

CRISTIN TIERNEY



## *Banned Books Week: Incinerating a classic*

Dan Grossman Sep 17, 2014



Tim Youd retypes Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* on an Underwood Noiseless at the Los Angeles Convention Center in January.

It was mid-July and I was in San Diego, visiting my parents with my 10-year-old daughter, Naomi. We spent much of our time on the beach, but on the last day of our vacation, I was able to sneak off alone to the La Jolla branch of the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. It just so happened that the artist Tim Youd — a guest of honor of the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library during Banned Books Week, Sept. 21-27 — was at work when I walked in the door.

Youd was retyping Raymond Chandler's mystery novel

*The Long Goodbye*, using the same manual typewriter as Chandler, an Olivetti Studio 44. The museum is located close to Chandler's former home.

# CRISTIN TIERNEY

Here's Youd's thing: He types out an entire novel on one sheet of paper. Actually he types on doubled sheets. The top sheet gets coated with typewriter ink from top to bottom; the bottom one receives indentations and ink where the keys break through, because even the strongest sheet of typing paper can only withstand so much. Once finished, he removes the sheets and frames them side by side. Sometimes, the bottom sheet is nearly clean; at others, both sheets are covered in ink.

Youd hopes to type 100 novels over five years. He started the project in early 2013. In September of that year, he made his first trip to the Vonnegut Library, where he typed Vonnegut's novels *Breakfast of Champions* and *Jailbird* on the late author's tool of choice, the Smith Corona Coronamatic 2200.

This September, things will be a little different. Youd will type Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* while living in the library during Banned Books Week. Then, taking a cue from that novel's firemen — who start fires, rather than putting them out, burning books and other samizdat media — he'll burn the result.

Bradbury was one of the country's most insightful writers on censorship. But Vonnegut had his own issues with the powers that be. Across the country his books have been and continue to be banned by schools and libraries.

"After *Slaughterhouse Five* and another book called *Twenty Boy Summer* were banned from a high school library in rural Missouri in 2011, the Vonnegut Library responded by sending free Vonnegut books to students who requested them at that high school," says Julia Whitehead, Executive Director of the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library.

"It was our first taste of censorship as an organization," she continues. "But, of course, Kurt had dealt with it before. So we decided to make sure that celebrating the freedom to read was a larger part of our mission. We tried to do what we could on a national level — communicating with free speech organizations and civil liberties groups around the country — while doing what we could locally."

# CRISTIN TIERNEY

That year, the library began commemorating Banned Books Week, which was launched nationally in 1982 "in response to a sudden surge in the number of challenges to books in schools, bookstores and libraries," according to the project's website. Whitehead, who met Youd through a mutual friend — the director of the Henry Miller Memorial Library in Big Sur, California — thinks he's an ideal partner on Banned Books programming. And he's going all in, as it were: Youd will be the third person to live inside of the library's "prison" of books during Banned Books Week, where he'll be at the center of programming including Tim's Bedtime Stories, when local celebrities will read to Youd from books that have been banned.

"Tim's work is unique and shows a personal relationship with both the author and the work," says Whitehead. "I like both the performance aspect of his work and the tangible piece of art that is created at the end of his process. I like that he interacts with those observing his process. He is knowledgeable about art, literature and so many other things, which will make him an ideal candidate for living in the Vonnegut Library during Banned Books Week. We get more visitors that week than any other week of our year. Vonnegut would like that Tim experienced different kinds of careers before focusing on his art. Tim is keeping the words and stories of various authors alive through his work. We love that."

## **The Right Stuff**

Youd's modus operandi is to retype the novels of particular authors where they originally composed said works. And he employs the actual typewriters — or when those are unavailable, the same brands of typewriters — used by the authors.

After about a twenty-minute retyping performance at the San Diego museum, during which time the gallery crowd grows to near capacity, Youd sits down with curator Jill Dawsey for a public conversation. As they talk I take a look at one of the diptychs on the wall — the one of Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff*. Much of the typing paper of the top sheet has been keyed away. The bottom sheet is smeared, punched, keyed, what have you, with blotches of black ink — random juxtapositions of words typed one-on-top-of-another. The way the paper is punched through reminds me of the last scene in the movie made of the book, in which the test pilot Chuck Yeager attempts to punch his F-104 through the atmosphere into space.

## CRISTIN TIERNEY

*Of course, Youd didn't intend for the work to come out this way. It just did, based on the typewriter he was using, the amount of pressure applied by the keys on the paper, etc. When we talk after the crowd has dissipated, he tells me he doesn't deliberately represent key scenes from novels he types, though he's happy if the final product inspires the imagination.*

*Youd says he was looking a book one day when he started to conceptualize the 100 Novels Project. "It dawned on me that just on a very formal level, what I was looking at, side by side, a rectangle inside of a smaller rectangle and then duplicated again — the smaller rectangle being the block of text," he says. "That, I think, was the key recognition for me in the sense that I then decided well, how could I explore this?"*

*Based in Los Angeles, Youd came to his art via a circuitous route. Born in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1967 and raised in nearby Rutland, Youd attended the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester — majoring in economics — and then moved to New York City to work for an investment bank on Wall Street. "I did that for two years and then I moved to Los Angeles to make movies. I produced a couple of feature films before deciding that what I really wanted to do was to be a visual artist," he says.*

*Youd says he became interested in art during his childhood. His mother was, and still is, an amateur artist.*

*"I credit her with making that part of our lives when we were just little," he says. "And so I think I had a skill set as well as an interest and education in art just by being brought up with it. My initial career path was a little bit of a Type A exercise. I think that in some point in my late 20s, I concluded that it wasn't fulfilling." By 1998, Youd says he was "drawn back to not just looking at visual art but trying to make visual art. I didn't drop everything and go to art school along the way I got married and had some kids, so it took some time to put myself in a spot where I could be a full time artist."*

*Youd's initial work, both in sculpture and in mixed media painting, often veered into literary territory, inspired in particular by works of literature with an erotic element (Anais Nin's *Delta of Venus*, the novels of Philip Roth).*

# CRISTIN TIERNEY

For one project, Youd bought a stack of mass-market paperbacks of *Delta of Venus*, ripped out each page, painted out the words (or at least some of them) and retyped the same words over the painted areas. "It really awakened me to the formal qualities of the page, of a page from a book," he says. "The next step was [to] put all the words of the book on one page."

## **Are you Raymond Chandler?**

The first book that Youd typed as part of the 100 Novels series was Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in February 2013.

*"When I did that one I didn't even know that I was going to type a hundred," Youd says. "I didn't do it in a location but I got an IBM Selectric typewriter, the same kind that he used — and famously used to bring out into the snow and shoot with a shotgun."*

*It was a natural fit for the project, says Youd, because Thompson, when an apprentice novelist, retyped Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* in order to learn how to put a novel together.*

"So that was the inspiration that helped launch the project," says Youd, who allows that his work is also inspired by minimalist artist and sculptor Donald Judd. "My process is very different from his," Youd says, but he admits to having drawn from Judd's "concern with the rectangle in the positive and the negative." (Judd's "stacks" of metal blocks resemble ladders in the way that blocks are affixed to the wall at regular intervals, such that there are both positive and negative rectangular spaces of equal size.)

As part of the 100 Novels project, Youd also creates cardboard sculptures of the typewriters he uses to type each book.

"In a way they are stand-ins on some level for the author," he says. "They become these idiosyncratic portraits of these different typewriters. I feel like they're a good counterbalance to the formal diptychs that I'm creating through the performance of the typing. It's a yin and yang almost."

## CRISTIN TIERNEY

The series has certainly captured the public imagination. Youd says that he's receiving invitations from all over the world. In May and April 2015, for example, Youd will be in Manchester, England retyping Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*. He's retyped Charles Bukowski's *Post Office* outside the Los Angeles post office where Bukowski sorted mail for 12 years. And Henry Miller's *Tropic of Capricorn* outside Miller's boyhood home in Brooklyn.

"I think the thing that drives the different reactions the most is the type of venue," says Youd. "If I'm sitting in an art museum, I think most people recognize it as a performance even if they aren't quite sure what I'm doing. But if I'm outside, if I'm just sitting on a sidewalk, down on a beach or something, the context is a little more jarring. Let's put it this way: more people sort of wander in wondering what the hell I'm doing. And the in-between space is ... a writer's house. Even if I'm at the Vonnegut Library to a certain extent, that's the middle ground, some people will immediately recognize it as a performance, some people will also be wondering what I'm doing."

The funniest reaction that he's had so far to his work, he says, was during his performance at the Contemporary Art Museum in San Diego when a man approached him and asked if he (Youd) was Raymond Chandler. Keeping a straight face, Youd answered in the negative, and explained to the curious patron who the late Raymond Chandler was.