Mallock’s work, Phillips approached the original text of *A Human Document* with a specific set of rules in mind. Firstly, though there are continuous motifs and stories to be found within *A Humument*, each of the book’s 367 treated pages may be regarded as an individual work, consisting of both a poem and an illustration. Next, in order to construct each individual poem, Phillips used a variation of American author William S. Burroughs’s technique of creating ‘cut-ups,’ where one literally cuts up a text, and by rearranging and omitting certain words, creates a new, ‘found’ poem.⁵ Phillips’s approach to *A Human*

⁴ Anne L. Burkhart, “Mongrel Nature: A Consideration of Artists’ Books and Their Implications for Art Education,” *Studies in Art Education* 47, no. 3 (2006): 255.

⁵ Mel Ash, *Beat Spirit: The Way of the Beat Writers as a Living Experience* (New York: Tarcher / Putnam Books, 1997), 45.

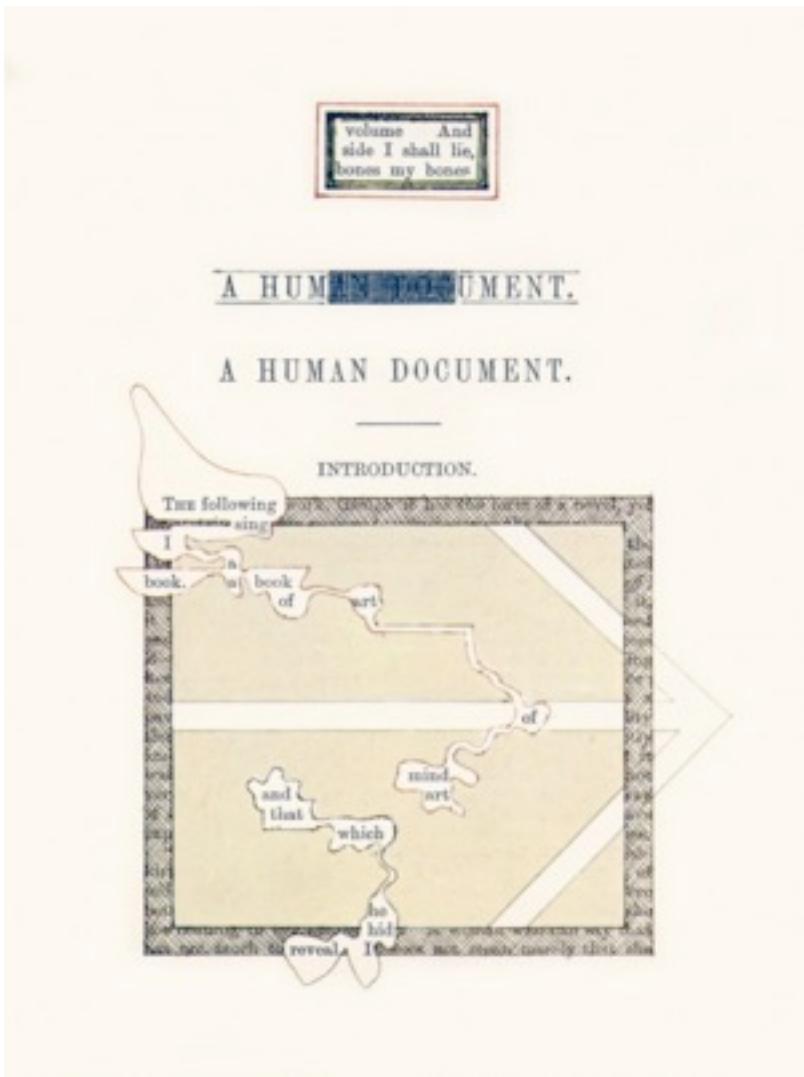


Figure 1 - Phillips, Tom. *A Humument*, Edition 1, Page 1. 1970. use on each folio, Phillips creates illustrations that relate back to the content of his poem. As good an example as any of Phillips' technique may be found on the first page of the first version of *A Humument* [Fig. 1]. By eliminating most of the words on the page, Phillips is able to highlight those few words he chooses to emphasize to create his poem. Then, through the usage of different paints and pens, Phillips creates an arrow atop the surplus words, both directing his reader deeper into his text and illustrating the content of the poem.

Document was a bit more civilized than the method of Burroughs, though Phillips still cites Burroughs's influence on his work in the introduction to the fifth edition version of *A Humument*.⁶ Instead of literally cutting *A Human Document* into pieces to then paste back together, Phillips instead worked through each page linearly, eliminating many of the words to create short poems from the original order of the words on each page. Then, over the text he does

⁶ Tom Phillips, *A Humument*, 5th ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), introduction, available through <http://humument.com/intro.html>

specifically the first line which reads “The following sing I a book. a book of art.”⁷ It should be noted that not all of Phillips’s illustrations in *A Humument* relate so directly to the accompanying poem. Many of the illustrations take on a rather surreal quality, but even when the illustration is not readily relatable to the content of the text, the relationship between poem and image is extremely intertwined for every folio.

By merely glancing at an example of Phillips’s treatment of *A Human Document*, it is immediately clear that he must have pored over Mallock’s original work extensively in order to extract his poetry. However, in order to discern how *A Humument* functions as a work of literary criticism requires a much closer reading of Phillips’s reworking of the original text, as well as some background regarding the original nature of Mallock’s work. Part of what Phillips achieves through *A Humument* is to carry on a conversation with the original text of *A Human Document*, and to a certain extent with W.H. Mallock himself. Often, Phillips accomplishes this by taking the words of Mallock and arranging them into an order that would have been thoroughly uncharacteristic of the man’s work, thus drawing attention to certain flaws or peculiarities of Mallock’s writing. For example, the persistently serious tone of Mallock’s passages was a common target for Phillips’s inserted commentary, with Phillips himself having mused that “In a way his [Mallock’s] complete lack of humour is also a help, for it is a pleasure to tease the odd joke out of a novel which contains almost none.”⁸ Phillips’s ability ‘to tease the odd joke’ out of Mallock’s dry text is primely illustrated by the 27th page of the first edition of *A Humument*

⁷ Tom Phillips, *A Humument*, 1st ed. (London: Tetrad Press, 1970), 1.
The reason for footnotes 6 and 7 being different has to do with differences between the different published editions of *A Humument*, with even the poems and illustrations changing from one edition to the next.

⁸ Phillips, *A Humument*, 5th ed., introduction.

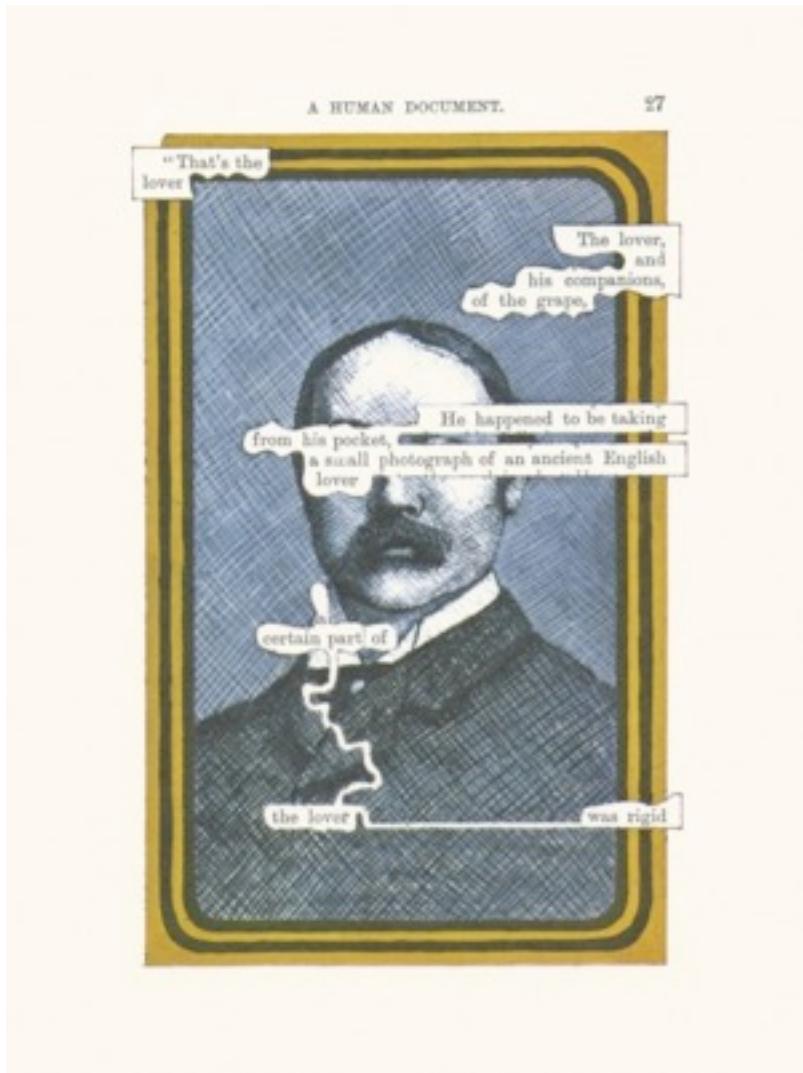


Figure 2 - Phillips, Tom. *A Humument*, Edition 1, Page 1. 1970. addition to countering Mallock's pervasively serious tone with humor,

Phillips critiques Mallock on other fronts as well, most notably for the author's anti-semitic attitude, which Phillips parodies in one of the few ongoing narratives of *A Humument*. By drawing attention to Mallock's shortcomings through his elaborate system of highlighting, Phillips is able to critique *A Human Document* without ever having to write a single word, creating criticism literally *through* his art.

[Fig. 2]. In this folio, Phillips's found poem demonstrates his ability to take the Victorian language of the unworked text and transform it into something far raunchier than the original author intended, ending with the line, "a certain part of the lover was rigid."⁹ By artfully choosing and leading his viewer through the words to his poem, Phillips turns a perfectly innocent passage into a poem about a man getting an erection after looking at a picture of his lover. In

⁹ Phillips, *A Humument*, 1st ed., 27.

To classify the appropriative approach of Tom Phillips's artist book *A Humument*, the adjective 'additive' was used, which only really makes sense when compared to the method employed by the next artist, Jonathan Safran Foer. In his work *Tree of Codes*, Foer created a new narrative out of the preexisting novel *Street of Crocodiles*, originally written by Bruno Schulz, much in the same way that Phillips had done to Mallock's *A Human Document*, only instead of crossing the excess words out, Foer physically removed all surplus wordage from his work. The finished result was a book consisting of more space than content, with each 'page' consisting of only a handful of words delicately webbed from the page's exterior edges [Fig. 3]. In regard to Foer's approach to the appropriative artist's book, the term 'subtractive' will be used, which provides some additional perspective to why Phillips's method is additive, since Foer literally took away from the original text he was working with, while Phillips technically added to it.

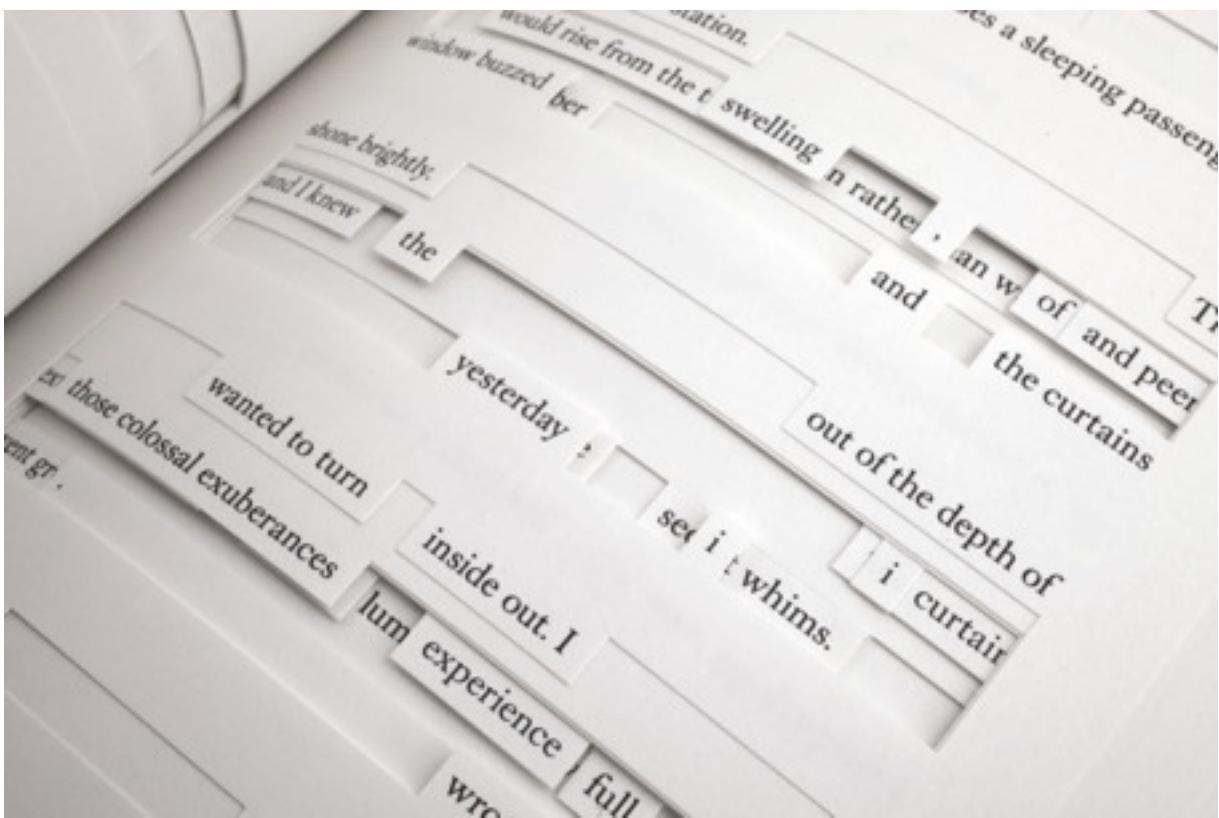


Figure 3 - Foer, Jonathan Safran. *Tree of Codes*. 2010.

through paints, pencils, and the occasional use of collage. In order to make *Tree of Codes*, Foer started out with a copy of Schulz's *Street of Crocodiles*, and through the use of a die cutting machine, he was able to edit down Schulz's original novel of 37,483 words to a work of only 3,815.¹⁰ Unlike *A Humument*, *Tree of Codes* is not just a collection of found poems created out of the text of an entirely different work, but does in fact still follow the plot originally outlined by Schulz in *Street of Crocodiles*, only severely abridged. Also unlike Phillips's work, Foer does not add anything to the pages of *Street of Crocodiles*; his art being formed solely by his choice of emissions to the original text.

Knowing that Foer created *Tree of Codes* from Schulz's *Street of Crocodiles*, it would make absolute sense that one of the purposes of Foer's work was to criticize Schulz's original novel, yet after closer examination, it becomes clear that any critique that Foer places upon Schulz's book is not meant to be derogatory in nature. In fact, *Street of Crocodiles* is likely not even the primary object of criticism here, but instead provides an excellent forum for Foer to point at other faults more generic to the literary world at large. As a work of critique, *Tree of Codes* can be interpreted as having two different targets: historic censorship, and the modern digitization of the literary form. To fully understand the jab Foer is taking at censorship, some background regarding the life of Bruno Schulz and Foer's editing of his book are first necessary. Schulz, a Jewish man having living in modern day Poland before World War II, published *Street of Crocodiles* in 1934, but after the onset of the war, the rest of his body of art and literature was lost, in particular a manuscript for a novel that was believed to be his masterpiece. Foer, in *Tree of Codes*, has been accused of stripping the original work of all "sexuality, animality, and

¹⁰ N. Katherine Hayles, "Combining Close and Distant Reading: Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* and the Aesthetic of Bookishness," *Publication of the Modern Language Association of America* 128, no. 1 (2013): 227.

sleaze,” some of the most significant themes of Schulz’s original work, only leaving behind a highly censored and ‘Disneyfied’ version of the original, which has been likened by N. Katherine Hayles to the loss of Schulz’s other work to the Holocaust.¹¹ By emulating the censorship and premature death of Schulz through the drastically edited and incomplete looking form of his artist’s book, Foer provides a sort of historic critique of racially based censorship, and in turn censorship in general. The other critique that Foer makes with *Tree of Codes* is significantly more apparent to the common reader. By having created a work of art that relies heavily upon its three dimensionality and physical quality, Foer is ensuring that his work be consumed via an actual print medium, a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly rare in the modern digitized world. For this quality, N. Katherine Hayles celebrates *Tree of Codes* in her article “Combining Close and Distant Reading,” in which she discusses what she calls the ‘aesthetic of bookishness,’ which has to do with the human attachment to the physical form of the book.¹² While Hayles’s points on this matter are a little esoteric, Johanna Drucker provides a clearer perspective on the subject in her essays “The Art of the Written Image” and “Electronic Media and the Status of Writing,” in which she discusses some of the aspects of the physical print medium that cannot be emulated through digital reproductions.¹³ Though most of Drucker’s work has to do with the actual handwritten word, much of what she has to say about the physicality of the medium also applies to works like *Tree of Codes*, in that both possess qualities that are lost when translated to a two dimensional electronic screen. Even referring back to figure

¹¹ Hayles, “Combining Close and Distant Reading,” 227 - 229.

¹² Ibid., 227.

¹³ Both essays included in Johanna Drucker’s *Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing, and Visual Poetics* (New York: Granary Books, 1998).

3, in which Foer's work is captured in a two dimensional photograph, it is clear the full, almost sculptural effect of the work is lost without being able to experience it in person. As such, artists' books like Foer's are critical of modern digitization in their very nature, losing their full impact when translated to a flat surface.

Where the additive method used to create *A Humument* and the subtractive method necessary to make *Tree of Codes* might be viewed as opposite approaches that ultimately culminate in the production of an appropriative artist's book, the third and final method to be evaluated here falls halfway between the previous two, neither adding nor taking away from the original work being treated. This approach to the artist's book, which will be called 'preservative,' instead keeps every word of the original work, but rearranges them into new formations, changing their meanings and implications. An example of this kind of artist's book is Karen Reimer's *Legendary, Lexical, Loquacious Love* which takes quite a different form than either of the two works already looked at. Where the artists' books of Tom Phillips and Jonathan Safran Foer both took the form of found poetry / literature, Reimer's work does not ever culminate into the shape of any sort of narrative. Instead, *Legendary, Lexical, Loquacious Love* simply takes all the text of a generic romance novel, the identity of which remains unnamed, and reorganizes all of its words into alphabetical order, splitting them into chapters based on beginning letter (chapter one is A, chapter two is B, and so on through Z) [Fig. 4]. While not all appropriative artists' books of the preservative variety are organized in this fashion, Reimer chooses to do so with hers, and to hilarious effect.

In a genre dominated by works consisting of found poetry, Reimer's *Legendary, Lexical, Loquacious Love* is a refreshing change of approach. While perhaps not something that could



Figure 4 - Reimer, Karen. *Legendary, Lexical, Loquacious Love*, Pages 50 - 51. 1996.

occupy someone's attention for an extended length of time, Reimer's work is sure to elicit a laugh from anyone who understands its irony. Advertised on its cover as "An Adult Romance for the Post Structuralist Woman,"¹⁴ *Legendary, Lexical, Loquacious Love* is criticizing the entire genre of romance literature by boiling it down into a basic alphabetized lexicon. The implication of Reimer's book is that by taking the lists of words found within its pages, anyone could assemble a work of pulp fiction, to join the near-endless legions of the stuff already cluttering the shelves of America's bookstores. The effect of the work is further enhanced by how it does not name the identity of the original book that was re-alphabetized to create Reimer's book, giving

¹⁴ Karen Reimer, *Legendary, Lexical, Loquacious Love* (Chicago: Sara Ranchouse Publishing, 1996), cover.

the impression that it could truly have been assembled from *any* romance novel. Though not the original intent of Reimer, a quick google search perpetuates the joke she began, with no one to date having successfully identified what the original text was. A closer look at Reimer's lexicon only further condemns the category of popular fiction she parodies. By skimming through the book's pages, the ridiculous lack of diversified vocabulary of the original work quickly impresses itself upon the reader. Referring back to figure 4, of those few words found on page 50, the majority of them have to do with either breasts, breathlessness, or breeches, marking the nature of the original text's content as incredibly predictable. Through this basic system of organization, Reimer managed to illuminate the formulaic superficiality of the entire romance genre, showing the minimal level of skill required to assemble such a book. *Legendary, Lexical, Loquacious Love* supplies a scathing criticism, but delivers it by means of providing its audience with a fresh perspective of a familiar form.

Through the works of Tom Phillips, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Karen Reimer, the critical potential of the appropriative artist's book is clearly illustrated. Each artist represents a different method of appropriating and altering a preexisting work of literature, either by means of an additive, subtractive, or preservative approach. In *A Humument*, Phillips provided a critique of a Victorian novel by W.H. Mallock, offering criticism regarding the tone and attitude of the original work. By treating Bruno Schulz's *Street of Crocodiles*, Foer directed his critical attention not at the specific work of Schulz, but at broader themes concerning censorship and the digitization of the printed world in his book *Tree of Codes*. Lastly Reimer, by reformatting a generic romance novel in *Legendary, Lexical, Loquacious Love*, managed to exhibit the inanity of an entire literary genre merely through alphabetization. These three artists demonstrate that, in

addition to being visually stimulating and exciting, this manner of artist's book can be just as effective in providing critiques as any traditional literary review. The only trouble is that once the artist's book reviews a piece of literature, what amusing form of criticism is left to then review the artist's book?

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