

Performance artist Tim Youd goes around typing up novels in public. What does it all mean?

Walter Ryce Jun 26, 2015



Tim Youd typing in Mississippi.
Robert Jordan/Ole Miss Communications

How many performance artists does it take to screw in a lightbulb?

A: I don't know. I left after six hours.

That's just one of many jokes that sling arrows at performance artists. Maybe because performance art can be complex, obscure, oblique and unexpected, it allows us to interpret it as we see fit. Or not. Performance art has been a punching bag, an effigy for the most challenging, goofy or indulgent regions of Art.

Marina Abramovic is probably the most famous performance artist alive thanks to her collaborations with **Jay-Z** at Pace Gallery and **Lady Gaga** (and Ms. Gaga's 45 million social media followers).

But most people probably couldn't name another performance artist, alive or dead.

Maybe **Tim Youd** will change that.

He is a self-described performance artist. And for even stepping up to that label, he merits attention. But his performance is easy to understand.

He's re-typing 100 published novels, on the kind of typewriters their original authors used, in locations relevant to that novel or author.

In January 2014, he typed all 292 pages of **Raymond Chandler's** *Farewell, My Lovely* sitting at a desk and chair and clacking away on an Underwood Noiseless typewriter on a pier in Santa Monica. Further back, in October 2013, he typed up **Tom Wolfe's** 352-page *The Right Stuff* on an Underwood 21 at the Lancaster Museum of Art And History. (Lancaster is near Edwards Air Force Base, the site of early test flights from Wolfe's book.)

He started February 2013 in Los Angeles, with **Hunter S. Thompson's** *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. He's done **Kurt Vonnegut**, **Ernest Hemingway**, **Virginia Woolf** and three by **Henry Miller**. He's going at a rate of about one a month. One of them he typed up in Ireland. He expects this will go on for 10 years total.

Charlotte Eyerman, executive director of the Monterey Museum of Art, brought Youd up here.

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"I've been wanting to work with contemporary artists in contemporary ways," she says. "Go beyond solo shows. And promote the literary legacy and connect that to the contemporary art world."

She's enlisted him to do four novels across the county in 6 weeks:

#36: **John Steinbeck's** *Travels with Charley* at the Steinbeck Center (June 22-30).

#37: **Jack Kerouac's** *Big Sur* at Monterey Museum of Art-Pacific (11am-4pm July 6; 4-5pm meet the artist), and near Bixby Bridge (July 7-15).

#38: **Richard Farina's** *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me* at Monterey Museum of Art-Pacific (11am-4pm July 20) and at The Barnyard in Carmel (July 21-29).

#39: **Richard Brautigan's** *A Confederate General from Big Sur* at Monterey Museum of Art-Pacific (Aug. 2) and Henry Miller Library (Aug. 2-6).

There's a twist. You'd types of the novels on just one page, cycling back up to the top and starting back down, again and again until the page is a smudge of ink. There is a second sheet of paper underneath that sheet that catches any ink that bleeds through, or keystrokes that wear through the first page.

Then he mounts both pages, side by side in a diptych that looks like a book. The deeper meaning of it seems open to interpretation. Which, if you're not a stickler for definitions, can be fun.

This is how Eyerman explains what Youd is up to: "He's a visual artist with performative inclinations. His works of art are alive. He reanimates what is an existing document produced in the past. His engagement creates a spark that makes it relevant and accessible now."

Christopher Knight, *LA Times Art Critic*, writes about Youd's typing performance of **Charles Bukowski's** *Post Office* in terms like this: "Labor is not an abstraction but a physical reality" and "Fitting for a work of art, the droning performance of *Post Office* unfolds during our traumatic era of crushing economic inequity."

See? Fun.

But here is Youd himself—stepping outside of Steinbeck's Rocinante truck (in which Steinbeck traveled the country with his dog Charley) for a break in typing at the Steinbeck Center—in his own words, on his own art.

Weekly: Most people are not allowed inside the truck. What's it like in there?

Youd: It's a pretty unexpected and delightful surprise. [Steinbeck Center's Interim Executive Director] **Susan Shillinglaw** was nice enough to let me access it. The lighting in there is this warm quality, an orange-yellow cast to it. It feels like I'm sitting off the highway in some grove of trees at dusk. Because I'm reading and absorbing the novel at the same time and thinking about [Steinbeck]...I'm not channeling him as much as giving myself a deeper access to the novel.

That top page gets saturated with the ink and bleeds through and gets distressed so holes are worn into it. That's starting now. Perforations. When I'm done, I take the two pages and mount them side by side like a diptych. Formally, two pages of a book. That piece has all the words of the novel. Not just for the work, but the presence.

When did you embark on this performance art project?

The first one was Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. I chose that one because it informs the project. I didn't know it was going to be 100 novels. I was experimenting. I picked that because Thompson typed out all of *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sun Also Rises*, and in a brute force way he was trying to come to terms with those novels. Like a craftsman. He wanted to be in it.

How fast do you type?

I'm a two-finger kind of hunt and peck typist, though I've perfected my style now. If I can get 5-6 pages per hour, I'm doing alright.

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Where do the pages go when you're done?

Seventeen of the first 25 were shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego. A solo exhibition. Diptychs and sculptures. My hope is, when I'm done, all 100 of them will show together.

How is typing the books in their entirety different from just reading them?

It's a physical thing. I think it does, in an almost absurd way, bring you closer to the craftsmanship. I read all the novels beforehand. For me, the heart of it is a devotional exercise. A real, dedicated, close reading of the novel. It's a meaningful experience for me. My visual art for many years had to do with text and literature. I think the thing that's made me happiest in my life has been reading.