

Research Report on Shelley Jackson's *Ineradicable Stain* Project by Juan Valencia

Summary:

Shelley Jackson's *Ineradicable Stain* project seeks to publish the author's short story, aptly titled "Skin," onto the bodies of over 2,000 participants. Given the strictly physical nature of the project, Jackson explores the publishing conventions involved with hard text as opposed to the "liquid" nature of writing that is often associated with experimental publishing. Jackson seeks as her ultimate goal a perishable book that exists strictly in a physical mode, denying any adaptation onto paper print, online publishing, music, film, etc. Her project reconsiders the value of having a readable text exist outside the web, and proves that innovation in the realm of materiality is still possible in regards to literature. Although unconventional given its exclusivity, it is still meant to read like a book. Considering the value of physicality in an era driven mainly by online data, Jackson's project draws its importance in going against the grain and exploring previously unimagined territories of publishing that are still concerned with material and a legible presentation rather than only aesthetic visual innovation.

Description:

Shelley Jackson's *Ineradicable Stain* is an as-of-yet unfinished project in which "Skin," her 2,016-word short story is being published word-by-word onto the skin of chosen volunteers out of a pool of over 10,000 applicants. So far, the story has seen a total of approximately 1,875 words published over a span of almost 12 years. The applicants are asked to mail in their personal information along with a short essay on why they are interested in participating on the project. The selection process has been slow due to the overwhelming number of responses the author has received. Applicants have appeared from all over the world. The project's website includes a map that pinpoints the location of all the current bearers of one of the story's words:



Map depicting the locations of chosen volunteers who carry the story on their skin.

As pictured, most chosen volunteers are located within the United States, although they span through most continents. The website also lists certain guidelines in regards to the form of tattoo the volunteer is to get:

1. The words are given out at random, and a volunteer has the option of turning the offer down if they dislike their word.
2. The tattoo must be in black ink and in a classic book font (the author herself has the word “Skin” tattooed onto her wrist in Baskerville font).
3. The tattoo can be in any part of the body unless the word specifies a certain body part. If, for example, the word is “arm,” it can be tattooed anywhere on the body except the arm (the word “skin” is obviously exempted from this rule).
4. The tattoo can be any size as long as it is legible with the naked eye.

Certain words may come with a form of punctuation mark (quotations, periods, etc.), which must be part of the tattoo as well. The entirety of the story is disclosed only to the chosen volunteers, and exists solely on their skin. The only other requirement is that each volunteer send in a picture of the finished tattoo directly to the author.

Research Context:

As many experimental publishing projects take to data or graphic design in order to innovate their writing, Shelley Jackson instead regresses the physicality of text into a bodily context. The project is significant in exaggerating the tradition of “printed” publishing which, at the time this is being written (2015), is highly coming into question as an obsolete form of providing text for an audience. Jackson opting to print her story in such a peculiar, by all means primitive fashion is a statement against the grain of most experimental publishing which chooses to stray as far away from the physical as possible. Jackson’s project is also interested in temporality: her story is being printed on bodies that are by no means permanent. As volunteers die, so does her story. Whereas archived digital documents are hopeful in an indefinite permanence, Jackson’s project is thwarted by decay or possible eradication (laser removal, possibility of injury/scarring that defaces tattoos, etc.).

Technical Analysis:

“Skin” is printed onto the bodies of over a thousand volunteers. The ink used for these tattoos is required to be black and the tattoo must be in old book font. The body part chosen for the tattoo is up to the volunteer (unless otherwise noted). The tattoo artist/parlor are also optional. The publishing of the story is strictly reserved to the skin of the volunteers. As quoted from the project’s website: “The text will be published nowhere else, and the author will not permit it to be summarized, quoted, described, set to music, or adapted for film, theater, television or any other medium.” This exclusivity greatly limits the reading of the story only to those who participate.

Although unconventional in its printing process, the story is very well still centered on its readability. The specification of the book font (examples from the website include Baskerville, Garamond, Times New Roman and Caslon) is due to the author’s intent on having the published work read like a book, not a piece of art. She specifies: “Your tattoo should look like something intended to be read, not admired for its decorative qualities.” Jackson goes on to state any fanciful lettering tattoo will be expunged from the project.

Any chosen volunteer for the project is considered a “word” of the story, rather than a bearer or printing material. Even if the word is eradicated through laser removal or other circumstances, the

word remains being identified. Death of volunteers is also part of the project, as Jackson states that the death of a “word” will lead to the story being altered due to it being considered a “redaction” of the text. The short story is meant to be temporary. Jackson states: “when the last word died then the story will also have died.” The text is documented through photographs of each tattoo sent in by the “words,” and the author still holds copyright over each word tattooed onto volunteers. This means that, as volunteers are chosen, their own bodies are taken to be the intellectual property of the author of the story. As such, the divulging or altering of the story is forbidden, although open display of the tattoo in public is allowed and seemingly even encouraged, as it is the only means for the story to have an audience (as explained before, volunteers are not the story’s audience – they are considered the story itself).

Evaluation of Research Opportunities/Limitations:

Ineradicable Stain takes on limitations as one of its main goals. Whereas the publishing method is innovative and original, it is by no means effective in terms of “mass publishing” or wide-ranging audience. The story is limited to only 2,000 or so applicants and gathering all those chosen in order to read the story as a whole is nearly impossible. The story, therefore, is not meant to be read entirely but fragmental, and at the risk of being lost. As Jackson herself states that her story will morph and eventually die as a result of the literal mortality of her words, “Skin” is not meant to innovate the field of publishing in any conventional sense. It is a project limited solely to its singular existence and cannot be replicated, as the author has refused the story to be told through any other media like music, film, etc.

However, as stated before, these limitations are part of the purpose of the project as an art-form-almost-nearing-protest against the overwhelming eradication of printed text in favor of digitized print accessible mainly through computers, smartphones, e-readers, etc. Whereas most experimental forms of publishing are opting to step away from physicality, here Jackson makes it the crucial point of her project: creating a living, breathing book that is scattered, prone to redactions and perishable. The benefits of such method of publishing include emphases on community and autonomy as well as the importance of legible print and innovating the presumed “outdated” nature of physical print.

One of the most striking aspects of *Ineradicable Stain* is that it is a community project, which takes community writing to a literal level as each member of the project is considered a word. The words, being autonomous, are subject to change and freedom in regards to where they print their word. Because of this, the book is fully autonomous, emphasizing a big step away from what is often considered the “singular” aspect of online data. Here, words are emphasized as living, breathing bodies. The emphasis on the body counteracts most speculation of living and being in a digital age, and should at least be considered a bold statement against what seems to be the leading argument for the future of books.

The emphasis on readability also steps away from the distracting and art-based display of text often incorporated into experimental publishing. Jackson strictly calls for old book fonts in black ink and a size readable to the naked eye. Even though its exclusivity makes the reading of the text extremely evasive and complicated, it is still above all a short story that is meant to be read. It also strictly states that any attempt at “printing” a volunteer’s given word in fanciful, artsy lettering will be disqualified from being considered part of the project. Although innovation is emphasized in most experimental publishing, Jackson’s project is surprisingly one of the few that is wholly

concerned with improving the words of a text itself rather than its artistic presentation. Most data-based published works are aesthetically appealing, but their presentation often distracts from the overall content of its writing. Given this, Jackson makes us critically reconsider the power of printed book conventions, and how physicality can still improve and innovate publishing without becoming obsolete. It is a text-based project, printing its words in a method that is very hard to ignore.

Resources for Further Study:

[*Ineradicable Stain* website](#)

[YouTube video showcasing the project in motion](#)

[Snow](#) - another project by Shelley Jackson completely written on snow