

SORTED BOOKS

NINA KATCHADOURIAN

Introduction by Brian Dillon



CHRONICLE BOOKS
SAN FRANCISCO

OPEN STACKS

BRIAN DILLON

“I am unpacking my library. Yes I am.” Thus the famously odd beginning to Walter Benjamin’s 1931 essay “Unpacking My Library.” Odd, that is, because, even allowing for peculiarities in the original German or the English translation (which I am unable to judge) and bearing in mind the intimate scene that Benjamin wishes to capture at the outset as he asks us to picture his books strewn about him, the line “Yes I am” has struck many readers as awkward and redundant. What exactly is its tone? Playful? Relieved? Triumphant? Pompous? (I always read it as if punctuated otherwise: “Yes I am!”) In light of Nina Katchadourian’s “Sorted Books”—a project that for twenty years has seen the artist arranging armfuls of books and their titles to poetic and deadpan comic effect—I have begun to think that he might have meant it a little defensively. *I* am unpacking my books, he seems to say; they are not unpacking, or shelving, themselves. As if that is the kind of thing we could expect libraries to do when we are not looking.

Perhaps this interpretation seems more fanciful than Benjamin’s little sentence allows. Consider, however, the word that Katchadourian uses to describe her gatherings of three, four, or five (sometimes, but rarely, fewer or more) volumes. She calls them *clusters*, and the word has a plausible organic implication: it is as though the books have convened of their own accord like plants or insect attractions. But a “cluster” might equally be an astronomical phenomenon, like a constellation: a design composed or conjured out of vastly distant points in space, seen as such only from a single vantage. Or it might be a phonetic aggregation of consonant or vowel sounds, flung into intimacy by speech though they belong to different words. *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* gives us the consonantly crunchy phrase “winch sprocket” by way of example: read it aloud and the cluster “nchspr” suddenly seems an unlikely thing to have said. A cluster, in other words, yokes together discrete elements in an order that is at once natural and estranging.

Isn’t this to some degree how we organize and use our libraries? Of course, there are fastidious individuals who line up their books by strict alphabetical order—though even in such cases subjective choices must be made, such as whether to order by author name or by title, the latter much less likely. And at the other extreme—if that is indeed what it is—the likes of art historian Aby Warburg, who notoriously structured his library by affinity or correspondence: a scholarly version of the prevalent belief on the part of sloppier bibliophiles that they themselves constitute the ordering principle and can lay hands on any book at a moment’s notice. (This is almost always a consoling fantasy. Though as Georges Perec puts it in his “Brief Notes on the Art and Manner of Arranging One’s Books” [1978] one can always trawl the whole library: “An unsorted book collection is not a serious matter in itself. It is a problem of the same order as ‘Where did I put my sock?’”) Most libraries, whether seemingly disordered or tidy and well cataloged, actually oscillate between the poles of order and disorder, and in day-to-day use even the most rigorously shelved collection is at the same time a labyrinth of more or less random passages between unrelated books that somehow go together by virtue of having sat near or opposite each other for years.

“Sorted Books” is many things at the same time: a series of sculptures, or photographs, or site-specific installations; a collection of short stories, or poems, or jokes; a work in which the “found

object” is subject alike to chance and the most painstaking choices; a delicate conceptual game with the horizontal and the vertical. But it is first of all an act of reading. We have to picture the artist at large between the bookshelves, scanning the spines for likely, or unlikely, meetings among their titles. Katchadourian says that in most cases she needs to handle the books themselves, trying out possible alignments, leaving small piles behind her as she goes, like a careless or impatient student in search of the right dissertation material. (The first occasion on which she altered her intimate and vagrant method was while on a residency at the International Artists Studio Program in Stockholm in 2004; working with the fragile books in the personal library of August Strindberg, she was forced instead to write their titles on notecards, composing her own partial and highly subjective catalog.) It is hard to know how to describe this reading process. Perhaps it is facile. (I mean ‘practiced and easy’ rather than crass, but Katchadourian surely flirts with that too: judging every book by its cover.) Or actually exacting, penetrative, acute: she sees things on the surface that even the most critical reader could not glean from the texts inside. She becomes a hunter-gatherer among the stacks: she seems to be grazing, but in a moment she will pounce.

It’s crucial, I think, this sense of the artist moving on the surface but at the same time spearing and pinning her prey, preparing it for a new life in an alternative, but parallel, collection. This is, after all, what reading consists of anyway. In his 1964 essay “The Book as Object,” Michel Butor notes that the chief advantage of the printed book over prior forms such as the scroll—and indeed over then novel technologies such as the tape recorder—is the way it allows us to scan horizontally between pages and vertically through the text, varying our levels of attention until we light on the portion of print that we are after. (And also, of course, allowing us to note and record our place in the text with far greater ease.) We read now—or perhaps we had better say half a century later that we read until recently: a question to which I’ll return—in three dimensions: each page is a portal, and the portals multiply like parallel arcades.

One of Katchadourian’s most elegant tricks in *Sorted Books* is to have corralled far-flung volumes and their titles, which we may imagine as sparsely arrayed locations on a map or bright points in a star chart, into the most laconic of textual forms: the list, just one thing after another. We might recall with Butor “the enormous importance of enumeration in classical literature, whether in the Bible, Homer, Greek tragedy, Rabelais, Victor Hugo, or modern poetry.” But the point is not exactly to invoke the venerable literary history, or the more recent conceptual heritage, of the list as such—let’s just note for now that the artist is no doubt aware of that history and of the structural implications of flattening (or should the term better be *extruding*?) a library into such narrow verbal confines. Instead, consider the sly poetics of the lists themselves. At times they are “pure” lists, paratactic inventories of distinct moments, montage sequences. Quite in accord with Henri Bergson’s contention that laughter results when a human being acts like a machine, their comedy is a question of repetition with difference or (funnier) no difference, as in the following from “Composition” (1993):

Repeat After Me
Are You Confused?
Are You Confused?

and

Procrastination
I’ll Quit Tomorrow
I’ll Quit Tomorrow.

For sure, such clusters also imply certain narratives, and much of the humor in “Sorted Books” comes from the way Katchadourian broaches entire epics, romances, and (more usually) tragedies with the slimmest of verbal resources. (It’s partly an old literary game. Think of Ernest Hemingway’s stab at a very short story: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.”) The stories in question often seem keyed to the age of the books themselves, not just in terms of the books’ subject matter but also the tone of their titles, their syntax, and their style. For example, the clusters in “Once Upon a Time in Delaware/In Search of the Perfect Book” (2012), composed of popular or sentimental fiction, children’s books, and improving tomes from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, have about them a kind of blackly comic morality, couched in the language of that time: *Captain Courtesy/An Amiable Charlatan/At Heart a Rake; If Youth But Knew/The Old Knowledge/At the Time Appointed*. Or a vignette from the late-Victorian encounter between spiritualism and technology: *Phantom Wires/The Moving Finger/The Message*. And the same is true of the first clusters Katchadourian made, in 1993, which wryly deploy the nostrums and assumptions of the nineties’ self-help boom, as in *Romeo and Juliet/They Rose Above It/Codependent No More* and this veritable epic of faux-spiritual self-empowerment: *Relax/When I Relax I Feel Guilty/When I Say No, I Feel Guilty/God Always Says Yes!/Don’t Say Yes When You Want to Say No*.

At times, the books come together to form whole sentences—*Somewhere in France/The Anglomaniacs/Meet the Germans*—or fragments of sentences: *The Outcasts/Breaking Into Society/With Edged Tools*. They may turn sententious and sternly imperative—*Hope and Have/The Life That Counts*—or suggest dialogues and encounters that have the stilted tone of a language lesson—I Am a Conductor/And Do You Also Play the Violin?—or the makings of a TV comedy sketch from half a century ago: *Speaking of Pianists . . ./Am I Too Loud?/Beethoven Lives Upstairs*. As the books multiply, the syntactical relations between their titles become less secure, so that something like the following seems like an exercise in daringly pushing the logic of the project as far as it will go: *All You Need to Know About the Music Business/Bobos in Paradise/Entanglement/Discord/The Tower of Babel/Music at Court/Great Operatic Disasters*.

One could pursue a rigorous typology of Katchadourian’s verbal clusters, their style, and their genre, but you would risk killing off their comedy and their peculiarity, which depend more on a certain laconic tone than on strict decisions about their coherence or flow. And reading “Sorted Books” as a solely textual project is in any case to ignore where a good deal of the work’s humor and resonance comes from—what I suppose we have to call the materiality of the books—though the general category of “materiality” always risks bracketing out the actual material of this or that concrete example. In fact, before even considering the books as objects, we have to acknowledge that the whole project depends on our willingness to extract the books’ titles from the other fragments of text on their spines and covers—subtitles, authors’ names, blurbs, and publishers’ names—and from any illustrations or printed motifs. The artist plays very expertly with this last piece when she places in a row a copy of John Ruskin’s *Queen of the Air*, Richard Harding Davis’s *Her First Appearance*, and a book whose title we cannot see but whose front cover shows a small gilt hand at the bottom right pointing upward to a strange gilt woman who is riding a sort of sea horse. Reading, as Butor points out, is usually a matter of choosing a certain stratum or thread of text to focus on: the printed page is surrounded by epitextual artifacts such as page numbers, running titles, footnotes, and so on.

All of that surrounding textual matter sometimes flickers back into view once we have grasped the main text and its poetic, narrative, or humorous import. We notice, for example, that in those earliest clusters from 1993, the lettering on the books’ spines reads from bottom to top, in the continental European manner, rather than top to bottom, as is usual with Anglophone publishers—it may take us some time to register that the books are actually upside down, so that publishers’ logos are at the top of the spine, inverted. Such details are reminders of the artist’s handling, as are the

“blank” books that have been shelved with spines facing inward and page edges out. Perec writes that it is “unusual, proscribed and nearly always considered shocking to have only the edge of a book on show;” in “Sorted Books,” or at least in Katchadourian’s photographs of shelved books, the implication is that most or all of the surrounding library has been arranged in this way, rendered anonymous and unmeaning save for these enigmatic messages it turns to the world. There are distinctions to be made, too, between these upright, if inverted, volumes, the stacks that turn titles into lists or verse, and the “faceouts” (as booksellers say) that appear elsewhere, making of the books a sort of frieze.

All of these, one might say, are reminders that books are objects designed to be handled: to sit happily between the thumb and forefinger of a standing rail commuter, to be hefted onto the bedclothes in the case of a hardback, abandoned on the beach face down with a split spine, or, at the farthest scholarly extreme, supported half-open in a cut-foam cradle and paged through slowly with tweezers in a library’s rare-books room. Katchadourian’s project more-or-less accurately parallels the swiftest acceleration of reading on screen instead of the page: first on the Internet, latterly in (and the prepositional difference is probably important) e-books. You could read “Sorted Books” now in ways that accord with current anxieties about the possible end of the book and therefore of its material particularity, the codes and gestures and sensations that attend it. But it is hard, actually, to find much that is nostalgic or catastrophist about these images and arrangements; they are both too canny and too delighted in the specificity of their source material to mourn its passing or fetishize it in bibliophile fashion. This seems more a body of work about paying attention in the present than fretting about the past or future of the printed codex. As Katchadourian has it in a minimal (just two books) cluster from 1996: *What Is Art?/Close Observation*.

TWENTY YEARS OF SORTING BOOKS

NINA KATCHADOURIAN

The “Sorted Books” project came out of an experiment hatched when I was in graduate school at the University of California, San Diego, in the early 1990s. The school’s master of fine arts program was established in the early 1970s by a group of artists¹ invested in reconnecting art with life, and this often influenced and infused their students’ work similarly. We studied—and were trying to put into practice—an engagement with the everyday, a stance toward art that located it in unlikely places, and ways of working collaboratively. In that spirit, an art major undergraduate, who was friendly with some of the graduate students, invited a group of us to move into her parents’ house for a week and make art with what we found. Her parents—who were not art collectors but simply welcoming and curious people—generously agreed to be invaded by the six of us.

The house where we stayed was in a small town called Half Moon Bay, about an hour south of San Francisco on the foggy California coast, so we decided to call the project “The Half Moon Bay Experiment.” We spent about a week there, poking around and thinking about what to make. Eventually each of us found different zones in the house that interested us, and in the end we had a small show, which essentially meant running an announcement in the local paper, opening the front door for the afternoon, and having some friends, family, and locals come by.

Quite early in the week, I latched onto the library. Our hosts had married late in life—a second marriage for both—and they had merged their separate book collections when they moved in together. It seemed like they had decided to keep everything, and so they had a lot of books, organized in a casually thematic manner on wooden shelves. I spent a long time looking at the books and getting acquainted with the wide variety of subjects in their library: Shakespeare, self-help, gambling, addiction, health care, history, and investment strategy guides. I suddenly recalled a moment in the university library when, looking for a book, I had turned my head sideways as I walked down the stacks and thought how spectacular it would be if all the titles formed an accidental sentence when read one after the other in a long chain. Standing amidst the bookshelves in Half Moon Bay, my next move was simply to make this imaginary accident real. I spent days shifting and arranging books, composing them so that their titles formed short sentences. The exercise was intimate, like a form of portraiture, and it felt important that the books I selected should function as a cross section of the larger collection.

In both methodology and priorities, all subsequent sortings have stayed true to these ground rules. Portraiture is still a guiding principle, whether I am focused on an individual (“BookPace” and “Reference”), a couple (“Composition” and “Sorting Shark”), an institution (“Akron Stacks” and “Special Collections Revisited”), or a nation (“Once Upon a Time in Delaware/In Search of the Perfect Book”). The project has even included one posthumous sorting (“Sorting Strindberg”) in the library of the Swedish author August Strindberg, whose books I was lucky to gain access to while on an artist’s residency in Stockholm in 2004. All the contemporary Swedish authors I initially approached declined on grounds of privacy or discomfort with the idea of a stranger looking at their books. Strindberg had no choice, you could say, since permission was granted by the Strindberg Museum, housed in the author’s former home. His books reflected his voracious intellectual curiosity; literature was almost outnumbered by books on linguistics, science, religion, the occult, history, and

geography. The books were very dusty often crumbling and sometimes had Strindberg's own handwriting on the make-shift spines. It gave me some comfort that books themselves were not precious objects for Strindberg; when he was living abroad in the 1880s, he famously wrote to his brother Axel with a request for a shipment of books from Sweden, instructing him that if the books were too heavy for shipping, the covers could just be torn off.

Although it's often described as a photography project, "Sorted Books" really has little to do with making pictures until the very last phase. While I'm in the middle of a sorting, it feels like a writing project combined with a memory exercise. It involves several types of memorization and recall: spatial ("The book I want is on the fifth shelf, left side"); topical ("Now I need that book about crop-destroying insects"); and visual ("It has a green cover, cloth-bound, with diagonal grain, gold detailing in upper right"). The process relies on maintaining a very associative, open-ended mental stance; the more book titles you can keep floating in your head at once, the more they bump into each other in fruitful ways. More than anything else, the process feels like songwriting: turning words over and over again to figure out where they fit, not only in terms of their content but also in terms of their rhythmic and sonic qualities. Sometimes, when a cluster has worked out especially well, I experience a curious feeling of detachment from the result: it feels like the grouping simply happened.

I am always paying attention to the physical qualities of the books, and I try to work with their particular attributes as much as possible. The size of a book carries temperament and tonality, as does the way the text sits on the spine. A heavy volume with large text on the spine, for example, might be exuberant, urgent, pushy; a small typeface might communicate a voice that's exacting, shy, insecure, or furtive. Several sortings have resulted in the exhibition of actual book clusters, sometimes even presented as sculptures. At the Athenaeum Music & Arts Library in La Jolla, California, for example, I constructed seesaws where a book stack placed on one end counterbalanced a stack on the other, and the weighted relationship added an additional layer of meaning. But I had underestimated the allure of the books themselves; at the opening, visitors enthusiastically picked up books they recognized, and the books on the other end of the seesaw catapulted into the hushed library air.

Despite all the hand-wringing over the demise of the book in our electronic age, this involuntary surge of curiosity that often makes us reach for a book has not diminished in the twenty years since the first book sorting in Half Moon Bay, although it now may be motivated by a combination of factors. Perhaps it's in part nostalgia for an object that is growing scarce. But with so many other forms of reading vying for our attention, maybe the printed book is also becoming more beautiful, more tactile, and more materially compelling, because it will have to be all those things to justify its existence. "Sorted Books" often induces others to try the activity themselves, and plenty of evidence of this exists on the Internet: blogs where people have sorted their own libraries; teachers who have assigned "Sorted Books" as a writing exercise and posted pictures of the results; and a Flickr page, created by a stranger, on which different people have contributed images made by culling their own shelves. I have been invited to judge "Sorted Books" competitions for various libraries. Years ago, I was cc'd on several irate emails from a kind Italian man who wrote to an advertising firm that he felt (and I agreed) had stolen the project wholesale for their website, but mostly I've been happy to see the project pass through the hands of others. Part of what seems to motivate these strangers is their pleasure in handling physical books and discovering that their bookshelves hold a kind of hidden potential that they hadn't thought about before.

Like so much of my other work, "Sorted Books" originates in the act of looking very carefully (often to things around me that are constantly present but overlooked), responding to a specific situation, and working with limited means. I still love the extreme economy of making "Sorted Books": I show up with almost nothing, make an investment of time, commit my full attention, and

leave with a number of images. It forces me to be productive within a situation that is bounded. “Sorted Books” is a milestone project for me because it identified and established a way of working and a stance toward art that has continued to be central in my practice. At the time I started “Sorted Books,” I would have found it implausible if someone had told me that twenty years after its first manifestation, this casual project, which owed so much to improvisation and spontaneity, would gather enough mass and momentum to become a book itself. I imagine I’ll be making “Sorted Books” the rest of my life. While working on this book, I’ve become very aware that I’ve never sorted my own books. Maybe that last sorting should be the final chapter.

¹ Allan Kaprow, Eleanor and David Antin, and Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison among them.

~~SORTED BOOKS~~

COMPOSITION 1993

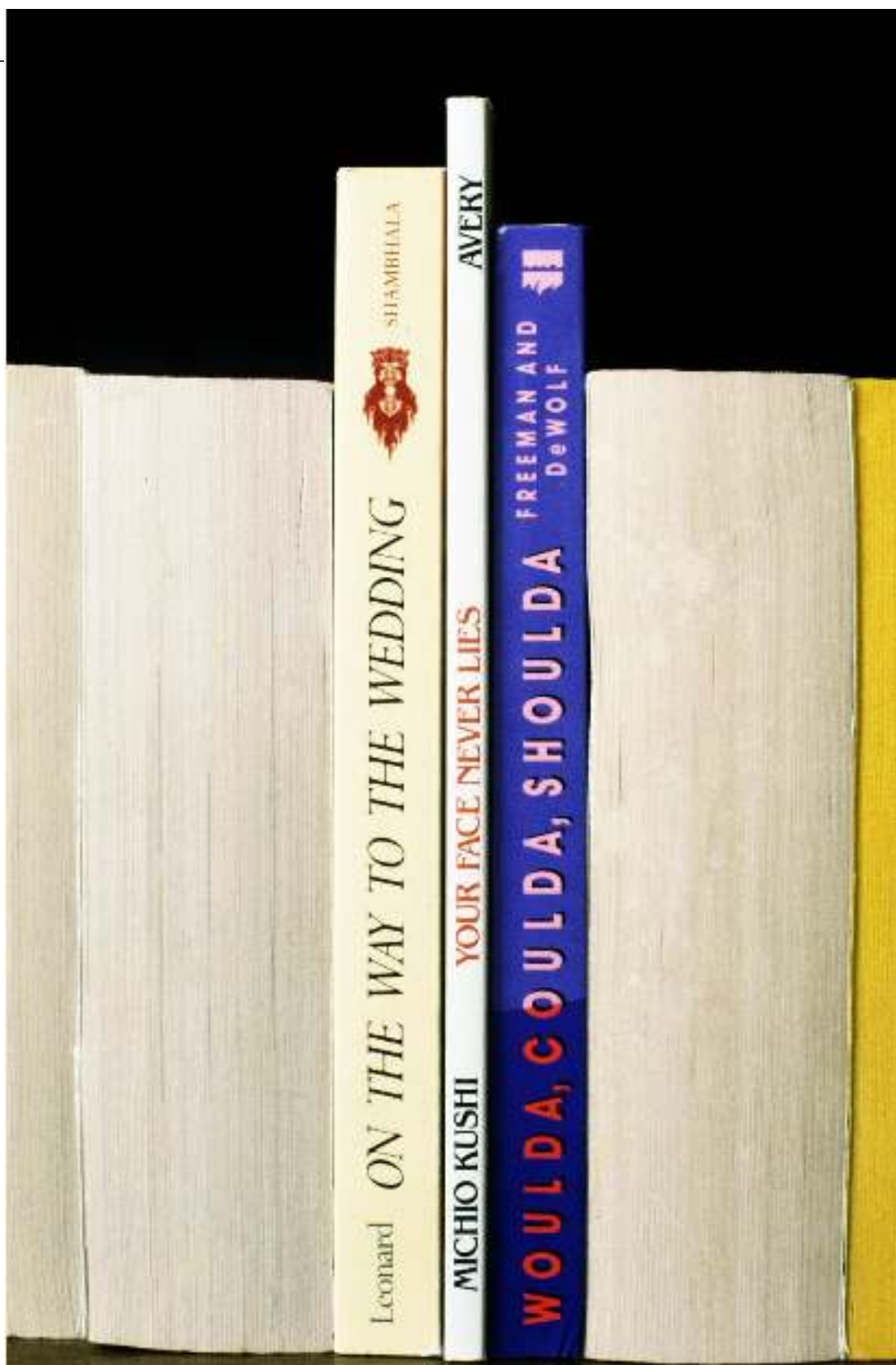
“Composition,” the first of the book sorting projects, took place in a private home in Half Moon Bay, California. The couple living there were both real estate agents in their forties and had been married for about five years—a second marriage for both of them. They had moved into the house with two discrete book collections that they then merged, filling about twenty tall bookcases that occupied the entire middle section of the house. Their collection contained a great deal of literature, self-help, and motivational writing. In a number of instances, I discovered two copies of the same book—a telling coincidence that I tried to make use of whenever possible.



The Story of My Life
Why Me?
Why Me?



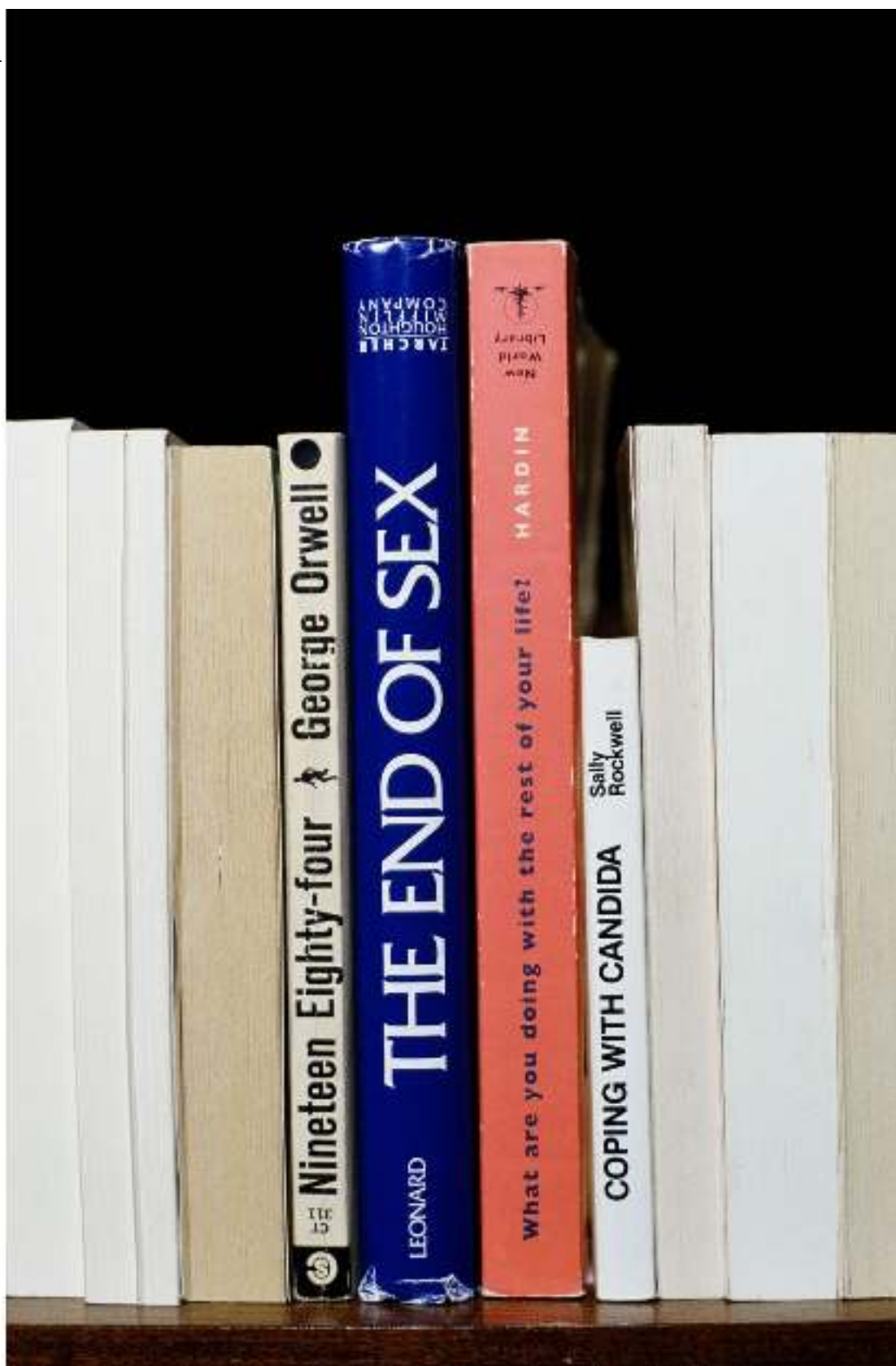
The Art of Conversation
Listen Listen Listen



On the Way to the Wedding
Your Face Never Lies
Woulda, Coulda, Shoulda



All the President's Men
Pissing in the Snow
With No Fear of Failure



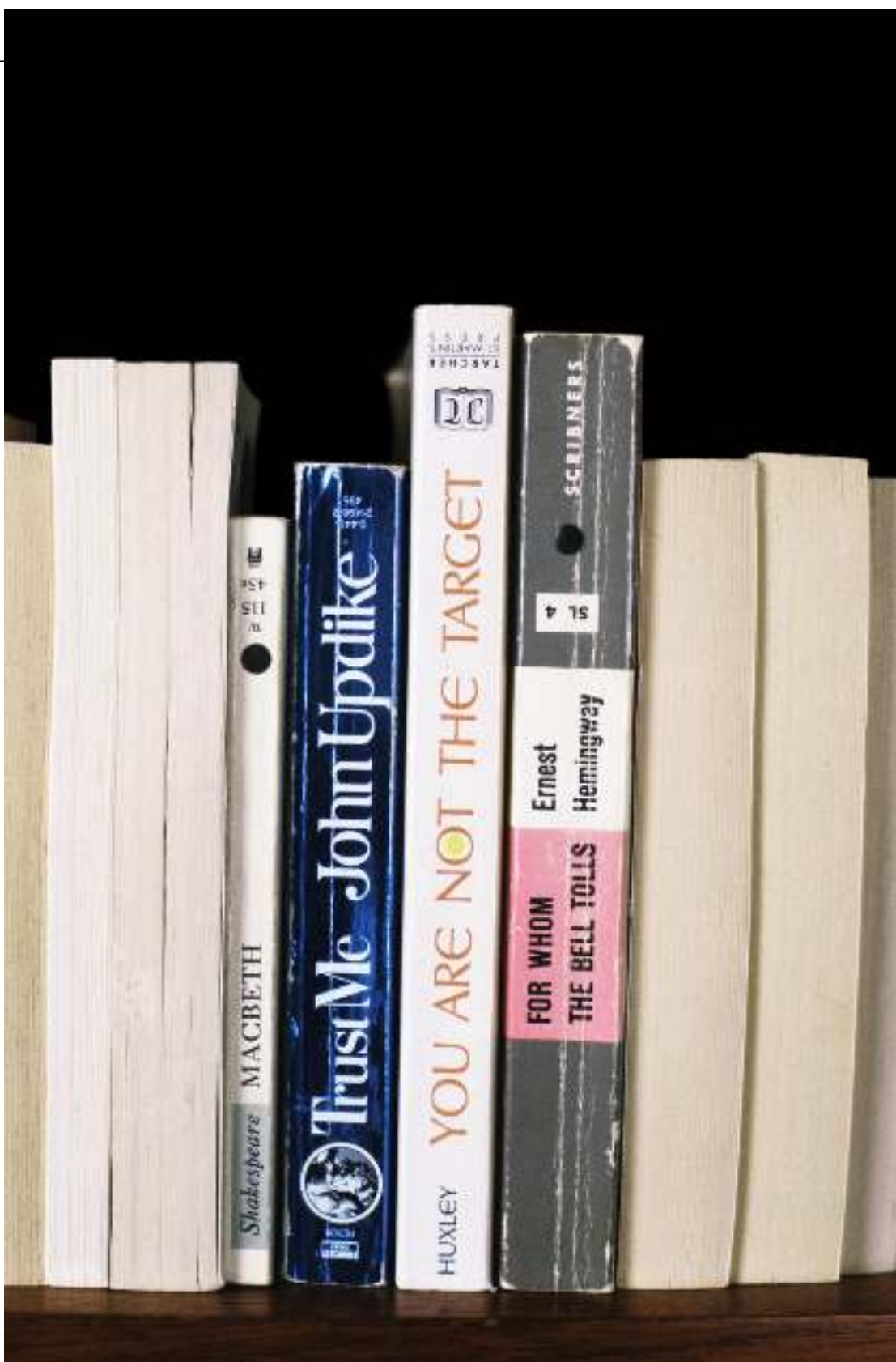
Nineteen Eighty-Four
The End of Sex
What Are You Doing with the Rest of Your Life?
Coping with Candida



Repeat After Me
Are You Confused?
Are You Confused?



Romeo and Juliet
They Rose Above It
Codependent No More



Macbeth
Trust Me
You Are Not the Target
For Whom the Bell Tolls



Hamlet
What's Eating You?
Hey, Man! Open Up and Live!



King Lear
Old Age is Contagious But . . .
If I'm In Charge Here Why Is Everybody Laughing?



Relax
When I Relax I Feel Guilty
When I Say No, I Feel Guilty
God Always Says Yes!
Don't Say Yes When You Want to Say No

REFERENCE 1996

“Reference” took place in a now-defunct New York gallery called Spot. The gallery director, who lived illegally behind the exhibition space, was a photographer and former eye surgeon. His book collection reflected his interest in art history, critical theory, and photography, but it also included many medical reference books—remnants of his past profession. In effect, there were two kinds of books on seeing: the books dealing with vision in the context of art history and criticism, and the books dealing with vision in its most mechanical and literal sense.



The Death of Superman
The Fall
Off the Wall

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