

## Headless: A Novel

by K.D. Triple Canopy/Sternberg Press/Tensta Konsthall, \$25 (softcover)

While few verifiable details are known of Georges Bataille's notorious Acéphale ('headless') group, its urban myth continues to exert a historical legacy. A secretive outgrowth of his *Collège de Sociologie* dedicated to medieval rites and the potentials of human sacrifice, the Acéphale instantiated Bataille's interwar theories of a 'community without community'. In *Headless*, a Byzantine metatext and satire indebted to Bataille's transgressive and occasionally conspiratorial theory, the spectre of the Acéphale inspires a murder mystery set in the postrecession art market of the 2010s.

Behind the authorial persona of K.D., *Headless* also represents the most ambitious undertaking yet by literary magazine publisher Triple Canopy, a Brooklyn-based collective whose experimental e-books have challenged the contemporary novel's relationship to web-time and the visual literacy with which literature must contend.

At the nexus of *Headless*'s knotty diegesis is cipher-turned-protagonist John Barlow, a Cambridge graduate and *writer manqué* whose work as an author-for-hire leads him to an assignment for the nebulous Scandi art collective Goldin+Senneby. G+S, who are ostensibly modelled on performance 'supergroups' like Bernadette Corporation and Claire Fontaine, have instigated a long-term 'project' on the identity of Headless, Ltd, an offshore corporation managed by the cheekily named Sovereign Trust – though the extent of its efforts are unclear.

What begins as a basic freelance assignment turns dangerous when an Interpol agent approaches Barlow with a photograph of a decapitation linked to Sovereign. Thereafter, Barlow's task of determining Headless's provenance is complicated as his role of guardian of the 'real' and narrative worlds of the novel becomes the grist of G+S's own performance and colloquia; a status compromised when a conspiracy of secondary characters, including a hit man, the beheading victim, an art historian and the Nabokovian/Borgesian interloper – K.D. herself – begin to challenge him for the position of author of the novel.

'In general, mass-market fiction is not about the production of mass-market fiction,' Barlow explains to Triple Canopy editor Alexander Provan in the introduction. 'Perhaps *Headless* is commercial fiction for lovers of conceptual art who are also fans of gut-wrenching, keeps-you-on-the-edge-of-your-seat thrillers.' Such a conceit mines much the same territory as Bernadette's *Reena Spaulings* (2004) or even Bret Easton Ellis's outrageous *Glamorama* (1998), merging the metaphysical detective story with a sardonic jab at the self-referential preoccupation of art criticism and vanity exhibitions, as they become appendages of hyperspeculative forces, both financial and hermeneutic.

What, then, is the responsibility of an artworld in which antiquated values such as 'meaning' and 'representation' are traded with the speed of transnational currency markets?

Neither Barlow nor G+S, nor the shifting cast of intellectuals and patrons of *Headless*'s parodic artworld seem interested or capable of turning away from the conspiratorial morass that ensures their professional survival. In a particularly Pynchonesque lampoon of the MFA excursus, a roundtable of insufferable critics and celebrity artists (some thinly veiled caricatures of real-life figures) are assembled like a cabal of supervillains to take part in a talk on 'site and non-site', an event that G+S have amusingly chosen to emcee *in absentia*. Underlying the discursive elitism and conceptual 'liquidity' of the artworld is, as the scene implies, a synergy between academia and finance, whose conspiracy is consistently obscured by the diversionary pleasures of 'watered down' theory. These suspicions are confirmed, when, in a recurring trope, all analyses of Acéphale require the characters' use of Google as a primary source.

Does the secret of the offshore Headless, Ltd, and its potential connection to Acéphale represent a transcendental signified, a semiotic key to unravelling and evaluating the ontological riddles presented by these artworld carneys, or is it the very conspiracy ensuring the artworld's virtual displacement? By the novel's end, Barlow's quest to uncover Bataille's credulous 'community without community' seems nothing but a fever dream under the influence of the hypercapitalist present. The crime the reader is left to solve is not the decapitation of the artist but the murder of the artworld itself. *Erik Morse*

## Works of Game: On the Aesthetics of Games and Art

by John Sharp MIT Press, £13.95/\$19.95 (hardcover)

It is with characteristic candour that John Sharp dedicates portions of this book's closing pages to laying out shortcomings in the fields it examines: 'The interactions of games and art are littered with ... missed opportunities' he notes. *Works of Game* keeps its focus tight and largely within the sphere of videogames, examining phenomena Sharp identifies as 'game art', 'artgames' and 'artists' games' – though within the period of the book's writing, the first two of these have (according to the author), respectively, ground to a halt and become 'even more a cul-de-sac inside the marginalized world of media art than it was before.'

The overlap between the world of art and games, then, is revealed as a fragile space – as a professor of games at Parsons with a background

in art history Sharp has a foot in each camp, and finds himself somewhat in the position of a man with two beloved friends whom he wishes would find common ground. Visiting the New Museum's 2009 *Younger Than Jesus* generational he wrestles studiously with Mark Essen's *Flywrench* (2007) video game, explaining that the artworld will not 'get' artist games without gaming literacy (and, implicitly, determination). Discussing the artgames (auteur-esque videogames that subvert the ludic qualities of the medium) of Jason Rohrer he acknowledges both the modesty of the gaming and a conservative social rhetoric not commonplace in the artworld.

For all his frankness, there is one glaring issue from which Sharp shies away. To a game-literate audience used to the lush graphics

and sophisticated interaction of *Destiny*, *Grand Theft Auto V* or *BioShock Infinite*, the videogame-related works of artists such as Cory Arcangel function within the field of amusing nostalgia – of the games laboriously hacked for his *Various Self Playing Bowling Games* (2011) the most recent (as listed in *Works of Game*) was already a decade old – rather than gaming actual. For the artworld to address the videogame – as subject or as medium – on equal footing would require vast technical investment or a significant shift in available technology. It is notable that the most compelling artist game that Sharp examines – Nathalie Pozzi and Eric Zimmerman's *Sixteen Tons* (2010) – functions entirely in real (rather than video) space.

*Hettie Judah*

