

## **Character, by Paul Heintz**

### **Introduction**

*Florian Beauvallet, University of Rouen, ERIAC EA4705*

One part of a multimedia project that also includes a video installation, *Character* is a book conceived and developed at the crossroads of fiction, documentation, and investigative *journalism*. Envisioned by its author, French artist Paul Heintz, as the record of a literary quest overstepping the boundary that divides the real from the imaginary, this journal proposes to unravel the many strands that connect us to the world, fictional or not. Similar to the book, the quest here undertaken is as nebulous as it is straightforward: “meeting a character from a novel”. This desire gives the artist the impetus to go out into the world looking for an answer to the central question that he can’t wave aside: “what do people in a novel do when they’re not animated by the fact of being read”? After a quick run-down of potential candidates including Kafka’s Gregor Samsa and Flaubert’s Frédéric Moreau, Heintz finally settles on Winston Smith, Orwell’s inconspicuous hero from *1984*.

In many regards, *Character* is a hall of mirrors where real life people and events are reflected and refracted into their fictional counterparts and vice versa. For instance, Heintz chooses to go looking for Smith “because he reflects back the solitude and the impossibility of a common struggle, one that could topple fascist power of former and current oppressors” but it could also be said that Heintz’s own undertaking in turn reflects Smith’s quest for his own self in a world deprived of privacy, as symbolized by his journal—an exercise in mirror writing that strives to articulate the creative encounter of our personal selves with the world as mediated through language. A game of doubles is at play throughout *Character*, as perfectly shown by the English version of the text abutted to the original one in French. The side by side presentation of the texts running on parallel lines grants *Character* a strong visual identity that borrows from the free-form style of diary-writing, where notes, narrative parts, observational inserts, books extracts augmented with further notes, memos, documents and other miscellany collide to form a repository of one’s

own experience and temporal existence. A graduate of the National Superior School of Art and Design of Nancy and of the National Superior School of Decorative Arts in Paris, Paul Heintz shows a sensibility for visual arts which is on full display in *Character*, a book-as-object whose physicality is explored to the fullest thanks to the insertion of images, photographs of objects and documents, all coalescing into various assemblages often leaning on factitiousness and trompe-l'oeil effects. The end result is a book that is conceived as an artefact, a book that draws attention to its materiality and artificiality.

Indeed in a manner that reflects the inner-logic of the artist's search, *Character's* visual organization is rich and sprawling, suggesting, at first glance, that the end product could be the 1:1 reproduction of the artist's personal journal. However, the montage-like quality of the overall design highlights its deliberateness and craftiness, thus implying that this book is less a journal than a meditation on what journal-writing entails: a *mise-en-scène* of the investigation treated as both a narrative and visual object. As it stands, *Character* is the outcome of a two-year inquiry that led artist Paul Heintz to go looking for Winston Smith's homonyms nowadays living in the London area. From Soho to Camden, the journal recounts Heintz's encounter with six of them which *de facto* makes this journal as much a recollection of the artist's experience as a repertory of multiple Winston Smiths, letting us catch a glimpse of the vertigo of inauthenticity that such a common surname implies—one of the many instances of doubling used by Heintz to prod out the multifarious realities of our given names.

Much like the exact existential location of Orwell's Winston Smith is undetermined, *Character* occupies and explores an uncertain space between the real and fiction—as if the many real-life documents attributed to the name Winston Smith (borrowed from the real Winston Smiths he met) had the effect of a wedge inserted into our daily experience of reality. The plastic properties of the book cannot be stressed enough since the journal provides a way to not only experiment with the multimodal possibilities of the physical book format but also with a way to question the foundations of our sense of reality, the better to bend, warp and displace the usual frontier between facts and fiction, between texts and images, between documentation and story-making—hence begging the question raised from the very title: what is a character?

Over the course of 15 chapters, *Character* takes the personal journal to the ontological limits of the genre since its author exploits its specificities to reify both the

conceptual nature of his quest and the fictional reality of characters we meet in novels. While the actual investigation embodies a process of revisiting a textual genre, the journal exhibits a natural ability to bridge the divide between what is lived and what is read. Thus the artist is able to chart the psychological effects and existential repercussions found at the confluence of the real and the fictive. As a result, the reader is offered a glimpse into what the real world shares with fiction according to an ample motion reaching outwards in multiple directions, in the hope of connecting people, real or imaginary, in space and time. The following extract here provided offers a preview of the first half of the journal. Made up of parts taken from Chapter I “The Rules of the Game,” Chapter II “The Phonebooks” and Chapter IV “Winston Smith, Camden,” this combination aims to provide the reader with a miniature illustration of the journal, at once encapsulating the inherent qualities of the work and the unbridled nature of its format, though not anything goes here, where each piece is carefully chosen and adjusted to others to create this balanced, dynamic, total work, vibrant with internal and external ramifications.

Following the collage logics animating multifaceted *Character* as a whole, this extract splices together seemingly self-excluding elements and considerations so as to both challenge and convey the tenuous distinction separating the fictional from the fictive, while also featuring front and centre an experience that cannot be fully contained—so much so that the overflowing pages of the journal can stand as a fitting metaphor for the way fiction oversteps into our daily lives as much as we into the worlds of the novels we read.