

Help! The New Written Art Object Alice Khan, a novel by Pauline Klein

Maryse Larivière

Number 77, Winter 2013

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/68371ac>

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Publisher(s)

Les éditions esse

ISSN

0831-859X (print)

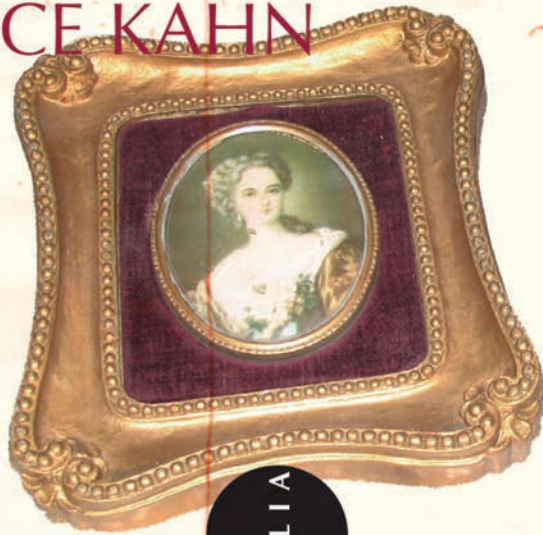
1929-3577 (digital)

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Cite this article

Larivière, M. (2013). Help! The New Written Art Object: Alice Khan, a novel by Pauline Klein. *esse arts + opinions*, (77), 66–67.

PAULINE KLEIN
ALICE KAHN



ALLIA

HELP! THE NEW WRITTEN ART OBJECT

Alice Kahn, a novel by Pauline Klein¹

MARYSE LARIVIÈRE

Book cover: © Janet Cardiff & George Miller,
Dark Pool (detail), 1995.

à l'aide. Written in a smaller font than the one used for the rest of the novel, this obscure dedication can easily be overlooked. To miss it—though it is seemingly addressed to the reader—would mean one had missed an important indicator of the overall tone of the book, as well as an important indication of how its content should be addressed. This cry for help is faintly shouted with the last breath of a slowly suffocating heroine.

Who is she? We might never really figure it out save for the fact that she is the first-person, omniscient, female narrator and quite a schizophrenic one at that. What we know though is that she is slowly transforming herself into Anna, one of those “gallery girls.” Who is Anna then? Anna is an invention, a fiction of a young woman constructed through the gaze of a desiring man, William. On a sunny afternoon, sitting at a café, William came to her and asked if she was Anna. She spontaneously answered “yes,” but this statement was only true in its becoming. So this is how it all started for Anna. “And me, I would be his work of art. He chose me on that terrasse to mould me to his ideas, to his delirium. To be his reality.”² The shell of a ghost is what Anna is.

The confessional tone of the novel brings to mind the author, Pauline Klein, who always desired to be invisible. Even more so after working as a gallery assistant in New York. Adding to the hall-of-mirrors effect, the book conjures Klein's desire to produce art without having to be an artist, and her insecurity about being in the public eye, while commenting on her experience not so much of the art world, but more specifically of the ways in which women conform to stereotypes. Yet could this mysterious author be a ghostwriter?

Wait, the title—who is this Alice Kahn? Alice Kahn is a ghost artist, another imaginary character created by the narrator, and who sometimes happens to be Anna. In order to fulfill her role as Anna for William, using fake credentials the heroine gains employment at a gallery, writes (real?) articles about fictional exhibitions by Alice Kahn for an art magazine, and promotes false rumours about Kahn's practice. Alice Kahn's practice consists of interventions in which she introduces a work of art of her own within an already existing exhibition without anyone noticing. Functioning as parasites, her artworks infiltrate the practices of other artists, thereby acquiring the aesthetic and monetary value of her host.

Another art practice, again a parasitical one, is at work within the story. A little more discreet, situated between the project of the author and that of Alice, is the construction of Anna by the narrator. Almost pathologically, the heroine—who is not Pauline, nor Anna, nor Alice—is inventing a new self outside of herself, like an object. She carries her self out. She talks to her like a puppet, refers to her as a statue, as a doll, using the third person to talk about, to talk to, her other self. Even her voice sounds like it is emerging from an out-of-body experience. There is no mirror in Anna's home. Only Anna to look into, to see herself. One could almost refer to reverse personification, considering that she treats her Anna like something nonhuman. This is like a sculpture, or should I say, Anna is.

The only one who does not dissimulate his art practice is William, an exhibiting, somewhat established photographer. Throughout the novel, we are reminded by the narrator about his struggle in the face of a creative block. Oh, but just when he thinks he has discovered Anna's trickery about Alice's art practice, and stops caring about finding out who the real woman behind Anna/Alice is, he picks up his camera again. At this point in the novel we are told: “Fall has come, and it is too cold to wear dresses.”³ As such, the heroine can now wear one of her invisible costumes and completely vanish. *Fin*.

Alice Kahn's unfolding play of references shadows Sophie Calle's autofictions, but it would not be the first time a novel directly references Calle's work.⁴ *Alice Kahn* is equally indebted to André Breton's *Nadja* since both novels depict their heroine as supreme object of desire. Consequently, *Alice Kahn* is yet another brilliant addition to the tradition of written art objects of the likes of Michèle Bernstein, Catherine Millet, and Chris Kraus, who construct literary projects with minutiae, using their feminine experience as material, with ambition to create abstract formal considerations not so far from Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*,⁵ or as our heroine puts it: “Un coup [...], un silence, un hasard à la Alice Kahn.”⁶

Alice Kahn also owes something to Voltaire's *Candide* and Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray* in that its duplicitous heroine presents herself as an ingenue. Yet, as the heroine is an uncanny incarnation of the author, it is easy to believe that Pauline Klein's project is a calculated and deliberate manoeuvre to discreetly enter the terrain of sensitive topics such as the place of women in the art world. A ludicrous comment on feminism, the novel ultimately shares affinities, both in style and content, with *Qu'avons-nous fait de la révolution sexuelle?* by Marcela Iacub, who, in her book, also gives the naïve character a semblance of a neutral and innocent voice in order to approach difficult questions of gender inequality without making waves, to ultimately “argue that the sexual revolution of the 1970s was, in part, a failure in that it abandoned its emancipatory ambitions.”⁷

1. Pauline Klein, *Alice Kahn* (Paris: Éditions Allia, 2010).

2. Ibid., 86. Loosely translated from the original text: “Et moi, je serais son œuvre. Il m'a choisie sur cette terrasse pour me conformer à ses idées, à son délire. Pour être sa réalité.”

3. Ibid., 126. Loosely translated from: “Lorsqu'en septembre il a commencé à faire trop froid pour se mettre en robe, je me suis mise à enfiler un costume invisible pour que William ne me voit plus du tout.”

4. For instance, Grégoire Bouillier's *L'invité mystère* (Paris: Allia, 2004), or more famously, Paul Auster's *Leviathan* (New York: Viking Press, 1992).

5. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (Paris: Gallimard, 1914). Translation: “A throw of the dice will never abolish chance.”

6. Klein, *Alice Kahn*, 41. Translation: “A trick [...] a silence, a chance in the style of Alice Kahn.”

7. Marcela Iacub, *Qu'avez-vous fait de la révolution sexuelle? Conte sociologique* (Paris: Flammarion, 2002) 55.

Maryse Larivière is currently a PhD candidate in Art & Visual Culture at the University of Western Ontario. Her most recent solo exhibitions were presented at Parker Branch (London) and Clint Roenisch (Toronto). She has also exhibited her work at Cité des Arts de Paris, Diaz Contemporary in Toronto, and Centre Clark and Skol, both in Montréal. Her writing has appeared in *Art New England*, *Pelt*, *Grace* and *Pages of Vapour*. Larivière is the co-founder of Pavilion Projects (Montréal), which has exhibited contemporary art projects since 2003.