

The SKIN Project by Shelley Jackson. The Tattooed Text as a Mortal Work of Art.

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► **To cite this version:**

Marie Bouchet. The SKIN Project by Shelley Jackson. The Tattooed Text as a Mortal Work of Art.. La Peaologie - Revue de sciences sociales et humaines sur les peaux, La Peaologie 2020, La littérature dans la peau : tatouages et imaginaires., pp.145-169. halshs-02567841

HAL Id: halshs-02567841

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Submitted on 28 Sep 2020

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La Peauologie

PRINTEMPS 2020

NUMÉRO 4



THE *SKIN* PROJECT BY SHELLEY JACKSON

THE TATTOOED TEXT AS A “MORTAL WORK OF ART”

Référence électronique

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Bouchet M., (2020), « The SKIN project by Shelley Jackson. The tattooed text as a “mortal work of art”. », *La Peauologie* 4, mis en ligne le 5 mai 2020, [En ligne] URL : <http://lapeauologie.fr/skin-project-shelley-jackson>

RÉSUMÉ

En 2003, Shelley Jackson lança en ligne un appel à volontaires destiné à trouver des personnes acceptant de faire tatouer sur leur peau l'un des 2 095 mots de sa nouvelle « Skin » — une tentative de publier le texte sur un support qui reflète son contenu. Une fois le tatouage fait (et prouvé par l'envoi d'une photo), l'auteure adressait à chaque participant (qu'elle appelle « ses mots ») le texte complet de la nouvelle, qui devait rester secret. Jackson reçut plus de 22 000 courriels pour ce projet, et envoya leur mot à tatouer à 1 875 personnes sélectionnées. Au final le projet *SKIN* ne put être achevé, car l'un de « ses » mots décéda avant que la nouvelle ne fut complètement imprimée/tatouée. Cet article explore la relation complexe entre éternité et finitude que tisse un tel projet. En effet, d'un côté la littérature est perçue comme un art éternel (selon le *topos* de l'auteur vivant éternellement à travers ses livres), et le tatouage est également considéré comme un marquage permanent, un geste d'encre comparable à celui de l'impression de textes. Le projet *SKIN* prend toutefois le contrepied de cet aspect, car dès le départ Shelley Jackson avait conscience que cette expérimentation avec les techniques d'impression produirait « une œuvre d'art mortelle » (Jackson, 2002). Le projet *SKIN* souligne donc le caractère éphémère du tatouage, en une sorte de *memento mori*. Cet article analyse également les traces que le tatouage littéraire original a laissées, à savoir, d'une part, le site internet où Jackson lança son appel, présenta le projet et produisit une carte localisant les mots de sa nouvelle. La deuxième trace du projet initial est un sous-texte de la nouvelle originelle, texte non imprimé sur le papier mais présenté sous forme d'une vidéo montée par Jackson en 2011 à partir des 200 vidéos YouTube, réalisées par certains « mots », dans lesquelles les participants se filment en train de montrer et prononcer à haute voix leur mot tatoué. Cette autre nouvelle, dermatographiquement dérivée de la première, combine donc littérature, tatouage, art conceptuel, image et son.

MOTS CLEFS

Shelley Jackson, peau, tatouage, finitude, éternité, mortalité

ABSTRACT

The *SKIN* project began in 2003 with Shelley Jackson sending out an online call for volunteers to find people who would be willing to have one of the 2,095 words of her short story “Skin” tattooed on their own body, in an attempt at “publishing in forms that reflected their content” (Daffern, 2012). In exchange for their tattoo (duly proven by a printed photograph), Jackson sent the participants the story she wrote, which was to remain secret. She received over 22,000 emails for the project, and sent their word to 1,875 applicants whom she selected, but she never completed the project because one of “her words” passed away before the full story was tattooed/printed. This article delves into the complex relationship between eternity and finitude that such a project entails. Indeed, on the one hand, literature is perceived as an art inscribed in eternity (with the *topos* of a writer living on through his/her works after death), and tattoos are also conceived as something permanent, an inking gesture similar to that of a printing machine. Yet, on the other hand, with the *SKIN* project, Shelley Jackson had very early in mind that this experiment with printing material would produce a “mortal work of art” (Jackson, 2002). The project therefore foregrounds the *ephemeral* nature of tattooing, in a *memento mori* gesture. The article also explores the traces of this unique literary tattoo in the other two forms through which the *SKIN* project can be experienced: first, the website that called for volunteers, exposed the project and even displays a map of the location of each word. The second trace of the tattooed text takes the form of a sub-story, a video Jackson edited herself in 2011, using the home-made videos posted on You Tube by over 200 “words” who filmed themselves *saying* and *showing* their word, thus combining literature, tattoo art, conceptual art, images and sound.

KEYWORDS

Shelley Jackson, skin, tattoo, finitude, eternity, mortality

INTRODUCTION

Shelley Jackson was born in 1963 in the Philippines, but was raised in Berkeley, CA. She holds a B.A. in art (Stanford University) and a M.F.A. in creative writing (Brown University), and is therefore both a writer and an artist, whose work is characterized by experiments crossing genres and mediums. Her work is characterized by explorations of the possibilities of publishing, and attempts at expanding the potential of print culture. She published two novels, a collection of short stories, three children’s books, and three hypertexts (among which *Patchwork Girl*, 1995). She also illustrated a book for children, and some of her own works (*My Body*)¹. Her artistic practice is thus transmedial, and her creative output often is intersemiotic.

A few words ought to be said about *Patchwork Girl*, because in many ways it really is the first step Jackson took before the *SKIN Project*. *Patchwork Girl* is a hypertextual novel, which was never published in a book form, and Jackson explained she never even thought of doing so. She elaborated an original story by borrowing from three literary sources, one being the paradigmatic monster narrative, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, the second being the sequel to the uber-famous children’s book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) by L. Frank Baum, entitled *The Patchwork Girl of Oz* (1913) with the Scraps character, and the third being, as Arnaud Regnauld showed, Derrida’s *Dissemination* (Regnauld, 2009, 73). It is the story of a female monster assembled by Mary Shelley herself, who then becomes her creature’s lover; the creature then travels to America, where she goes through many adventures before disintegrating after a 175-year lifetime. Individual sections of the novel also explore the lives of some of the women whose corpses contributed body parts to the creature. The story can only be read on a computer, and is told through illustrations of parts of the female body that are stitched together through text and image. The narrative of the story is divided into five segments, but each segment takes a path that carries the story in multiple directions through various linking words and images. Hence one experiences, in a narrative, the same vertigo of endless redirection one experiences when browsing the web. The aim of the hypertextual novel is not only to make the reader aware of its overall structure, but also to make us realize that all the pieces must be “patched” together in order to create one unified whole, as exemplified in this particularly metatextual passage: “If you want to see the whole you will have to piece me together yourself” (Jackson, 1995). The tension between the whole and its fragments which characterizes *Patchwork Girl* is brought to yet another level with the *SKIN* project.

1. For a full presentation of her work, see Wend, 2010.

In 2002, Shelley Jackson decided to keep one short story, entitled “Skin”, apart from her short story collection entitled *The Melancholy of Anatomy* (2002), a book centered on the body, its fluids, humors and recesses^[2]. She kept “Skin” apart because, according to her, it did not really fit in. She thus decided to send out a call to find people who would be willing to have one of the 2,095 words of the remaining story tattooed on their own skin, in an attempt at “publishing in forms that reflected their content” (Daffern, 2012). The title word, *SKIN* was tattooed on Jackson’s own wrist, as a first step in the project. In exchange for their tattoo (duly proven by a printed photograph), Jackson sends the participants the story she wrote, which is not meant to be publicly circulated, and which the participants promise not to disclose, via a signed contract. She received over 22,000 emails from people who wanted to be included in the project, and sent their word to 1,875 applicants whom she selected. In the end she never completed the project because one of “her words” passed away before the full story was tattooed/printed. This article is therefore *not* an analysis of the “Skin” short story, which is not publicly available nor disclosable, but a study of the *SKIN* project itself, and its two hypertextual and intersemiotic sub-projects, the *SKIN* project website, and the *SKIN* video issued in 2011.

To analyze the various ways the *SKIN* project explores the tension between finitude and eternity, this article will first present the project and its original obsession with form and death; then its paradoxical call for the temporal and spatial infinite thanks to the internet will be studied, so as to finally focus upon the latest by-product of the project, the *SKIN* video (2011), commissioned by the Berkeley Art Museum.

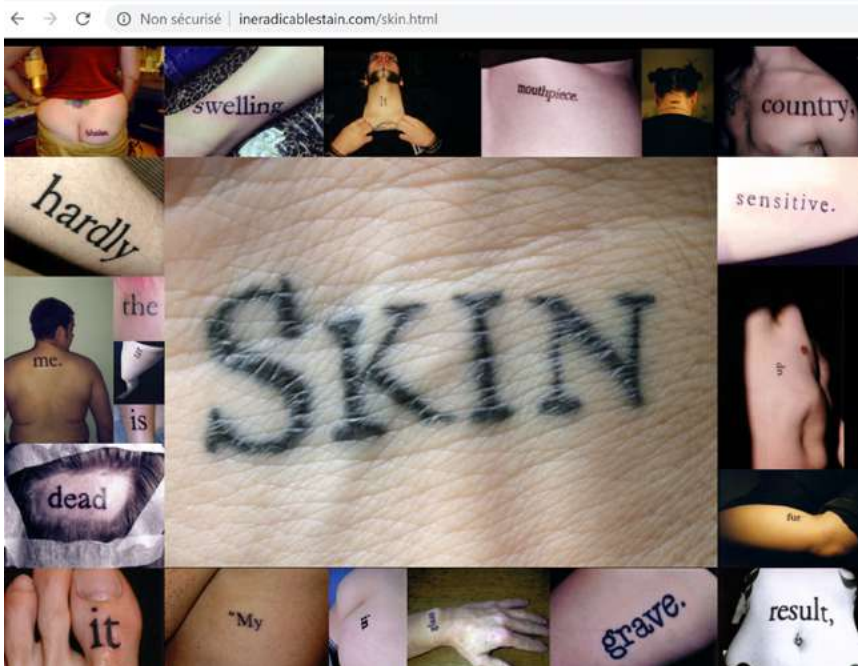
PRESENTATION OF THE PROJECT: AN OBSESSION WITH FORM AND DEATH

One persistent obsession in Jackson’s work is the body^[3], as noted by many critics and stated in an interview: “Thematically, all my writing is obsessed with the body — partly because I have a sense of language as a physical force. On the one hand, it abstractly conveys ideas, but it also leaves a residue in the form of shapes on the page, sounds in the air, the movement of your

2. This collection of short stories is also a reference to the 1628 book by Robert Burton (1577-1640) *Anatomy of Melancholy*. The book is intended as a medical treatise (it mixes text and image) and explores a dizzying assortment of mental afflictions, including what might now be called depression.

3. Her hypertextual and autobiographical work entitled *My Body* (1997) weaves text and image, and is designed for the reader to navigate Jackson’s narrative of her corporeal self.

tongue and mouth” (Ulin, 2005). This acute sense of the double nature of language, and of the fact that it stems from the relationship between an abstract signified and a “physical” signifier that can be eternal (letters/“shapes on the page”) or ephemeral (“sounds in the air, the movement of your tongue and mouth”) is another essential aspect of her work and aesthetic, as will be illustrated further below.

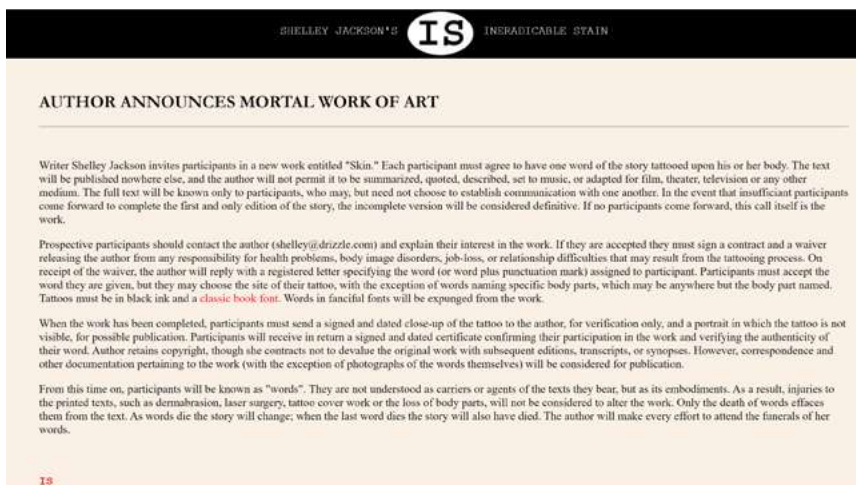


Entry page to the SKIN project.

From its earliest stages, the *SKIN* project explored the complex relationship between eternity and finitude. Indeed, while, on the one hand, literature is perceived as an art inscribed in eternity (with the *topos* of a writer living on through his/her works after death), tattoos are also conceived as something permanent that the wearer intends to “keep forever”. The often-drawn parallel between the patient and skilled inking gesture of tattooing and that of medieval monks writing and illuminating texts to be kept forever is revealing of the eternal, almost sacred nature of tattoo art. Yet, with the *SKIN* project, Shelley Jackson had very early in mind that her experiment with printing material would produce a “mortal work of art” (my emphasis, see below), and as a matter of fact one of the words/participants did die before the story was fully printed/enacted on skin. The *SKIN* project therefore foregrounds the

ephemeral nature of tattooing, in a sort of *memento mori* gesture.

Let us examine the call for participants:



Call for participants page

The *SKIN* project provides a further form of hypertextuality (in its etymological sense: beyond the page-printed text), for the words are scattered not through the world wide web this time, but quite literally throughout the world (see the map of where the participants are located on earth, on the *SKIN* website^[4]). Moreover, even though the tattooed text is by nature tangible, and recalls the etymology of *fiction* (from the Latin *fingerere*, touch), *SKIN* is also, at the same time, an extremely elusive text, since, in its dermatographed form, the text could have “come together” only very difficultly, as it would have required for the “words” / participants to be gathered in the same place. *SKIN* is therefore a literary text that is mostly made to be printed rather than read, and in a printed form not made to last forever.

In the call for participants page, one can note how the importance of the *life* of the tattoo itself is underscored: being inked on skin, the words are meant to be impacted by any incident that may occur on the surface of the participants' bodies. “Skin” is made to exist in both an actual (the concrete tattoos) and virtual way (the fact of constituting a whole, a story made of words, rests in the knowledge of the project). Jackson stretches the idea of a book form

4. <http://ineradicablestain.com/skinmap.html>

holding all the words of a story printed on pages to a community of bodies holding all the tattooed words of her story. Quite clearly in this project, form overpowers contents, and the transmedial nature of the work is explored/exploited in various ways that show that its nature is even more elusive than what it claims to be.

Going back to the title of the call for participants (boasting a “mortal work of art”), one should add that many of the articles covering the *SKIN* project naturally insist on that aspect (see Wend, 2010, for instance). Daniel Pink, in the *New York Times*, notes: “Most artists spend their careers trying to create something that will live forever. But the writer Shelley Jackson is creating a work of literature that is intentionally and indisputably mortal” (Pink, 2004). Art critic Amelia Taylor-Hochberg (2011) explains:

Most art is not built to die. Climate control and painstaking restoration keep classical art forms from aging, and while paint or clay may degrade slowly, they can never die in a traditional sense because they were never alive. But when human beings are the materials of the artist’s project, the piece becomes a living body, dependent on the organic vivacity of its material.

In an NPR interview with Ben Gilbert (2004), Jackson explains: “I wanted to write a story that was a living text, a living work of art. And somehow to make that possible it seemed to me that it also had to be able to die.” The idea of death that underpins the project is running against the cliché that works of art are immortal, and is clearly stated at the end of the call for participants:

Only the death of words effaces them from the text. As words die the story will change; when the last word dies the story will also have died. The author will make every effort to attend the funerals of her words.

Jackson even boasts about the “revolutionary” character of her experiment, in an interview with Joanna Walters (2003): “There is something wonderfully melancholic about a piece of writing that’s living flesh and finally dies and is grieved over. It is a revolution in literature.” It may be experimental in literature, but in contemporary art the idea that permanence is not necessary to create a work of art has become a *topos*: ephemerality is one key-term in contemporary creations, as Paul Ardenne underscored⁵.

The *SKIN* project was therefore meant to reflect its own published form from the start — it was meant to literally live and die. That aspect was very appealing to many participants. In the NPR interview, the journalist recalls that librarians wrote to Jackson asking to be part of the project, saying “I want

5. Ardenne remarks upon the “vanishist” tendency of contemporary creations, in which the over-represented body disappears; he notes that this form of “*art disparitionniste*” is paradoxical, since it is only made possible if the body has appeared in the first place (Ardenne, 2009, 445).

to be part of a living book”. In another interview, Jackson acknowledges that the actual injury made to the skin by the tattoo also had an emotional appeal for her: “I was also moved by the image of reading as offering yourself to be wounded by a piece of writing” (Nunes).

In fact the term “offering yourself”, the notion of sacrifice, is quite accurate for such a project, because it does somehow entail the erasure of the participants’ identity, even though that aspect is largely ignored or downplayed in the articles dedicated to the project^[6]; for instance in the *Los Angeles Times*:

To be clear, Jackson doesn’t call them participants — with great affection and admiration, she calls the tattoo volunteers “words.” In an e-mail to *The Times*, she explains: “I usually call them words, or my words, as in, “I got an angry email from one of my words,” or “Two of my words just got married!” I really like the ripple of surreality this induces in listeners who haven’t yet become inured to the usage. It comes from my original call for participants: I specify that once they are tattooed, “participants will be known as ‘words’.” (Kellogg, 2011)

Not only do these persons become “*her* words”, but they also pay for the tattoo themselves. Moreover, they even relinquish the rights to their own image and to the texts sent to Jackson^[7]. The participants therefore “must sign a contract” and willingly submit to a somewhat authoritarian action in an albeit creative project. What is fascinating is that Jackson in her turn commits to the life and death of “her words” by making a pledge to attend all her words’ funerals, and, as Daniel Pink recalls: “If she dies first, she says, she hopes several of them will come to her funeral and make her the first writer ever to be mourned by her words” (Pink, 2004).

Not only is Jackson obsessed with the mortality of her work of art, but the control she wants to exert over her creation also expresses itself in the rules she set up regarding the “printing” process, the shape, font, size and location of the tattoos themselves, as indicated in the Guidelines page:

4. You are responsible for getting the word tattooed on your body at a tattoo parlor of your choice. Read the following specifications carefully.

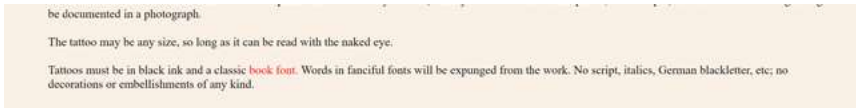
You are free to choose the site of your tattoo, except in the case of words naming specific body parts. These may be anywhere *but* the parts named, e.g. the word “hand” may be tattooed on your foot, stomach, shoulder blade, etc. but not on your hand. This stipulation does not apply to the word “skin” or any of its synonyms, for obvious reasons. The tattoo need not be in a place that is commonly visible (under your hair would be acceptable, for example) but must remain so long enough to be documented in a photograph.

Guidelines page

6. “Once a word has been tattooed, the person then “becomes” the word and Jackson refers to her “words” as someone else might speak of their own children” (Teresa, 2010).

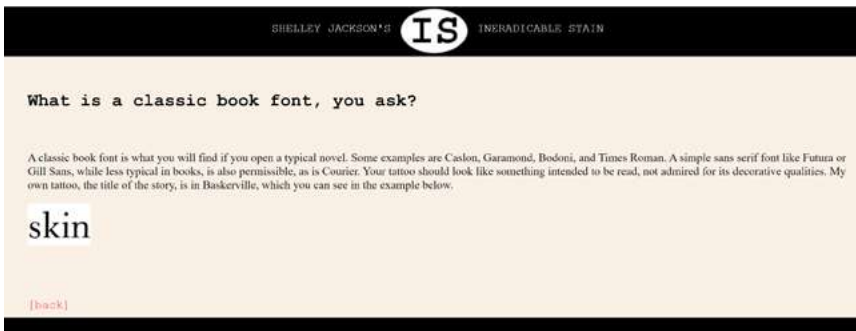
7. In the call for participants, she explains the photos they sent of themselves and the correspondence between herself and the participants will be considered for publication.

This requirement indicates that Jackson wishes to prevent any relation between the signifier and a potential signified in the printing/inking process, probably because she does not wish to have the polysemic nature of words reduced, but also precisely because the actual meaning or use of the word in the story has not been disclosed to participants before they got tattooed, so they may imply a meaning that is not the one used in the story. In fact, what Jackson seeks is to have the tattooed words replicate the aspect of words on a printed page:



Guidelines page

If one clicks on the “book font” link, one finds her again insisting upon the tattoo being similar to a printed text:



Book font page

Beyond this self-reflexive aspect of the project, which underscores the very materiality of writing, what is interesting here is the dialectic opposition binding the readability of the words and the unreadability of the story. This dialectic opposition somehow reflects the one binding the inerasable tattoos and the perishable participant. Jackson must have therefore been quite satisfied with the reaction of one of her “words” interviewed on NPR, for he said: “Basically it looks as if the word jumped out of the book and stuck on my ankle” (Gilbert, 2004). This statement shows that this participant fully accepted the principle according to which “the words have been chosen for the purposes of the story, not for their suitability as decorations” (cf. Call).

Even if form somehow overcomes content in the *SKIN* project, some points of tension seem to arise, as evidenced in the reactions to it. For Tim Farrell (2010) for instance, “this project in particular took what we consider to be “literature” to its most abstract.” On the other hand, other critics like Amelia Taylor-Hochberg (2011) underscore the corporeality of the work: “The definitive mark of the project is, however, not virtual but corporeal.” The tension between abstraction and corporeality, which stems from the story’s publishing strategy, is enriched with yet another dialectic, that of permanence/eternity vs. transience/finitude. Some critics are fascinated by “the transient nature” of the work, because “the story may never be fully realized, as it seems possible that before the last word has been “born” one of the others may have died” (Teresa, 2010), while other people, especially participants, like “the permanence of the whole thing”^[8]. And indeed “One of [her] volunteers asked [her], hypothetically, if he could will his word to his children” (Wend, 2010), therefore countering the death-bound nature of the work.

Another dialectic the *SKIN* project relies upon is that of secrecy. Indeed, as Teresa wrote (2010), “the story is a closely guarded secret”, and as Pierre Boutang noted in his *Ontologie du Secret*, the very ambivalence at the core of secrecy is that a secret is something that must not be told, but is also something that has no other sense than in being disclosed (1973, 129). So while Jackson repeatedly stated that the “Skin” short story would never be published^[9], and while she disclosed it only to the participants who are sworn to secrecy, she also set the stage for an exhibition of the short story project. Shelley Jackson not only uses all the “effects of secrecy” as Arielle Meyer called them in *Le Spectacle du Secret* (i.e. keeping, hiding, disguising, distilling, revealing) but she also uses what Meyer terms its “paradoxical effects”, i.e. veiling to disclose better, or showing what is hidden (Meyer, 2003, 20). The display of the secret is staged via the project’s website, which is systematically mentioned in the press articles written on “Skin”. Hence Jackson uses the world wide web to show something that is not to be “circulated”. As David Ulin (2005) said, “Skin’ will, when finished, operate with the inferential power of a rumor, offering a narrative that’s both visible and invisible all at once”.

Another paradox therefore to be explored with this story tattoo-printed is that despite being designed to be mortal, the author set up the stage for its immortality.

8. Participant named Poulos in the *USA Today* interview (Franklin, 2004).

9. Frank Franklin (2004) explains: “she’s optimistic that *Skin*, in its published entirety, will remain a secret among her loyal subjects.”

A CALL FOR TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL ETERNITY

Today “Skin” is dead, since it died with its first word. Hence the *Skin* website is now the “dead” project’s online prolongation, its virtual and eternal (after) life. The living-on nature of the work is reflected in the internet flux, via the updates Jackson posted as to the project’s progress, her posts, the “letters” she wrote to her words, and via the participation of the “words” themselves to the website. Therefore, as the Berkeley Art Museum webpage explains, “Shelley Jackson’s ‘Skin’ is equal parts conceptual art, performance art, literature, and Internet art”. The intersemiotic quality of the project indeed makes it “far more visually interesting than the average novella” (Teresa, 2010), and definitely something more than “just” a story printed on skin.

Jackson’s project encapsulates both the “real” world in which the participants live, get hurt, or die, and the “virtual” world of the internet, and this is one of the strengths of the project, as explained by the Berkeley Art Museum, since the project thus managed to balance the mortality of the unique human body and the eternity of internet life through an unexpected structural mirror effect between the Internet and the short story:

‘Skin’ is akin to an alternate reality game in that the Internet provides the glue that holds the project together — its orchestration and viral reach — but much of the action happens offline. ‘Skin’ literalizes many tropes of Internet art such as decentralized authorship and the networked (common) body. It is part of a wave of “post-Internet art” that ignores the boundaries of online versus offline and assumes the conditions of networked culture into its content as well as its material makeup. (Berkeley Art Museum)

The website is the central piece of the *SKIN* project. It is conceived as an object triggering desire to join the project, as illustrated by the entrance page, with photos of words surrounding the first word — Jackson’s own hand in extreme close-up, so that the grain of her skin is visible. The website is all the more essential as Jackson stated that in the case no one volunteered to get the story published on skin, the online call for participants would have constituted the project itself, thus following many examples of conceptual art.

More importantly, the website provides the interface for the participants to contribute even further to the project. As Amelia Taylor-Hochberg (2011) contends, “with origins in both print media and the Internet, ‘Skin’ is the enactment of a new communicative order in the relationship between artist and audience.” Indeed, to participate, people had to *write* to Jackson and try to convince her to take them on. This exchange of letters, before the ultimate exchange of the author sending a snail mail letter containing the word assigned to be tattooed, is a key aspect of the project, that Jackson sought to prolong by regularly writing to “her” words, and, in 2010, contacting them for the video project.

Another original aspect lies in the way that *SKIN* not only plays with various semiotic systems, but also in the manner in which it created a community (before Facebook existed), a community of people sharing a specific tattoo — somehow duplicating the idea of the “tattoo community”, at a time when getting a tattoo was not yet mainstream. According to Jackson, this is one of the major reasons why people joined the project^[10]. That aspect has largely been commented upon in the various articles on the project (see Gilbert, 2004; Walters, 2003; Nunes), and Jackson repeatedly stressed it:

Some say they love books, some that they love tattoos, some that they want to feel like they are an essential part of something larger than themselves, something that ties them to people around the world with an invisible thread. (...) Many of my applicants write that they are yearning for a different kind of community, and hope that this might provide it. That might seem far-fetched, but in fact online groups have already formed to talk about the project, and some of my words have already met in the flesh. Some of my words sent me Christmas cards. One of my words is knitting me a scarf. I seem to have founded a strange sort of family. (Nunes)

Actual family members or friends asked to be given a sequence of words^[11] or a sentence they would share (Teresa, 2010), and potential families can have sprung among words, with people meeting and getting married via the Skin network^[12]. Jackson clearly encourages such relationships between the persons involved (“participants, (...) may, but need not choose to establish communication with one another”), notably by creating a specific webpage on the *SKIN* project site for them to express themselves. She even jokes about it:

I’m wondering whether a kind of caste system is going to arise, where the common “ands” and “thes” will be looked down upon by fancier words — or maybe the prepositions and indefinite articles will gang up on the effete adjectives. There really should be an “ifs and buts” party. (Walters, 2003)

10. “Jackson said participants want to be connected to 2,094 other people and often don’t care about the story’s subject. Some have never read her earlier work” (Franklin, 2004).

11. “What kind of person signs up for an experiment in epidermal literature? Curiosity seekers and members of “body modification” communities have been early adopters. But many enlistees have been surprisingly mainstream. Mothers and daughters are requesting consecutive words. So are couples, perhaps hoping to form the syntactic equivalent of a civil union. For others, the motives are social: Jackson is encouraging her far-flung words to get to know each other via e-mail, telephone, even in person. (Imagine the possibilities. A sentence getting together for dinner. A paragraph having a party.) In addition, Jackson has heard from several dyslexics, who have struggled with mastery of writing and reading. And librarians are signing up in droves” (Pink, 2004).

12. Jackson jokes: “People have written to me saying that if two Words met, fell in love and had a baby, would that offspring be a footnote?” (Walters, 2003).

Art critic Amelia Taylor-Hochberg sees in the physical, bloody, tattooing process the key to the creation of that community, or “secret society” whose members are all branded:

Bearing the project’s title on her right wrist, Jackson is not only the author but also a participant, subject to the same indelible pain that brings the project into existence. (...) Once aware of its own existence, the textual community establishes a non-present physical intimacy between itself and the author, between art and artist. Both parties have bled for each other, an empathetic relationship difficult to achieve in a static gallery. (Taylor-Hochberg, 2011)

In the guidelines, Jackson warns the applicants: “Participants must be prepared for the possibility that the word they receive, once tattooed on their body, will suggest meanings unintended by the author and/or bearer.” Sometimes people decide not to get inked, or place the tattoo where it will seldom be seen (“dead” under one’s hair, “glass” under one’s watch...). Doing so, participants do not appropriate the power of narrative influx that can spring from tattoos. Indeed, most tattoo-wearers like explaining why they chose this or that particular tattoo, because getting a tattoo implies a semiotization of the body that is both literal (inscription of a sign on one’s skin) and symbolic (what the tattoos means or refers to). For the *SKIN* project, the fact that participants explain why they have a word tattooed on their skin literally “spreads the word” about the project, and makes it circulate further.

In addition, the participants can shape the meaning of the word, or create resonances to it by choosing where to place it: for example the person who got the word “heal” placed it on her ankle, and that gesture lead people to think “heel” had be misspelled, thus adding a shade of meaning to the original word. The changes made to the story by its own “words” are firstly to be seen in the page entitled “footnotes” on the project’s website^[13], which Jackson designed to be a space of free expression for her words: “By words, for words. Please add or edit your own footnote”. They log in onto the page, and they can write whatever they want, and post pictures if they wish. It is an interesting reversal, since potential readers have access to the footnotes to the words only, and not to the text of the story itself. Obviously not all the participants have used that textual space to express themselves and verbally contribute further to the project, but the type of participation that this page entails is interesting, because it further obfuscates the original story, and expands the scope and ramifications of the project by providing reactions to the project from within, in an endless gesture of writing on and on, which runs counter to the mortal nature of the initial project.

13. <http://www.ineradicablestain.com/footnotes.html>

It would be too long to analyze in depth the way in which each contribution interacts with the project, but one can sketch out the various types of footnotes to be found. The footnotes are presented in alphabetical order (obviously to avoid revealing any part of the short story). They are either composed of:

- definitions of the word (either lifted from a dictionary, or self-worded, either complete, or edited: the “word” retains the meanings that are the most significant to himself/herself); as such, a lot of participants play with the polysemy of the term they were assigned;
- quotes;
- jokes (polysemy used in a humorous way);
- anagrams;
- personal stories about how the participants relate to the word;
- links to the participants’ blogs, or webpages;
- an email address, and often an open invitation for other words to get in contact or meet;
- photos (usually of the tattoo itself, sometimes of the person only);
- poems (quoted from more or less famous poets, like Rilke, Dickinson, or composed by the participants): the proportion of verse is actually quite significant, as if the very gift of a word was poetry-inducing.

The initial secret-bound, mortal and confidential project therefore endlessly forks in different directions, towards words, images, words that are images, images that are words, or other, further web pages. Jackson’s “words” play on the bond between signifier and signified, and rely on the polysemy of signs, therefore showcasing how printed text has inner creative potential. One should note that Jackson herself contributed to the footnotes: “When I received the word, “skin” several years ago I decided to have it tattooed on the inside of my left wrist. Even though I spend a lot of time explaining why I have this tattoo, I’m still glad to be a part of this project.” Interestingly enough, Jackson leaves it for the attentive reader who has carefully observed the entrance and index pages of the project’s website to guess it is her, pretending, behind these lines, that she did not choose the first word for herself, or that she is tired of talking about it.

In her interview with Rosita Nunes, Jackson claims that she had not initially fully realized the potential for change that the project had: “As a whole, yes, the project (in ways I had not fully articulated for myself before undertaking it) embraces change, permeability, and collaboration” (Nunes). Interactivity is at the source of the project, and Jackson incorporated that aspect to it, as explained by journalist David Ulin:

Her participants are interacting with the material and changing it — just as Jackson hoped they might. “They’ve hijacked my story,” she enthuses. “They’re forming chat groups, e-mailing to tell me what their words mean to them.” On the one hand, this is another example of the viral nature of the project, the way that, once set loose, all these bits of language break apart and recombine like errant DNA. It’s not hard to imagine clusters of “words” coming together, forming sentences — indeed, entire narratives — that Jackson never consciously composed. (Ulin, 2005)

Jackson developed a very clear line of how to interpret these sub-narratives and changes to her initial words:

There are two ways to look at how this impacts meaning. One, since each participant will get to read the story in its original sequence, the story *will find its coherence in its readers’ minds*, rather than in the world. This is true of all stories, in a sense. Two, the original story is only the DNA; the real story as living organism is perpetually rearranging and revising itself, and its meaning is the aggregate of a *myriad of idiosyncratic personal interpretations that will attach themselves to its words, interpretations I have invited but can’t predict or control*. This too is true of all stories, in a sense. (Ulin, 2005, my emphasis)

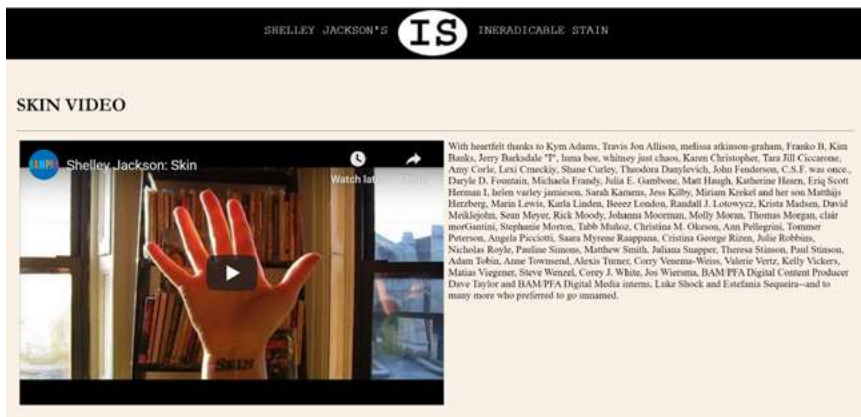
Presented in that light, the *SKIN* project seems to be the paragon of all books, even though, or maybe because it is not printed on paper nor published. Paradoxically enough, by stretching out the possibilities of the publishing form through tattoo and by severing the average readers from her text, Jackson reinforced the bond between her only readers (the participants) and her text, creating a type of reader that could hardly be more participating in the creative process (at least from the point of view of producing the piece of literature physically). Jackson explained that the viral or transformative aspect of the project was at the core of her idea (which allows her to keep the upper demiurgic hand over all the participants):

One of the pleasures of this project for me is seeing what people do with the material I give them; I’ve defined the project around the expectation that this is exactly what will happen. Of course that means that my “original intent” embraces revisions, so I’m safe! (Nunes)

This notion of “safety” seems closely related to the question of having full control or not over her creation: “I’m not interested in totally relinquishing control. I have just redefined the work to include the whole process of its evolution, including its eventual demise” (Nunes). It may explain why Jackson asked all her participants to relinquish their rights over all the correspondence and texts they gave with her: her intention, from the start, was to keep all the possibilities open to make the *SKIN* project evolve into yet another transmedial form. In 2003, she told *The Observer* that she planned

an art exhibition featuring “the faces of her volunteers arranged in the order of the story and in paragraphs, but not displaying their tattoos because that would reveal the story” (Walters, 2003); but it is only in 2011 that another forking of the original short story was put together by Jackson.

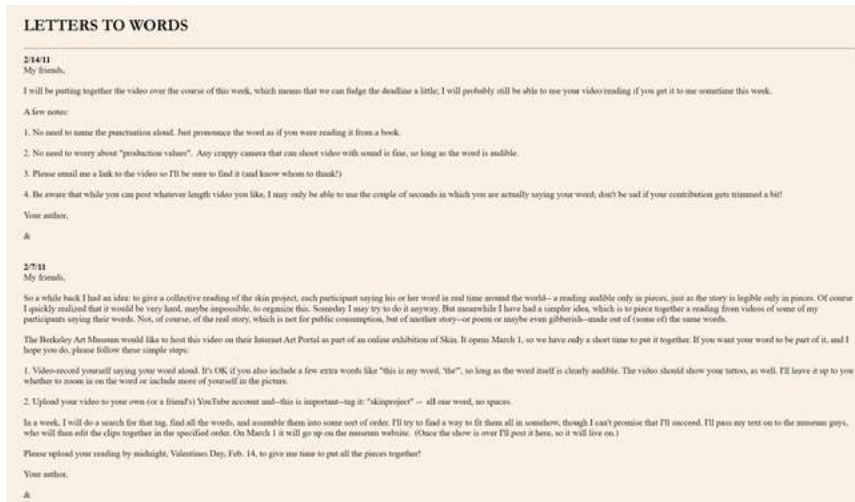
The Berkeley Art Museums claimed that most of the *SKIN* project happens off line, but now, with the new by-product the museum commissioned, the balance has shifted, as well as the source of authorship, since when one googles “Shelley Jackson Skin”, it is the 2011 video project that immediately crops up, from a myriad of websites in many languages. If the initial project died with its first word, the Internet allowed for the sub-story to sprout in all directions.



Access to the video through Jackson's website.

THE SKIN VIDEO (2011): AN ETERNITY OF ILLEGIBILITY

To make that video, Jackson edited the home-made videos posted on YouTube by over 200 “words” who filmed themselves *saying* their word and *showing* their tattoo, thus uniting literature, conceptual art, image and sound. To get to that point, Jackson launched a call to the participants from the *SKIN* project's website:



“Letters to words” page of the website

This derived project^[14], launched three weeks before the deadline, produces another text, which is of course different from the original (defunct) short story. In the initial project, Jackson had severed the text from its readership, but this new project restored some form of readability of the text (albeit difficult, and it being another text). And since each “word” posted his or her own video online, this sub-project reproduced the hypertextual structure of her previous works. Indeed YouTube, where the participants post their personal videos, becomes, in that light, yet another hypertextual network, but non-controlled by Jackson^[15]. From these online videos, Jackson arranged 191 words from the original story into a whole new story that is read aloud, collectively, by the “words” themselves. With that second project, Jackson follows in the steps of surrealists or OULIPO writers who chose specific constraints to write under: she had 191 words to work with, and came up with an 899-word story composed from that restricted textual material.

The final editing and assembling was on display on the Berkeley Art Museum art portal in the 2011 Spring, and is still available on YouTube and on the *SKIN* website. It lasts exactly 10 minutes, and, as one can imagine, it is very

14. Available from the Museum’s YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=viF-xuLrGvA>

15. “A decade or so ago, in the pre-Web era of the digital revolution, a new literary art form began to emerge, made possible by the computer’s ability to escape the book’s linear page-turning mechanism and *provide multiple links between screens of text in a nonlinear webwork of narrative or poetic elements*” (Coover, 1999, my emphasis).

difficult to make sense of the story just by watching the video^[16]. Hence what was advertised as a “new sub-Skin story” (Kellogg, 2011), or “an alternate expression of ‘Skin’”, “a new narrative” (Taylor-Hochberg, 2011), is quite a failure from the point of view of the actual story-telling performance. When watching the video, the spectator’s need for a syntactic unity, and for *one* voice uttering sentences, is quite blatant. Even though Jackson inserted black screens to mimic punctuation (short pauses for commas, longer pauses for periods), the lack of voice unity, added to the differences in accents and in quality of the audio tracks, create obstacles in understanding. In order to grasp the meaning of the narrative, one has to painstakingly write down the story under the strange dictation of utterances without intonation, or to mute the sound and try to read the text word by word, as it appears on the sometimes illegible tattoos:

SKIN [Shelley Jackson’s tattoo, shown in front of books and windows]

After the fall, we came to in another place. We don’t remember who we are but we are certain that we are not dead. This landscape of rippling skin with glass houses inhabited with settlers like us. This is just like life. They say the dead go into exile wrapped in scenes of a former life. The skin about them is memorious but they’re not.

They are in print, but we are not like them. We are certain of it. No, our skin is inhabited. We are swelling with our story, even if we don’t remember it. We go into one of the glass houses. There we face one another. Who are we anyway. On one of my ankles is a breath. In your cuticles, dirt. The glass is rippling like water and I start, and know we came from water once. Remember, floating on water like a leaf, floating on life. Like leaves on water or rippling through it. Vivacious water is like us. It has a certain internal life, and a skin, so certain beetles can even go across it if they like, and not fall through. On it scenes of life are floating, like the one rippling across your eyes. I meant to stop there, but we have to go on. This is the law, to go. After the water we came to a different landscape, and fell into a different life. This world is hard. Like beetles we go in the dirt. This place has water but it’s just visiting, like we are just visiting. It’s not hard to leave. After the world of water and the world of dirt, we fell through a tube of the like into this place. Call it a world of skin.

You say what’s in a paper and I leaf through it. You have a glass of water. This we call life. I don’t remember you, but I know that I know you. Like sleeves or eyes we go together. The adults found us. They came across the landscape like the law, wrapped in fur, swelling with might. They touch us on the ankles with a certain device, and peel a piece of skin from us. They say we are misaligned. Vivacious they leave but we can see they know something about us. After they go I touch

16. The videos posted by participants indicate Jackson had to edit them significantly, for many of them did not say their word while they are showing their tattoo, so Jackson probably had to re-edit the soundtrack.

the bare place on you and leave a print, you touch my bare place, there, another breath just like the one I came with. After this I touch you like a leaf but longer floating on the world you are. And like a leaf I leave. For I don't know if this is life. Are we dead or not.

I go to the tube. The one we came here through. There underneath it I fall in the dirt. No, on the skin. Here it grows over the landscape. Just like it sleeves our bodies from eyes to ankles or just about. I don't like it. I see the adults visiting another of the settlers. They are certain of the law and of themselves. They have hard bodies like beetles and glass eyes. They have dead skin like cuticles, I want to peel them. No, I want to peel you. I want to peel the world and leave it bare swelling with internal life but I go in again and touch my breath to your breath. They are like letters in words we don't know yet. They call from another place or call another I from this one. See. Even if we are misaligned I stop you start I start you stop. We know. We are certain of this, like of a just law. We are one. We are of a piece. We world one another and in one another we are settlers. The adults came again. They don't like us. We have to go over it again. You know we fell through a tube. We remember water. We are settlers. After they leave we strip. No, I peel you. Underneath your skin I find a different skin. From that skin I peel a piece, and find another skin underneath. Is this who we are, just skin wrapped in skin, wrapped in skin. I peel I, and find another I, flayed but not bare. I molt, I molt, I, I, I. Like the many dead letters from a former life. I want to find something underneath. I don't know what. But my eyes fall on a piece of skin with your print on it. I remember something. You. What's this in your eyes. Water. Can you have it fall into my eyes. You can. This I is hard. I know it's hard on you, but see in water I dissolve, I say. If water has a law, it is to fall. And we have to fall like water, again and again. It is a just law, no one is spared and we are not spared but if we are dead, yet we are not through. You touch my place. No we are not through yet. This is my skin, this your skin. I piece them together, like letters into words, like words into a mnemonic device. Remember this is a piece. This another piece, floating scenes from life. If I place them just, like, this, or this, they touch your eyes one, after, another, and a different world grows, a different story. (fade in)

This first-person (sometimes first-person plural) narrative is a poetic, enigmatic, meditative, and quite metaphysical text, with elements that directly point at the *SKIN* project: “This landscape of rippling skin with glass houses inhabited with settlers like us” can evoke the video project itself, with all the tattoos seen from a computer screen (glass houses), each one in its own video. Similarly, the following lines echo the video situation:

[the dead] are in print, but we are not like them. We are certain of it. No, our skin is inhabited. We are swelling with our story, even if we don't remember it. We go into one of the glass houses. There we face one another. Who are we anyway.

The excipit is clearly metatextual:

This is my skin, this your skin. I piece them together, like letters into words, like words into a mnemonic device. Remember this is a piece. This another piece, floating scenes from life. If I place them just, like, this, or this, they touch your eyes one, after, another, and a different world grows, a different story.

The self-reflexive quality of the text is probably what strikes the viewer first, as the word “skin” keeps on recurring through the hard-to-understand narrative. The key motifs of life and death once again mark the spectator/reader, as the text points to Genesis-types of narratives: we find references to the Fall, to the cycle of life (fetal life in amniotic liquid, being born, living, dying), to the cycle of insect molting^[17]. These images and references also have a self-reflexive quality, but they acquire a deeper meaning as some sense of threat emerges:

The adults found us. They came across the landscape like the law, wrapped in fur, swelling with might. They touch us on the ankles with a certain device, and peel a piece of skin from us. They say we are misaligned.

See. Even if we are misaligned I stop you start I start you stop. We know. We are certain of this, like of a just law. We are one. We are of a piece. We world one another and in one another we are settlers. The adults came again. They don't like us.

The meaning of the “misaligned” metaphor is very elusive. It certainly alludes to the problems of misaligned characters in printing, and one wonders if these “adults” could not be interpreted as being critics, who find the narrative “misaligned”.

If one also studies the short videos uploaded on YouTube by the “words” themselves, new auras of meaning arise, and new textual possibilities are opened. These videos are interesting transmedial objects, hybrids made of text, moving or still images, and performance art. They renew the potential of words, and seem to somehow counter the fears that Robert Coover had expressed:

And even the word, the very stuff of literature, and indeed of all human thought, is under assault, giving ground daily to image-surfing, hypermedia, the linked icon. Indeed, the word itself is increasingly reduced to icon or caption. Some speak hopefully of the binding of word and image, many, perhaps also hopefully, of the displacement of word by image. There is a genuine fear — or hope — that our old language of the intellect, systematic discourse, and poetic metaphor may very soon be as foreign and esoteric as ancient Sumerian cuneiform tablets. (Coover, 1999)

17. The molting process, the fact of gaining a new identity with each new skin, is cleverly duplicated in the video (from 7:32 to 7:47), with the juxtaposed “I”s being given by different voices/tattoos: “I peel I, and find another I, flayed but not bare. I molt, I molt, I, I, I.”

One can understand Coover’s fears of having words become purely iconic and monosemic in the contemporary, internet-based system of representation: for example some participants chose to stage one meaning of their word in their video, thus countering Jackson’s attempt at not linking signifier and signified in her project (“wrapped”, “sleeves” or “water”^[18]). However, a lot of participants actually played with polysemy, or with the potential of video-making, opening further the potentialities of the original text by uploading videos that are longer than what Jackson needed for her piece. A significant number of participants say their name, sometimes where they are from, and give their word. Some show the inside of their homes, their children, their garden; they play music in the background. In a way they re-semiotize the word by placing it in a context that has nothing to do with a book-form, and remind the spectator of the *life* beyond the word, the pulsating veins beneath the tattooed word. Many participants stage the revelation of their word, by pulling their hair up (“dead”), or removing clothes (“you”), sometimes fairly sensually (“memorious”). Some play on intonation (“No.”, or “anyway”, one of the most creative videos). These examples show the potential for polysemy contained in intonation, but visual repetition is also to be found in the many mirrors and reflections that are shown on these videos (“want”, or “settlers”). Some participants play with the self-reflexive potential of the project, by placing themselves in front of bookshelves, like Jackson herself in the title image.

These videos illustrate how some participants completely identify/merge with their tattooed words. In that regard, the *SKIN* project is a *tour de force*, for it brings the idea of transmediality to a further level, in which it is not only a transfer from one medium to another, but from one ontological status to another. Many participants, instead of saying “my word is ...”, say “I am ...”^[19]. These some 200 videos illustrate the first stage in the potential for stories that the *SKIN* project entailed, as Jackson explained:

‘Skin’ is ceaselessly remixing itself as its words wander around the world, and in a sense my original story is only one of countless stories that it tells. (...) The video I’ve put together is one way of gesturing toward that, but it would also be interesting to open up a space for other people to assemble their own stories out of the same material. (Kellogg, 2011)

The *LA Times*, which interviewed Jackson about the “2.0” version of her story, even started the thread, for they posted videos on their own webpage which, once assembled, form the sentence: “Remember? The vivacious words are on skin not dead paper” (Kellogg, 2011). The future will tell us whether other

18. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2BI7Qehy_g

19. For example: “I am the” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WxPH0Ugk0Sc> (Accessed on January, 23 2020)

people join in the project and explore some of the infinite possibilities of assembling Shelley Jackson’s video tattooed words into other texts.

CONCLUSION

Even though today it would be impossible to gather all the words of the ‘Skin’ story in one place, it is actually not very significant, for “it is a work about process, after all” (Ulin, 2005). In her project, Jackson said she was “just interested in exploring the range of what a text can do”, claiming her fascination for “alternative publications”, because not that many authors have attempted alternative ways of publishing, and “publishers are not interested in conceptual art” (Franklin, 2004). And indeed it is a museum, the Berkeley Museum of Art, which commissioned her to put together the ‘Skin’ video.

Publishers are not interested in conceptual art mostly because they target a *reading* public, and works such as the *SKIN* project flaunt the very possibility of reading. In fact, the “interrupt[ion of] the continuity of text as both matter and sense” that Arnaud Regnauld (2009, 81) analyzed in *Patchwork Girl* through the function of the hypertextual link, reaches yet another level with the *SKIN* project, as the fragmented matter of the text cannot be gathered physically nor virtually, and therefore its sense cannot be accessed. However, with the “Skin” story and its words tattooed onto the skins of its only readers, Jackson provokes the ultimate physical contact between author and reader, without the mediation of an interface, such as the print technology. And by *staging* the unreadability of both the original “Skin” short story and its video sub-story, she displays her experiment in dermatography as a reminder of the material aspects of printing and circulating texts, and somehow replaces her *lector in fabula* by *lectores in carne* while trampling upon the immortality of art.

With her text both elusive and very physical, her project doomed to death and endlessly forking in all the directions the Internet permits, Shelley Jackson foregrounds the hybrid nature of tattoo art, which is both writing and drawing, both meant to be read and to be seen, both meant to be shown and generate stories, and hidden and shrouded in silence.

The *SKIN* project finally offers another form of reversal, when compared with literary texts in which tattoos play a key thematic role^[20], or when replaced within the literary tradition of semiotized bodies^[21] recalling how writing and

20. For instance, Tanizaki Jun’ichiro’s “The Tattooer” (1910) or Stieg Larsson’s *Girl with a Dragon Tattoo* (2005).

21. The paradigmatic literary text would be Hawthorne’s 1843 short story entitled “The Birth-Mark”.

reading are a fundamentally corporeal experience; indeed *SKIN* transfers the thematic, metatextual or symbolic aspects of the tattoo onto the writing act itself, and offers a defamiliarizing literalization of the *topos* of the body as text.

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La Peaologie
n°4 • Mai 2020

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ILLUSTRATION DE COUVERTURE

Niko Inko. *L'Encrophage*, (2014),
Rimbaud.

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