

## Neither resolution nor meaning: the books of Sharon Kivland

by Joanne Lee

I once read an essay Sharon Kivland had written about work by her friend, the artist Pavel Büchler. In a parenthetical exclamation she expresses her uncertainty over how to address her subject:

(Oh, I do not know what to call him now – should it be Büchler? Yet that implies objectivity, distance, and I have known him for far too long. Is that the source of my anxiety? Or Pavel, implying a familiarity that may be inappropriate here?) Kivland, S. 2003, unpaginated).

In writing my own essay I have something of the same anxiety. I've known Sharon Kivland for a long time and although the art world, and that of art criticism, still functions through networks of friends, it usually feels too improper and unprofessional to explicitly acknowledge such a thing. But the issue about how I ought to address Sharon Kivland goes much deeper than mere social propriety; indeed, it lies at the very centre of her practice.

In his Editor's Introduction to Sharon Kivland's book *A Case of Hysteria* (a substantial book that investigates and re-writes Sigmund Freud's famous analysis of 'Dora', and that can only – inadequately – be described as a sort of artist's book-cum-detective fiction-cum-work of theory), Forbes Morlock identifies the problem:

Even the apparently simple question of how to refer to *A Case's* author is troubled by the logic of its text. Calling her 'Sharon' puts her among the hysterics (such as 'Dora' and 'Katharina') and the detectives ('Jeri' and 'Freddie', for example) – all female literary creations. Calling her 'Kivland' places her among the (albeit creative) masters (like 'Freud' and 'Le Corbusier'). She could be Ms K., Mrs K., or Frau K., but that name is already taken. Even her initials, S.K., identify in Sarah Kofman an earlier reader of Freud's case. Perhaps the choice is hardly definitive – she is best 'Sharon Kivland', with 'Charlotte Perriand' and 'Camille Claudel' and artist, a woman artist, just disturbing the dichotomies of hysteric and master, character and author. Kivland, S. (1999) xi

Morlock goes on to suggest that one of the book's most striking features is the 'density and duplicity of its 'voice''. He writes:

The text (Sharon Kivland, for want of a better name) starts by singing all the voices, speaking all the parts, taking up all the positions (the case's 'solver', its subject, and its scribe). Kivland, S. (1999) xii

Sharon Kivland speaks as Freud, as Dora, as the heroine of a nineteenth century novel, as a series of private investigators and sometimes, probably, as herself – a woman who occupies the multiple roles of artist, writer, academic, curator and student of psychoanalysis. Within her art practice she chooses to work with diverse media including photography, embroidery, engraving, boxed letterpress editions, sign writing and lettering, 'adapted' objects, and sound, as well as making books. Further, she is also a daughter, a sister, a mother and a friend, a great cook, a passionate gardener, an inveterate feeder of stray and abandoned animals, a committed poultry keeper and a lover of mystery novels.

Forbes Morlock draws attention to what he terms the *ambiguity* of the phrase 'a Sharon Kivland book', given that large parts of *A Case of Hysteria* (and other books) comprise Sharon Kivland ventriloquising other voices; sometimes literally taking their words as her own, or else borrowing words from one source and transposing them to another. Morlock describes how he carefully corrected and edited sentences which Sharon Kivland subsequently informed him were, in fact not her own, but those of Freud or her other sources. Her book *Mes Fils* presents indexical references from the collected works of Sigmund Freud as its content; *La Forme-Valeur* borrows from Karl Marx; *Memoirs* voices recollections from patients and staff of a psychiatric hospital facing imminent closure; *The Property of a Gentleman* sees her transcribing three years diaries of the late eighteenth century Sussex naturalist William Markwick; *Flair* takes the descriptions of perfumes given within the pages of in-flight magazines and adapts them so that it reads as a woman describing

herself; and certain passages in *Cela aura déjà eu lieu* find her writing from the position of two viewers of an art work (hers) that has not at that point been made. This last work also acknowledges that the words she writes are to be translated into another language and that she will subsequently not be able to tell if they remain quite as she has written them, if they are still *her* words. Her works frequently exist between languages – English, French, German – and are always attentive to the peculiarities of translation, to slips and misreadings. And yet, despite (or because?) of all these borrowed, transposed and translated words, ‘a Sharon Kivland book’ is always very distinctively a Sharon Kivland book.

In the first instance, the books have a certain kind of aesthetic; they are instantly recognisable, despite their diversity of scale, subject matter or publisher. For the most part they are slim volumes with covers in a range of pale shades – ivory or buff, lavender, the blue of a robin’s egg, a peachy colour reminiscent of women’s foundation make up... These rather sophisticated books are characteristically titled with an elegant serif font in black, white or silver and inside the contents are nearly always monochromatic. They are largely text-based, though some incorporate photographs, which are most usually in black and white. Sharon Kivland (as I shall have to refer to her) attends closely to the design and manufacture of her books, frequently offering a colophon which details the font (perhaps Garamond), the paper (maybe Stow Book), or the press (probably Aldgate) that she has chosen to use. These books seem a long way from the contemporary fashions of graphic design: they appear as from another era, or, more properly, they seem timeless, with their voices borrowed from the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Although they do not take particularly experimental forms, these aren’t quite like any other books at all, not even the diverse, but rather familiar, tropes which artists’ books have taken. Writing in *A Case of Hysteria* (an uncharacteristically *big* book of almost three hundred pages) Sharon Kivland is clear:

It won’t fit in your pocket for a start. It is not an analytic work either, so it will be difficult to find a place for it on your bookshelves. (Kivland, S. 1999, 199).

I struggle to find a simile for her books, to give you, the reader, a sense of what I have been looking at, but I repeatedly scrub what I have written. Perhaps the best I can come up with, is that several seemingly recall the sort of thing one might find in libraries or archives, the works of a keen amateur historian who has sought to publish the results of long and diligent researches.

In some ways, Sharon Kivland really is such an amateur. Don’t mistake me – I’m not questioning her actual professional standing (her extensive exhibition CV and her Doctorate and University Readership surely prove the authenticity of her credentials), nor the seriousness of what she does (her research has taken her back and forth across Europe, to Rome and Vienna, to Marienbad and several spa towns, through Parisian arcades and department stores, and into countless libraries and archives), but there is a sense that she pursues her work regardless of academic or artistic fashions, out of an acute and very real relationship to her subjects. As the etymology suggests, the amateur does it out of love, and as Roland Barthes once made clear, the lover is the most frantic epistemologist, who attends to clues and signs *precisely* because they matter so much: a coolly professional distance cannot be maintained to a *loved* subject.<sup>1</sup> Like the eighteenth century libertines who recur throughout Sharon Kivland’s work and whose pedagogy twinned eroticism and enlightenment, and like Jacques Lacan (whose polyvalent voice frequently speaks through her work) she seeks to produce a discourse that binds love and knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

Sharon Kivland follows sightings, tracks down addresses, writes to archives, but her research seems more complicated than simple academic detection:

Each institution replied exactly to my requests for a piece of information, a copy of a document, or a photograph (though in one instance the postcard I sent was pinned up as of interest and its message forgotten) they sent me that thing, but nothing more, and it was the something more I sought and for which I could not ask, since I do not know what it was. It would not be true to insist I am closer to it now; rather, I am more acutely sensitive to its lack. (Kivland, S. 1999, 146).

She is always alert to the sense of what is missing, what evades apprehension. Her methodology is careful, therefore, to recognise the importance of actual and intellectual wandering. Getting lost is an integral part of her project.

In *Freud Dreams of Rome* (Volume I of a projected series bearing the wonderfully frivolous title *Freud on Holiday*) she writes:

I have spent a lot of time walking about cities, often alone. I always have an aim, yet I seldom achieve it directly, for what I'm seeking evades systematic research, and its disclosures rely upon the accidental, on uncertain events. (Kivland, S. 2005 unpaginated).

Actual and imaginary walks through various cities fill Sharon Kivland's books. Elsewhere in *Freud Dreams of Rome* she makes it clear her writing will follow 'the seemingly aimless trajectory of a rambler'. (Kivland, S. 2005 unpaginated). (Perhaps you will recall that Freud used the city of Rome as his image of the unconscious, with his recognition of the way its earliest phases of development continue to exist alongside the more contemporary?) Sharon Kivland detours constantly in her accounts; she darts back and forth in time, her books tell of getting lost in strange cities, of following people (metaphorically, imaginatively and in actuality), and taking train journeys that do not get to the right location. She very literally pursues other avenues, follows new tracks. She apologises frequently for her digressions, this only serves to draw attention to them – which is, I think, her point.

Perhaps this imaginative wandering is prompted most particularly by the act of reading. In reading we are led to places we do not previously know by an author we have trusted to take as our prompt or guide. The act of reading certainly preoccupies Sharon Kivland: she is first of all a reader, before she is a writer or an artist. (She once claimed that her history of art is in fact a history of images of women reading...) But, informed by psychoanalysis, her careful reading is not limited to the actual text, but always attends to its omissions and ellipses, and to the physicality and spectacle of the reading act itself: 'the figure of the reader turns into a diagram or illustration supporting a text'. She writes:

where you stand or sit while reading, how you stand or sit while reading, the way you read, when you read and with whom, cannot be matters of indifference. (Kivland, S. 1999, 203).

She speculates about the way our posture affects our encounter with the books we read: reclining may prompt an languorous abandonment to the text whilst sitting upright, with the book placed carefully on a table and one's feet firmly on the floor is surely the proper way to engage with serious works. She discovers that Freud used to read in a 'very peculiar and uncomfortable' posture leaning in a chair 'in a sort of diagonal position, one of his legs slung over the arm of the chair, the book held high and his head unsupported.' (Kivland, S. 1999, 197). Aware of how the reading may be changed, she determines to try reading her beloved mystery novels as if they were academic works, sitting at a writing table with their pages smoothed carefully open, and to practise holding text books high above her head late at night, as if she were reading fiction.

As I explored her books for this essay, I became acutely self-conscious of my own readerly *technique du corps*. I've sat properly at my desk, with my feet firmly on the floor; I've reclined to read in my bed and on my sofa, (and enjoyed references to Cr billon fils' marvellous story *Le Sopha*<sup>3</sup>, which involves a talking sofa that 'reads' the lovers who sit together upon it); I've laid on the floor propped up by my elbows (my favoured reading position as a child.) I've even wandered to the lavatory with them, pondering the way 'the smallest room in the house' is so often a favoured site of reading. But artists' books (and especially Sharon Kivland's books) are not so simple as other books to 'read'. They are not novels – though stories may be told; not works of theory – though concepts may be explored; not photography books in the traditional sense – though there may be many photographs. They problematise the whole act of 'reading'.

During the writing of this text, needing to relieve my body after a long session at the computer, I took a walk to Brighton's *Permanent Gallery* to see another set of artists' books (an exhibition curated by the Blue Notebook's Editor). The invigilator was sitting at his desk; after a brief hello, he turned his back to me and concentrated once more upon his laptop. I pulled on one of two pairs of white gloves left out with the books, presuming I should

do so, though there was no notice of instruction that explicitly required it. As I stood 'reading' the books in the quiet of gallery, my hands were (as so often) too small for the gloves, and I fumbled clumsily as I turned the pages. My leather coat creaked with every tiny movement, every shift of my weight from foot to foot. I felt utterly self-conscious. I took off my coat, placing it on a chair, a chair I did not sit down upon to read because, given the small scale of most of the books, I 'read' each quickly and would have been constantly up and down to select the next one. (It seemed improper to gather a pile from the shelves to take to my seat, as I would at home).

I encountered some books with which I'm already familiar, including one of Sharon Kivland's (The Chanel-pink, gilt-edged edition *La Forme-Valeur* in which she seeks a woman's voice in Marx's *Kapital*, but finds instead only the feminised voice of the commodity). I stood leafing awkwardly through each book, wondering if the invigilator sneaked a look now and again in order to check up on me. As I observed my own attempt to look nonchalant, Sharon Kivland's words about the analytic situation came back to me.

Each movement or gesture will have the effect of bringing something to light, something which one may prefer to keep hidden, but which the body betrays. If one remains quite still, frozen even, something is spoken nonetheless: secrets will circulate despite silence, despite immobility. (Kivland, S. 1999, 140).

I am constantly reading; I always have a book by my bed or in my bag when I go out. I read comfortably in public, enjoying the way that having a book licenses one to a certain kind of invisibility: with a book in one's hand, one can sit alone and untroubled on planes and trains, in parks, cafés or bars. But reading a book in a gallery always makes me anxious, and reading artists' books doubly so, never mind how often I have done it. There is something about the books themselves and the situation that perturbs and reveals me.

I clearly recall one of the earliest moments of such anxiety. As a gauche undergraduate, and one who, at that time, had very little idea what exactly an artist's book might be, I attended a conference and exhibition under the rubric *Bookworks: a women's perspective*<sup>4</sup>. I walked into an unfamiliar gallery and found a room containing a series of books placed on plinths, each book circled by a pool of spotlight and caught in the draught of electric fans, their pages rustling and turning independently of any viewer. The books attracted attention, drew viewers to them. They fluttered and strained, like birds flapping on perches, and we clustered round to watch. I can remember stepping up, straining to see, wanting to grab the pages and still them so I could read, rather than merely glimpse their content (the transcription of several people's dreams), but suspecting the rules of exhibition meant that I ought not to do so. I wasn't sure how to react: whether I was supposed to see these works as sculpture/installation or as books; whether in fact to 'view' or 'read' (and I wondered for the first time about these different acts of attention). I became preoccupied by the way my body cast shadows or caused the 'breeze' to still a little as I moved round the space – the stillness allowing the pages to come to a rest for a while, but the shadow making it harder yet to read the text.

This work was Sharon Kivland's *L'attente ... l'oubli*, and probably the first of her works involving books that I remember encountering. The title borrows, or at least, I think, it resonates with that of Maurice Blanchot's book<sup>5</sup>, another text that combines fiction with theory, and uses plural, multi-vocal speech. Its title is usually translated as 'awaiting oblivion' but might literally mean 'awaiting the lapse of memory'. And thinking back to that encounter I am all too aware of my own memory lapses (accentuated by the embarrassment that I remember much more about getting lost in London's grimy East End streets, than I do about many of the conference presentations). I can't be sure at all that what I remember is, in fact, quite what I encountered. Indeed it may be simply what I have invented retrospectively, informed by later experiences, by more recently acquired knowledge, and by what I am trying to write in the present, as I'm surrounded by all these other Sharon Kivland books and the pages of notes I have made.

This would come as no surprise to Sharon Kivland. In both essays and book works she has frequently written of the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit* or deferred action, when the past is no more than a series of events reworked by the present, events that are psychically elaborated. She suggests that in fact there is a causality after the event, occurring 'retrospectively, through the functions of time (both synchronic and diachronic), condensation and

displacement (or metaphor and metonymy)'. (Kivland, S. 2004b, 3). Her works are always attentive to this, but a book from 2004 *Cela aura déjà eu lieu* (or, 'Something will have been') is explicitly founded upon it, and it is with this example I wish to conclude, for it is, along with *A Case of Hysteria*, the book by which I have been most affected.

This book was the final stage of a project at the Centre d'art de Morsang, France, a project that began with an invitation, involved an event and viewing, and resulted in an image, translated into a postcard. All these aspects are finally drawn together into an elegant publication of twenty pages contained within a golden cover. This book is presented entirely in French, and I struggled to mobilise linguistic skills that had long been dormant, squinting at tenses that repeatedly confused me, and trying to fathom the order of events that were being described. Later, I explored Sharon Kivland's website and discovered a translation of the text, which is of course not a translation at all but the original - the words Sharon Kivland wrote in English before it was given over to a translator to be turned into French. It became clear that time and tenses were at the heart of this work. In the first paragraph of the book she writes:

I worry if I am making sense, if my confusion of tenses, defying diachronic time, is sensible. It is how one thinks and dreams, though, in leaps back and forth. The title of the work, of all its parts, is in the tense called the future anterior, sometimes called the future perfect. Something *will have been*. (Kivland, S. 2004a, unpaginated).

In this book Sharon Kivland writes certain events into existence, whilst others never come to pass. Parts of the work were originally envisaged entirely differently, elements of which made it erroneously into the publicity; and there were a further series of 'mistakes', the invitation was printed so late that it risked arriving after the event it publicised, and a notice in the back of Art Press gave the wrong day. All of this is narrated into the book itself. The 'audience' were ostensibly there for a performance (a choir was to perform) but this happened off-stage and out of view. Sharon Kivland had altered the space in which the audience were seated, hanging a hundred metres of gold silk at the windows, an extravagance that passed almost unnoticed, since most people imagined these gorgeous curtains had always been there. The audience, some of who were charmed, and some confused by exactly what it was that they had encountered, then became the subject of a photograph taken by Sharon Kivland. Some took this photographic act to be the intended performance, especially as she had chosen to wear a skirt matching the silk curtains. Later, a postcard of this photograph was sent to all who had left their addresses, a postcard that is also itself reproduced within *Cela aura déjà eu lieu* (and which also accompanied the parcel of books Sharon Kivland sent me to explore, once I had accepted the invitation to write about her work: the postcard remains in front of me, propped to the left of my computer...)

As I explored this book, and its translation (that was in fact the original) I found myself slipping between a variety of pasts, presents and futures. I was thinking about the pile of books that have preoccupied me these last months. I was recalling other Sharon Kivland works - photographs, installations, editions - that I had encountered or seen reproduced across the last two decades. I was also imagining an event I hadn't witnessed, and which was now past: I was creating it over again in my own head, and thus in some sense projecting it into the future. I was also imagining manifestations of the work that Sharon Kivland never made because her plans changed between proposal and execution, but which her book describes, and which thus exist equally for the reader. As I made notes, and drafted early versions of this essay, my own words began to seem increasingly strange; as I wrote, my tenses became muddled, I got lost in my corrections, uncertain which tense I ought best to use: to which encounter in which timeframe was I referring?

The oscillation of tenses is a key aspect of *Nachträglichkeit*, and this for Sharon Kivland, is at heart of our engagement with art works. One arrives at a work informed by experiences that have preceded the encounter. We bring our anticipation, and later, retroactively, we might also reconsider what we have seen. The effects of the work may return hours, days, weeks, months, even years later, when subsequent events or experiences provoke its recollection. However such effects are not the same as 'meaning': they do not offer definitive interpretation, for they are likely to change again, as time displaces us once more:

The work of art, through the psychic mechanism of deferred action, forces an encounter with the impossibility of representation, rather than with its failure. There is no point in waiting for a reply when there cannot be one. Neither resolution nor meaning may be required at all in the encounter with a work of art, whose effects may indeed be entirely dependent on remaining unresolved and attendant. (Kivland, S. 2004b, 7-8).

So then, as I arrive at the end of my text, in this moment of concluding I remain unresolved, alert to the slippery tenses and to the chorus of voices that have filled these Sharon Kivland books. The more I've read, the more I'm aware of my own reading falling into patterns she has established, and the more I've felt myself slipping into her voice (which is though, often that of others). My own text has too much of her, too much quotation, too many paragraphs where I suspect I parrot her thinking rather than remaining the impartial, objective critic I ought to be. Perhaps I have over-identified with my subject, as Sharon Kivland fears she has done in her book on Dora, but it is done now, and I have no time to start over. I look despairingly at the pile of notes whose content I hasn't made it into this text, and at the books I suddenly remember I haven't discussed. I can only conclude with Sharon Kivland's words, which close *A Case of Hysteria* and which are in fact (surely this should come as no surprise to you by now) those of Camille Claudel: 'It is true; there is always a lack that torments me'. (Kivland, S. 1999, 293).

## Notes

1. It was Sharon Kivland who first introduced me to Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse*, a book with which I instantly fell in love. I am happy to report it is a love that has endured.
2. See Book XX of The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, his work which most particularly explores the discourse of love and knowledge.
3. Crébillon fils' libertine work *Le Sopha: A Moral Tale* tells the story of Amanzei, who is condemned by divine decree to be reincarnated into successive sofas - upon which a series of couples engage in amorous encounters, assignations he voyeuristically observes.
4. *Bookworks: a women's perspective* was a conference and exhibition organised by Bookworks and held at City of London Polytechnic, March 1992
5. Sharon Kivland also introduced me to the work of Maurice Blanchot, whose work continues to simultaneously madden and compel me.

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