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CHICAGO SUN★TIMES

Amid a sea of paintings and sculptures, Tim Youd makes ‘noisy art’ at EXPO Chicago

Sitting at a typewriter, the Los Angeles-based performance artist is working on a project to re-type 100 published novels — each one on a single page.

By Stefano Esposito - Apr 12, 2024, 8:48pm



For his latest work, performance and visual artist Tim Youd re-types Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451" at EXPO Chicago on Friday.
Pat Nabong/Sun-Times

Hunched over a typewriter, brows knitted, Tim Youd has the look of a man urgently trying to finish his work without being interrupted.

Peer over his shoulder — as a number of people did Friday at EXPO Chicago at Navy Pier — and you could reasonably assume his was the work of a madman: The paper rolled into the typewriter was so ink-caked, so key-battered, that it was completely illegible.

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But neither assumption would be correct.

You'd is a Los Angeles-based artist. In a sea of static artwork, he was one of just a handful of performance artists at the expo, which wraps up a four-day run on Sunday. The event showcases nearly 170 galleries from across Chicago, the U.S. and the globe.



Performance and visual artist Tim Youd speaks to attendees in between re-typing Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451" at EXPO Chicago on Friday afternoon. Pat Nabong/Sun-Times

When visitors, drawn by the clacking, stopped by, Youd was delighted to lift his fingers from the keys to talk about his multi-year art project. He's retyping — word for word — 100 novels, each book on a single page, which explains why they are impossible to read.

Paper debris — the bits the typewriter spits out — lies on Youd's desk, like a scattering of inky ash.

To date, he's re-typed 80 novels, he said. When he's finished — last week he was working on Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451" — he typically frames the finished "work."

He's worked on books that are 800-plus pages, he said.

"Those are two-month jobs each," he said, adding, "I'm not riveting sheet metal, but it's still hard work."

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He sells his work, with each "framed performance" costing \$10,000.



Scraps of debris paper, strewn about his booth at EXPO Chicago at Navy Pier, are all that remain from the re-typed novels by Tim Youd. Pat Nabong/Sun-Times

Youd types on the kind of typewriter the original author used and he'll bang away at the keys for five to six hours a day, he said. His locations are often outdoors — in a place central to the novel or perhaps in the hometown of the author. He has a collection of about 100 typewriters in his Los Angeles studio.

He does this work, he said, to gain a deeper understanding of a favorite author's work. He got the idea from the journalist and author Hunter S. Thompson, who, to learn his craft, typed out F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby" and Ernest Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms."

"At the bottom of it, the reward for me is the reading," Youd said. "When you read or when you're doing something very creative and you're locked in ..., you kind of separate from your body a little bit. You almost feel like out of your corner of your eye you're looking at yourself."

It's almost a religious experience, he said.

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At EXPO Chicago, performance and visual artist Tim Youd is in the midst of his latest work, which features retyping novels in their entirety on a single piece of paper, which ultimately renders the pages illegible. Pat Nabong/Sun-Times

But why mash the whole book onto a single page?

That's a little trickier to explain. It comes from an artist's desire to create something physical from the abstract concepts found in a novel, he says.

"That's what a visual artist wants— an object, something they can put their hands on and they can build," he said.

Others have not always seen it that way.

He's had people call him stupid. He's been mooned, had women flash their breasts, he said.

"At 2 in the morning on Hollywood Boulevard when the clubs are letting out, that's when you're going to get the real action," he said.

A passerby once urinated in front of him, he said.

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"But I've also had very engaging, mutually satisfying conversations—and those are more the norm," he said.

He calls his performance "understated."

"I'm not out front, singing and tap dancing," he said.

On Friday, several people passed by, stared at Youd and then wandered over to less-noisy art.

"Is this part of the exhibit?" one seemingly befuddled visitor muttered.

A few feet away, Chicago gallery owner Lawrence Converso mused, "This might drive me crazy."

But Converso didn't want to complain about the noise.

"There's nothing I could say without coming across as a jerk," he said.

Michael Davidson, 62, visiting from Milwaukee, described the typing sound as "beautiful."

"That part of being illegible [means] it's not about the story, it's thinking about a narrative in a different way. It's thinking about the layers of the narrative in a different way without thinking about the narrative itself," he said.