

Miria Swain

“So you dare me to end our friendship?”

Intimate is a word that comes to mind with *Untitled Text*, a work made by Jennifer Lewandowski and Samuel Levack in 1999. Created via a process of alternate authoring over the course of several weeks, it was shown in different forms, several of which are presented in this book. With its confrontational and histrionic tone, the piece is unnervingly personal. It is all too easy to step into the role of the other person in this fabricated exchange – the subject at which the monologue is directed. Maybe this is because everyone has, at some point, been implicated in a similar such diatribe or experienced someone seeking answers to similar questions, while hiding behind written words. The written words in this case seem to be significantly obscured, with black paint smears that could be read as a visual retort – as a gesture of interruption.

It turns out, however, that the paint marks are not intentional. That they were actually the serendipitous by-product of transferring the text to the walls of a derelict motorcycle garage for the final public incarnation of this piece. And yet it does seem more than mere coincidence that in one of the works produced for their series *Film Trailers* (2000-2009), Lewandowski and Levack should choose to extrapolate a scene from the film *Batman* (1989), where The Joker and his henchmen deface (or as they believe improve) a set of old master paintings they encounter in Gotham City's Flugelheim Museum. In this scene, only one painting is left untouched: Francis Bacon's *Figure With Meat* (1954). Pausing in front of it, The Joker says, “I kinda like this one Bob, leave it.” It is this line, that is used by the artists for the title of a work comprising a pack of playing cards, defaced by splashes of red paint – only the two Jokers left unmarked.

From trailers to entire films; with their *Transformation* series, Lewandowski and Levack's strategy of using a feature film as the source material for a body of work is explored in more depth. Part sculptural installation, part archival project, for these works the entirety of each film – first *Blade Runner* (1982) for *Transformation #1* (2001-2) and then *The Big Blue* (1988) for *Transformation #2* (2003) – is distilled into a single installation. Not illustrative, neither stage set nor film set and with no obvious props though plenty of objects, the only discernible hint at the source films from which they are derived are the single neon texts in each piece: ‘Los Angeles 2019’ in *Transformation #1* and ‘French Riviera 1988’ in *Transformation #2*. These crucial visual devices serve the purpose of anchoring each of the works, by locating them in a time and space. And yet through the process of condensing these films, the linearity of the cinematic experience is exploded, time and space become abstract, as does the coherency of any previous narrative.

As with *Untitled Text*, an important element of the *Transformation* series lies in the participation of the viewer both as a member of the audience and as a character inhabiting a fictional space. In *Transformation #1*, the viewer's involvement is taken even further, in the form of physical interaction with the piece – the only way of entering the work was to be pushed into the installation space on a six-foot metal box on rails. This move to extend the artwork out into its audience, so that the audience itself is physically as well as psychologically implicated within the work, is a recurrent motif in Lewandowski and Levack's work. One could argue that it was pivotal to the flash-style happening they created in

collaboration with Joel Levack at the Port Eliot Literary Festival. Entitled *One Minute Disco* (2007), the piece may have begun as an impromptu dance to an 80s pop tune – *Hot In The City* (1982) by Billy Idol – but by the end of the weekend, its repetition on the hour, every hour, had become an event not to be missed and one that drew participants from across the entire festival.

It seems appropriate that Lewandowski and Levack would choose to follow the chaotic frenzy of *One Minute Disco* with the calm but equally anarchic gesture made manifest in *Blue Flag* (2008). In temporarily reinstating a redundant flagpole of a stately home in Essex, they furnish it with a flag that has no purpose as an ensign. The flag is stripped of its function as a vehicle of communication in the traditional sense. Not serving the purpose of indicating that a family is at home, nor identifying friend or foe, the flag is simply transformed into a beautiful object of contemplation; a piece of sky cut out of silk that tells us little but captures and detains our imagination nevertheless. Although context is of course a crucial part of the work, the reading of this piece is not solely dependent on an idea of context or site specificity. Rather, if anything, it is about opportunity and how an opportunity can, in the hands of the artists, be transformed into a performative space.

There is certainly an air of alchemy in their work, but although their approach is partially driven by notions of participation, opportunity and context, it is fair to say that the work of Lewandowski and Levack resists formal categorisation. There may have been a manifesto governing the way that the *Transformation* series was made, but there is no rulebook that dictates how one reads or engages with their work.