Deep reading is a form of magic. When we engage with words and their meaning on a profound level, it can be an out-of-body experience. We are transported into a different time and place and inhabit the narratives unfolding in a story. Words that are shaped by an author whose intent it is to capture and convey the living world of ideas and emotions can create an alternate universe. We are carried through this world by the precise composition of words and ideas.

A great work of literature changes us: it rewire our consciousness and embeds itself into our memory, adding another element to the complex phenomena that we call “self”.

Written by Gary Brewer
Tim Youd is a visual/performance artist whose love of literature slowly found its way into his art.

He worked in the film industry for years and in his 30’s came to realize that this form of creative work did not satisfy his needs. He always had a deep love of literature and during his years producing films, reading was a form of pleasure and a sanctuary away from the stress and pressure of this world. He chose to leave the film industry and began his career as a visual artist.

Seven years ago, he decided to type the entire book, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* by Hunter S. Thompson, in his studio as an experiment. At the time he did not realize that it was a performance piece – but when he completed it, he was compelled to type another. It was during the process of typing the second book that the idea of this as a performative act, crystallized in his mind.

There are specific parameters to these actions. The books need to be written in English and they had to be typed. He researches to learn what year and model of typewriter was used and then he purchases a similar one. As much as possible, the performances are site-specific. He said of this, “Six years ago, one of my early performances was Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Capricorn*. I set up my typewriter and table on a sidewalk in Brooklyn, just around the corner from the home where Henry Miller grew up. Last year, I was invited by the city of Dresden in Germany to perform typing Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughter House Five*, as part of their commemoration of the 50th anniversary of its publication. In Dresden there is a library that the architect Daniel Libeskind designed. There is a bold triangular room called the Wedge, where I spent part of my time typing the book. It was designed with the tip of the triangle pointing at the location where American bombers flew in to drop the bombs that would completely level the city of Dresden. The fire-bombing of Dresden is a central theme in the book. So in this instance: the book, the performance and the location had a much more powerful resonance.”

These performances leave a residue of the thousands of words typed on two sheets of paper, the one page alone cannot endure the action, so a
second sheet backs it up to receive the tens of thousands of impacts from individual letters. The result is a marriage of a Suprematist rectangle on a white field and a metaphoric representation of memory. The page is in tatters; the repeated pummeling of the metal letters battering the page, leaving it a container of content and process: the impact of consciousness and time on matter; the thin sheet of paper being destroyed by the word.

It is an artifact that is a composite of memory and homage and leaves behind a relic; a physical object that contains a spiritual aspect of the novel and its author.

Tim’s visual art extends beyond the typed page. He creates large sculptures of the typewriters that different authors have used. They are bulky, funky vaudevillian props made of painted cardboard, depicting objects of a different era. There is a nostalgic aura to these sculptures and a comedic element that brings to mind Buster Keaton, where humor is transformed into pathos; the importance of objects nullified through the passage of time to become obsolete. Oblivion awaits all.

Tim has also been working on a series of seemingly minimalist compositions. These pieces started with the black and red typewriter ribbons that held the ink that is transferred to the paper with each letter strike. He glues them in rows onto a primed board and further paints them in a nuanced expressive approach.

I asked if the minimalist language that he employs to create these works has any specific relationship to words or is a reflection of the early Minimalist artist’s interest in concrete poetry and the relationship of words to objects. He replied, “The ribbons are both abstract and they are objects. When I complete typing an entire novel, every word is physically imprinted into the ribbon; it is like our memory. The ribbons from the typewriter and the pages that I type on, both hold all of the words from a book; but similar to our own memory, it is there, but we cannot word-forward remember it. They are metaphors of that quality of our mind.”
He is currently taking these ideas further, creating expressive, physical works – building up thick impasto surfaces using paint sticks. The rows of red and black on white simultaneously reference their origin in the typewriter ribbons but explore further afield into the mutable nature of language and metaphor.

Several years ago, I saw one of Tim’s performances: typing Raymond Chandler’s novel *Lady in the Lake*, at the Los Angeles Athletic Club. There was a sincerity and presence to his bearing that immediately caught my attention. He was focused and completely engaged in the act of reading and typing, word-for-word, the entire novel. I was deeply affected by his total immersion into the act, and his commitment to the word. It was a silent incantation – only the mechanical sound of the keys could be heard – but a deep feeling of mental activity, engagement and a meditation on literature and the structure and meaning of language was palpable. It had an almost religious quality to it; similar to watching a Buddhist monk in meditation or chanting a *sutra*. I asked Tim about his experience while he was engaged in this deep interaction with literature. “When I type a novel, I am entirely focused on the words. I have come to see each sentence as a complete unit of meaning, that at times can stand completely on its own. At times I lose myself in the process and
feel an out-of-body experience, the novel completely taking over my consciousness. I do not feel that I am channeling the author, but I am paying homage to a book and a writer that I love. The creation of the artifacts – the pages and the ribbons – reflect a human need we have for relics, an object that contains some memory or spiritual quality of someone or something that is important to us. The performances and the objects that come out of them reflect certain aspects of religious experience and are metaphors of these human desires.”

Writing is a profound expression of our shared humanity; the invention of writing from cuneiform to the modern alphabet, allowed thoughts and ideas to spread further through time and space and to become embedded into the cultural fabric of our collective memory. A writer works alone – memory and imagination shaping words into stories that can carry us into philosophical reflection and moral awakenings. To reenact this moment of reverie into performance, externalizes a private universe into a public one.

Art is a mutable fire. It’s shape changes freely to fill a space of passion. Performance is an art that can make us feel the subjective, interior life of an artist. Performance art often uses endurance as a way to make an audience physically empathize with the physical hardships an artist experiences. Tim takes another mode of exploring subjectivity and empathy. To use novels that are classics and known to many, he creates performances in site-specific locations, whether it is the home or studio where it was written or the city where a cataclysmic event took place that is the theme of the novel. Tim Youd carries the viewer through his performance into a ritual reenactment and a personification of the physical act of reading and writing and draws us into a fresh relationship to an author, the book and the consciousness of the artist.

Art is a form of magic. When artists create profound works, they reshape the contour of language and that in turn shapes and renews consciousness. To bring the written word of great literature into a ritual performance and leave a visual trace in a physical object that radiates a poetically charged aura – is a feat of magic indeed.
Cristin Tierney, Youd's New York Gallery is presenting a solo exhibition of his work at The Armory Show, March 5-8. He will also have a solo show at the gallery from March 6 to April 18.