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Review: Tim Youd's 'Post Office' is Bukowski to the letter

The downtown performance art is an irony-steeped exercise in endurance, as Youd re-types the author's first book on a single battered page.

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Performance artist Tim Youd uses a Royal Quiet Deluxe typewriter to transcribe... (Luis Sinco / Los Angeles...)

Endurance is a staple of performance art.

In 1971, Chris Burden locked himself inside a small school locker at UC Irvine for five days. Three years later, Linda Mary Montano performed "Three Day Blindfold," groping her way around San Francisco with her eyes shrouded by a blindfold.

That same year, for eight hours a day over three days, German artist Joseph Beuys was locked inside a New York gallery with a wild coyote. Marina Abramovic and Ulay Laysiepen spent 90 days in 1988 walking the length of the Great Wall of China from opposite ends until, finally meeting in the

middle, they said their goodbyes and ended their 12-year collaboration.

While perhaps not quite as grueling as these predecessors, Tim Youd for the past week has been sitting at a typewriter set up in the bed of a rented pickup truck in the parking lot of the U.S. Post Office Terminal Annex in downtown Los Angeles. Daily from 11 a.m. until 4 p.m., he is retyping poet and novelist Charles Bukowski's first book, word for word and page by page, on the same model of Underwood typewriter that the late author used.

The artist is facing the vast and imposing facility where Bukowski worked for 14 years, first as a substitute letter carrier and later as a mail sorter, and where he took inspiration for his 1971 novel "Post Office." Youd will be there through Saturday. The schedule leads up to the evening-long Perform Chinatown performance-art festival, which features two-dozen artists and begins on Chung King Road at 5 p.m. Visit the Terminal Annex parking lot and there isn't much to see, although Youd is happy to take a break and chat.

That stark lack of entertainment value seems part of the point. Youd's 10-day performance involves drudgery, not glamour. When he worked at the post office Bukowski was an ordinary wage-slave, tied to the dull repetition of modern industrial labor. His famously unadorned style of writing juxtaposed the indifferent routine of his workaday world with irresistible bouts of drinking, debauchery and equivocal stabs at human connection.

That the job site for the writer back then and the artist today is called Terminal Annex, with its end-of-the-line overtones of offering just a bit more space for reflection, is an irony hard to miss. "You wait," Bukowski once said of any writer's normal predicament, "and if nothing happens, you wait some more."

Youd, as he did on a Brooklyn sidewalk in May with Henry Miller's "Tropic of Capricorn," is re-typing the 200-page novel onto a single sheet of 8.5" by 11" paper. He starts at the top and, when he gets to the bottom of the page, feeds it back into the cylindrical roller and begins again. Every re-typed page is completely different yet finally indistinguishable from the one that came before it.

By Sunday, the sheet was a dense and impenetrable rectangle of silvery-

black ink. The monotonous repetition of keystroke atop keystroke is slowly but steadily shredding the paper. Youd has taped a second sheet behind the first, and it has begun to pick up ink smudges and letter fragments through the tears as he continues on. (Ask and he'll show you.) The unwavering pounding of the keys leaves the second sheet physically scarred.

It looks something like a page of Braille, a text whose meaning can only begin to be understood through touch. Labor is not an abstraction but a physical reality. When the performance is over, Youd will frame the two sheets of paper side by side as a diptych – a form that arose in the Middle Ages, before the modern era, as the visual equivalent of a book.

One reason that performance art exploded into prominence in the 1970s is that it inserted the human body into an aesthetic landscape where the gossamer claims for abstraction's inevitable primacy in Modern art had finally fallen apart. Its more recent efflorescence can partly be explained by the simultaneous rise of virtual experience in our increasingly digital world.

Youd's clattering, obsolete typewriter, carefully matched to the one the original author used, stands in sharp contrast to the gentle keyboard of a computer, tablet or digital phone. He's texting, but not in the usual way. Out there in the parking lot an element of nostalgia is unavoidable, yet he's no Luddite. (A cellphone casually rests on his work table.) Rather than destroying contemporary machinery – as those 19th century bands of Luddite workers in England did in a futile effort to resist the march of mechanized threats to employment – Youd is italicizing the very idea of work.

Endurance performances such as Youd's extended project of physically writing the book have different functions. But most have one thing in common: They exploit the limits of focused concentration. Always a challenge, the scramble these days is to keep afloat in the interactive environment of virtual and analog realities.

Fitting for a work of art, the droning performance of "Post Office" unfolds during our traumatic era of crushing economic inequity, the likes of which we have not seen in generations. "Any damn fool can beg up some kind of job," Bukowski wrote in the 1971 book that Youd is retyping; "it takes a wise man to make it without working." That prescient line could be an Occupy epigram for today's notorious 1% society.

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It might also differentiate the kind of labor artists typically undertake in their studios. Bukowski, after quitting the post office, knocked out his novel in a month.