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Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, and the Performance of *A Girl's Life*

Abstract I: Nato dalla collaborazione fra la poetessa visiva Johanna Drucker e la pittrice Susan Bee, *A Girl's Life* (2002) impiega materiali eterogenei della cultura popolare (riviste per adolescenti, libri di lettura "Dick and Jane", copertine pulp), adesivi, sagome di carta, figurazione originale, variazione grafica e tipografica, per sfatare i cliché sulla vita di una giovane donna. Contravvenendo alle convenzioni letterarie e a relazioni verbo-visive tradizionali, questo libro d'artista coinvolge i lettori in una performance eccentrica che si fa beffe dei copioni narrativi, testuali e di genere, esplorando forme di visualizzazione in grado di favorire nuove percezioni, visioni e cambiamenti dentro e fuori dalla pagina.

Abstract II: Born from the collaboration between visual poet Johanna Drucker and painter Susan Bee, *A Girl's Life* (2002) employs heterogeneous materials – images from popular culture (teen magazines, old Dick and Jane books, and covers of pulp novels), stickers, paper dolls, original artwork, layout and typographic variation – to expose and explode clichés about a young woman's life. Eschewing literary and book conventions as well as traditional word-image relationships, this artist's book involves readers in an eccentric performance that flouts gender, narrative, and textual scripts, exploring novel forms of visuality that might foster new perception, vision, and change on and off the page.

Keywords: Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, collaboration, word-image relationships, artist's book, textual performance, girl culture and discourse.

As a site for the encounter and interaction of different voices, languages, and perspectives, texts originating from artistic collaboration can develop and unleash a radical potential in the aesthetic as well as in the social and political domains. Contrary to the traditional idea of the author as the inspired, solitary genius, the multi-authored work draws an open and dynamic textual space where identity, especially in the case of 'minor' subjects such as women, may no longer be fixed, but is in the making. A performing space with writing as "action and function of communication" (Vickery 2000: 249); a space where, in the confrontation that takes place with the other, predefined categories are destabilised. 'Collaborator', after all, bears an ambivalent value in the English language since it defines a person working both for and against cultural hegemony.

Such a conspiracy is especially threatening in the case of interart collaborations, which have created hybrid forms based on reciprocity and equality (within difference) that upset the social dynamics of representation, founded instead on relationships of power/knowledge/desire: representation as "something done to something, with something, by someone, for someone" (Mitchell 1994: 180). Furthermore, intermedial texts are intrinsically performative[1] – and hence reveal an inherent transforming power[2] – since they are about the 'staging' (the conscious self-presentation) of media and elicit change: as boundaries are transgressed, media are redefined under mutual influence and a new "resensibilised perception" is fostered (Kattenbelt 2010: 29, 35).

A Girl's Life (2002) is the first book in a series of fruitful collaborations between US poet Johanna Drucker and visual artist Susan Bee. The series, which also includes *Fabulas Feminae* (2015) and *Off-World Fairy Tales* (2020), sets feminist imagination at work while revising female images of representation and the tradition of the illustrated book. In particular, this first text explores portrayals of teenage girls and life. If female adolescence, which implies a liminal and dynamic state (an identity in progress), is fixed by the stereotypical images of cultural and media artifacts, the collaborationist quality of Drucker and Bee's joint work explodes gender clichés as well as textual conventions to develop new sights and visions.

The volume has a highly hybrid character not only for its interplay of verbal and pictorial elements, but also for the heterogeneity of its visual materials. Susan Bee collages on the page images of different types and styles selected from products of popular culture that offer hackneyed and biased representations of the female: photos of young girls from teen magazines, child images from the old Dick and Jane readers, and the sensual and/or dangerous women displayed on the covers of pulp novels. This apparatus of ready-made images also includes paper dolls, stickers, original artwork, and typographic variations (font colour and layout), which, added to Drucker's fragmented narrative, results in an eccentric, multi-layered, and multi-coloured textual performance that resists hegemonic discourse structures and counteracts prescribed models of gender performativity.

As an artist's book, *A Girl's Life* develops new word-image connections that reject traditional combinations based on hierarchical and asymmetrical relations. Unlike conventional illustrated books, it is no longer possible to make sharp distinctions between images and text; nor do the images maintain the secondary or ancillary function of showing the contents of a primary, pre-existing text. Words and pictures, verbal and visual elements, rather contribute – on the same level, each in its own way and according to the possibilities of

[1] Whereas 'performing' relates to ritual and the performing arts (i.e. to performance in the literal sense *is performance*), 'performative' implies reference to performance in the metaphorical sense (*as performance*) to include the enactment of social roles as well as literary texts and digital programs based on process, action, and interaction; texts that are no longer objects, "not in themselves, but as players in ongoing relationships" (Schechner 2013: 2).

[2] For Schechner, the performance shares the function of rites, which produce change (the shift from an initial situation to a new one) and embody a liminal condition, "a fluid mid-point between two fixed structures" (Schechner 2003: 114). His notion of "restored behavior" or "twice-behaved behavior" implies reforming possibilities. Performance is not just doing but re-doing; reiteration, which involves adaptations to novel contingencies, ends in transformation: of means, of effects, or both (Schechner 2013: 29).

its medium – to the construction (or deconstruction) of meaning. Unlike book illustrations, where artist and writer work separately, one (the artist) after the other (the writer), and their work is eventually combined on the page by one more professional figure who is external to the creative process (the editor), artists' books develop from collaboration, from an ongoing dialogue and feedback between painter and writer, who share communicative intention and action. Accordingly, the final text turns from a merely multimedia work, where media borders remain intact, to a more complex intermedial process where it is not possible to remove the words from the images or the images from the words without seriously compromising the whole product, its meaning, and reception[3].

The book narrates – or rather performs – the story of teenage Becki's 'downfall' as seen through the eyes of Dawn, her best friend. Any perspective of a perfect life that is suggested at the beginning ("A girl's life? What could be better!"[4]) is in fact frustrated by the ambiguous relationships entertained with two male characters, Ivan and Malvin, who disrupt the delight of female-adolescent "daily dreams". Drucker took her primary inspiration from the "pink magazines", i.e. those magazines for female teenagers that construct girl culture and discourse, basing her narrative "on Ivanhoe (!)"[5], as she informs, "since that was very much in mind at the time"[6]: an initially long narrative that would be reduced into a shorter and shorter text with the help of Bee. The story, therefore, develops around the presumed desires

[3] On the artist's book, see Drucker (2004), especially 1-19, and Cristofovici (2015). The term 'intermediality' was introduced by Dick Higgins (1966) to identify collaborative works of the 1960s in which the materials of different art forms were conceptually fused. The shift from multimedia to intermedia is in fact the shift from a mere contiguity of different media to a "'genuine' integration […] which in its most pure form would privilege none of its constituent elements". This condition develops a radical potential since it fosters "dynamic, evolutionary process […] and a newly constituting" (Rajewski 2005: 52). Accordingly, the new field of Intermedia Studies, which further develops and/or updates traditional Interart Studies, shifts attention on the materiality of media and its influence on perception; tending to the deconstruction of differences, it dismisses hierarchical relationships that, in the literary context, privilege authorship and the verbal text, and takes into account the specific contributions of the other media (Clüver 2007).

[4] Drucker & Bee (2002). The volume has no page numbers.

[5] There are indeed slight connections between *A Girl's Life* and Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819): character names Ivan and Becki might allude to Ivanhoe and Rebecca, while Dawn and Malvin might have been freely developed from Rowena and knight Templar Brian de Bois-Guilbert; if language imitates teen talk and the reproduced images belong to the 20th century, the past literary background is scantily suggested by the sentence, "foolish as medieval lovers imagined by romantic writers".

[6] http://www.artistsbooksonline.org/works/grls.xml (consulted on 2/08/2024). Actually, Drucker might be referring to the "Ivanhoe Game", so called because first played by herself and Jerome McGann with Scott's romance, in a form that was originally paper based (and later turned into a digital project). The Game explores a new (imaginative) approach to critical interpretation that is performance based and collaborative, within the discourse field of historical events or literary works. As McGann explains, "a game strategy is deployed within a field of interrelated textual, visual, cultural, and critical artifacts. The game 'moves' involve the production (the writing) of texts that integrate with and simulate the materials in the discourse field of the game. Players produce texts in response to the opportunities and problems raised by the texts produced by the other players. […] The action does not take place outside but inside the object of attention […] not so much a perceived 'meaning' as a line of the (interactive) system's own developmental possibilities [...] to create a condition for further dynamic change within the system. Understanding the system is operating with and in the system" (2001: 218-219). Likewise, *A Girl's Life* seems to be "generating different lines that are latent but undeveloped by the system" (McGann 2001: 209).

and expectations of young women as set by the pervasive representations of popular culture, which shapes identities, roles, and codes of behaviour ranging from social relationships to language and dress codes, from beauty canons to commodities. To expose the fictive character of such a discourse, the writer offers a self-reflective tale that conveniently emphasises the artificiality of both her own work and of the discourse in which she participates. She therefore shares her ideas about plot development (she might be reporting her conversation with Bee when writing, "Why not add a tragic twist to the tale and let the audience do the rest?") and explicitly mentions forms of representation: "simulacral flame", tabloids ("Inevitable as a tabloid headline", "Both were struck still in the headlines, mutually shocked", "foolish as medieval lovers imagined by romantic writers, and splashed onto the pages of the tabloid press"), shooting studios ("Romance smoked through the stale air of the hot studio", "the set from the sit-com next door", "Violence broke with unexpected force, wrecking the set", "the screen of her vision").

Drucker's narrative and verbal configuration reproduces the excitement and exaggeration – of content as well as of tone and colour – of glossy magazines (and tabloid press). She offers a melodramatic story where the 'innocent' or 'decent' world of romance, fashion, and beauty is combined with the wicked world of seduction and crime, which is altogether spectacularised and promoted as an equally fashionable and attractive lifestyle. At the same time, as the writer develops her plot around the theme of female adolescent crushes and consequential concern for looking pretty, she suggests a direct link between modern "pink magazines" and the tradition of the sentimental novel, which played the same role of influencing and guiding young women's social conduct, especially when relating to men. Virginity is still paramount and promoted as commodity: lines from the text refer to "the *marketable* virtue of repressed behavior" (emphasis added) and insist on 'decorum' ("Decorum had its way with her"; "Becki liked to live right at the edge of decorum in every act"). Yet, Drucker also exposes the obsolescence and, at the same time, construction of female gender scripts with the sentence, "In the real world it's difficult to be a nineteen-year-old virgin these days", which foregrounds the gap between discourse and fact, and clearly suggests the provisional character of what is culture-bound ("these days"). Indeed, she perceives the contradictory signs that girls receive from contemporary culture, which naturalises an emancipated routine of dating and ritual of self-care for public display and appreciation; which capitalises virginity in its double – and antithetical possibilities – of being both preserved and lost.

Teen magazines in particular have a special share in the construction of ambivalent messages that help sustain the economic goals of goods advertising (a major income in the magazine industry) in a capitalist, consumeristic society[7]. Since they pursue the double purpose of selling both copies and the sponsored products, advertising shapes the cultural content as much as editorial material, pointing to the "key role of women as the primary

[7] On the one hand, magazines invite girls to consume goods that will make them sexually attractive; on the other hand, editorial contents warn them against sex (as well as against other transgressive behaviours such as drinking and smoking). Like family, schools, and churches, they "teach girls to engage in moral and socially acceptable behavior but unlike these other institutions, engage openly in an ideological double standard" (McCracken 1993: 141).

purchasers of goods and services" (McCracken 1993: 4). Messages that promote the embodiment of ideal femininity, instilling desire among young female readers, are equally promotional of those goods that help them achieve such an ideal and bridge the gap between desired status and actual condition. The social prestige that will derive from being beautiful, fashionable, and self-confident, is therefore built on inadequacy for the induced feeling of being exactly the opposite: non-beautiful, non-fashionable, and insecure.

This portrait of ideal femininity, however, derives from male expectations (about beautiful girls, dutiful wives, and future caring mothers); even when some license is granted to transgressive behaviour or taboo subjects (usually concerning sexuality), traditional dominant values are never questioned since any potentially subversive element is safely contained within the master narrative of heterosexual romance. If young girls are educated into falling in love (so that they might marry and have children) and initiated into crushes and the social ritual of dating, the relevance given to physical beauty and the necessary goods to achieve and/or improve it (from clothes to cosmetics) are instrumental to the purpose. The social and economic logics intertwine to reinforce each other: the boy is not only an ultimate end of supposedly female desire but "a catalyst for more buying" (Massoni 2006: 40).

In *A Girl's Life*, the relevance given to Becki's crush and date ("the big day", "special moment") is matched by the value of physical beauty ("her strict blonde perfection") and recurrent reference to beauty products that are usually promoted in female teen magazines, whereby Drucker and Bee suggest (and criticize) the bond between patriarchal and capitalist-consumeristic culture. The writer, for instance, includes phrases and sentences such as, "glam soaps", "fruit-flowered products of her skin", "blueberry glitter polish on her nails", "raspberry lip gloss", "the make-up of her cheeks glinted bronze", "hair ornaments". Bee, for her part, has a lipstick and a mirror hang on the extremities of a potted plant (Figure 1)[8]; elsewhere, she reduces a girl's face to her glossy lips (the fragment collaged on the page), whereas the extremely red lips of the half-naked woman from the cover of a pulp novel emphasise the reification of the female body (Figure 2) that women's magazines also accomplish. Here, in fact, in order to support the sale of cosmetics and attract advertisers, editorial contents foster young readers "to dissect themselves conceptually into fragments that various products are promised to improve"; in particular, clothes and accessories, "draw attention (i.e. visual consumption) to certain parts of their bodies and away from others" (McCracken 1993: 138-139). The 'lesson' for girls is that they need to decorate themselves, no matter how intelligent they might be, if they are to win male approval and love (McCracken 1993: 139).

If the consuming girl is herself turned into a product of consumption, an object of male desire, the swerve from the main script (the promise and achievement of romance) foregrounds the gap between imagination and fact. In Drucker's narrative, Becki's

[8] Figures 1-8 are reproduced from Johanna Drucker and Susan Bee, *A Girl's Life* © 2002 by Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, and Granary Books, Inc. I wish to express my gratitude to Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, Mary Catherine Kinniburgh and Steve Clay at Granary Books, Inc., for permission to reprint pages and quote lines from the book.

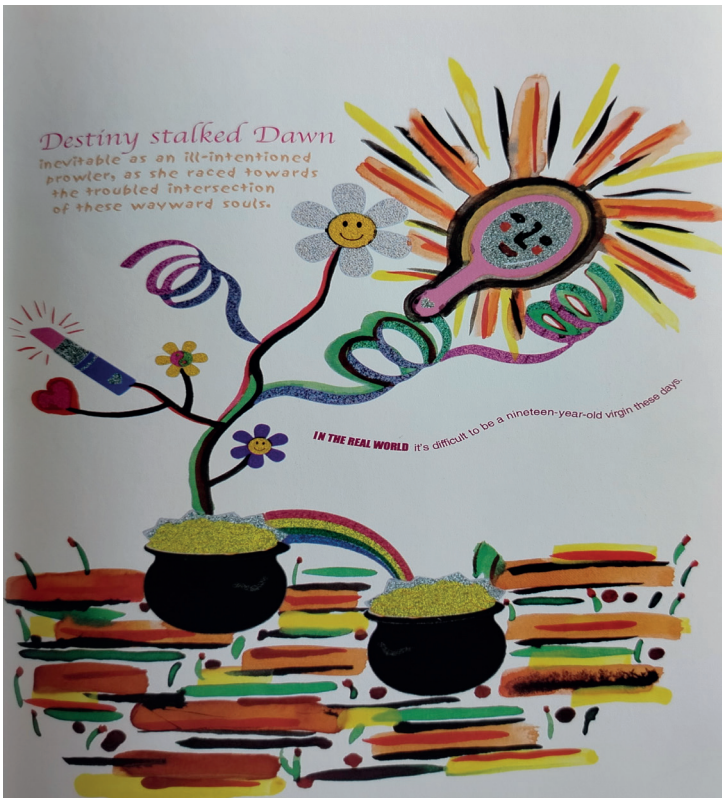

Fig. 1. From *A Girl's Life*. Courtesy of Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, and Granary Books, Inc.

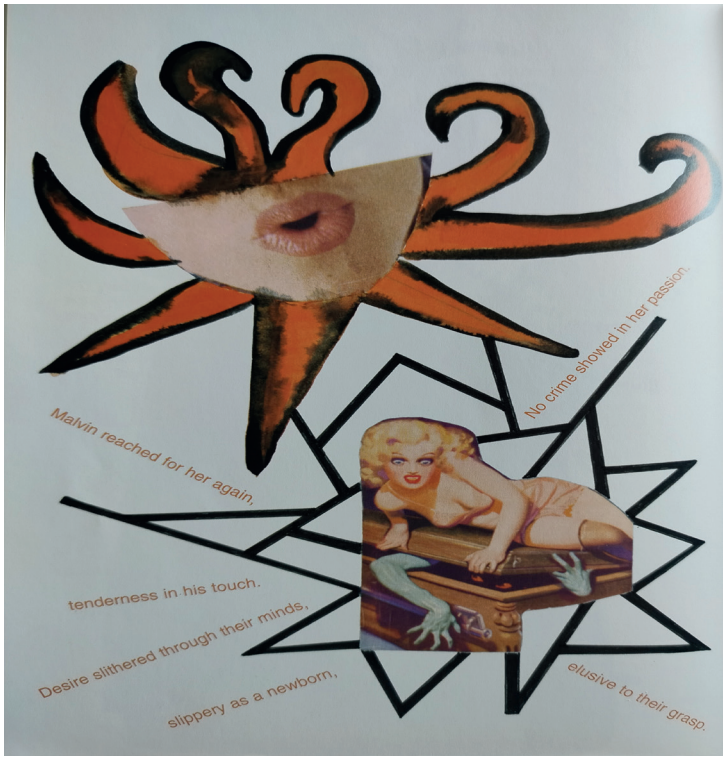

Figure 2. From *A Girl's Life*. Courtesy of Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, and Granary Books, Inc.

expectations of love and romance are haunted from the beginning. Far from being a perfect match, Ivan as a character takes on the connotations of a villain. He is introduced as a "low-life creep with a touch of evil" and is later associated, in Becki's mind, with a psychopathic murderer ("the guy of her dream might be a serial killer"). Love gives way to lust ("he rolled her over and over again"; "Her sky-blue orbs were flush with the purple light of lust") and violence ("violence broke with unexpected force, wrecking the set") when the "special moment" arrives. The tale develops into the "tragic twist" announced a few pages earlier ("Why not add a tragic twist to the tale and let the audience do the rest?"), once Becki herself turns from passive victim to perpetrator of violence: "Becki suddenly turned pale and larval. Her outfit ached against his thighs"; yet, "Transformed from a flower into a stalk of light, Becki killed the man so fast she never even noticed, till he fell, that she had majorly transformed the situation". Violent confrontation is then also repeated in her relationship with "malevolent" Malvin, who is "erotically charged by his Becki obsession". Whereas his phantasy involves bloody images ("He wanted to run his teeth along her till she bled. Open a flesh wound as the threshold to her soul"), his expression "hints at depravity", and "he struggles to keep from ripping that soft flesh out of bonds", Becki is caught "*wrestling* with blueberry glitter polish on her nails […] *Blood* caked around her cuticles" (emphasis added).

Drucker's deconstruction of girl culture and discourse is amplified by Bee's contribution. If the images of girls from teen magazines establish a (relatively) direct link with the verbal contents, representations of children from old Dick and Jane books (issued from 1930 to 1965) and of women from pulp novel covers of the 1940s add quite different and apparently disconnected material that requires readers' collaboration and complicity to bridge the gaps. The addition of further samples from popular culture turns the book into a larger reflection on the systematic way in which cultural products across time and genres work to set stereotypical images of femininity, for any age of life (from childhood to adolescence and maturity), that articulate a dominant, male-centred vision. The stories and pictures of the Dick and Jane primer not only aimed at teaching children the standard use of language, but also intended to teach about proper social behaviour based upon clear-cut gender roles through grammar. The repetition of themes, vocabulary, settings, and patterns of actions-interactions, which associated males with action and females with passive observation, and other semiotic clues such as clothing and colours, offered a kind of initiation into social conventions and expectations. The linear, simple, and redundant character of each story, set in anonymous place and suspended time to foster identification with representative (mythical) characters that never change (Luke 1988: 98), secured the univocal reception of the ideological content. Both verbal and visual codes converged into the construction of a closed text: the repetition, in each story, of previously encountered elements aroused the pleasure of recognition; the stories were merely consumed (therefore passively accepted as the natural state of affairs) instead of being truly understood, interpreted and criticised (Luke 1988: 116).

Female teen magazines continue, in a way, the same work of the old language primer since they also intend to imprint behavioural patterns of socialization for adolescent girls. Significantly, any transgressive attitude is contained within the controlling frame of consumeristic culture, which reinforces dominant moral values and secures young ladies' compliance while confirming them in their role of consumers (McCracken 1993: 136). If the primer insists on images of female innocence and the magazines combine childish innocence with a penchant for transgression, however restrained within dominant discourse about a girl's life, the third kind of recycled images point to the mischievous development of former dutiful daughters, who have grown dark and rebellious, and abandoned domesticity. Yet, on the covers of pulp novels, the explicitly sexualised portrait of women and association with violence, which they either suffer or provoke, is itself a sign of female reification and male prurience. Sex and crime are emphasised and overexposed to seduce male readers; depicted into the exclusive roles of victims or *femmes fatales*, women are spectacularized to attract an audience of men and sell copies.

The three types of images are drawn from multimedia works (the illustrated book, the magazine, the book cover) that combine verbal and visual elements (even if the image is confined to the paratextual dimension of the cover, in the last case) and offer traditional word-image relationships based on coherence and content equivalence. In their original contexts, the pictures provide an ancillary function: they show – and hence reinforce – the verbal message (the illustrated book); they achieve a referential or promotional function (the magazine), or, fully eroticised into the female other, they work like baits to attract a potential

male audience (the pulp novel cover). In *A Girl's Life*, juxtaposed to verbal and visual elements that are foreign to their original discursive contexts, they challenge recognition and defy expectations; they call for readers' interpretation and interrogation of that residue of meaning they still convey by pointing to their former semiotic systems. Defying verbal and visual coherence, which is traditionally served by the illustrative and referential functions of pictures, their inclusion fosters incongruence. Consequently, they are resisted instead of being consumed; they no longer help construct a simple, linear, redundant and repetitious narrative that is immediately digested, but a complex, non-linear, heterogeneous discourse pattern that subverts the ideologically charged narratives they evoke[9]. The process is set by the relationships established on the page: what does the contiguity of these different elements imply? Why do juxtapositions matter? What do they achieve and/or mean?[10] Let us examine a few cases.

On one of the first pages, for instance (Figure 3), Bee invites readers to infer connections by literally joining the image of a girl child from the Dick and Jane primer series and the picture of the typical woman – blond, sexy, half-undressed – represented on the covers of pulp novels. The girl child holds in her hand a small bunch of flowers that is reproduced as a decorative element on her hat and, more covertly, in the shadow it projects, which takes the form of a speech or thought bubble and encloses the picture of the woman. This material connection is then strengthened by similarities between the two female figures. Blond hair suggests that they could be the same person in different ages of her life, admitting the possibility (desire?) for little Janes of growing up as rebels and rejecting domesticity, only to fall prey, however, to the likewise stereotypical role of the *femme fatale* of men's own desire. The little girl, after all, is beautifully clothed, 'decorous' as well as 'decorated' by the flowers on her hat, red lipstick on her lips, and blush on her cheeks. In other words, she is already imagined and imaged as a little woman who resorts to make-up, clothes, and accessories to beautify herself and please men. The dark background of the adult female image (which connotes transgressive conduct) is directly opposite to the bright colours (innocent curiosity) of the child image. Both figures are framed by round lines (the spherical line of the bubble and the semi-spherical

[9] Here the elitist form of the artist's book finds a popular equivalent in the comics. Theoretical discourse about this other hybrid genre, in fact, has 'naturalised' the same non-linear discourse and reading processes, heightened self/medium-consciousness, collaborative authorship, critical distance and active engagement of readers, who confront various – and at times unpredictable – patterns due to the combination of different codes on the same page. Since interpretation requires the processing of words, of images, and of their mutual relationships, readers of comics (also) move back-and-forth for meanings that are never fixed and closed but always negotiable and open. See Sealey-Morris (2015).

[10] In integrated systems of words and images of this kind, where different semiotic elements do not necessarily reflect each other, Mitchell suggests in fact that readers go beyond a pure comparative approach, which exalts either analogy or difference, to interrogate the forms and effects of these connections. Focusing on materiality and literalness, they should start from "the actual conjunctions of words and images" (1994: 90) to assess relationships characterised by "incommensurability" and/or "non-negotiable forms of alterities" (1994: 87). Furthermore, if we accept that "*all media are mixed media*", whereby every medium "already entails some mixture of sensory, perceptual, and semiotic elements", attention should fall on the specific contributions and ensuing relationships of and among elements participating in a different way and to a different extent (Mitchell 2005: 260; italics in the source).

Figure 3. From *A Girl's Life*. Courtesy of Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, and Granary Books, Inc.

line of the girl's hat), which are in their turn replicated by the verbal text (surrounding the picture, it follows the same curves instead of flowing straight from left to right).

The images picked from teen magazines, on the other hand, show mainly happy and trendy teenage girls, young couples, smiling and spotless faces (of both sexes). Yet, Bee's attitude is in this case less reverential: to counteract the ideological force of images that construct girlhood within the frame of patriarchal discourse and consumeristic culture, she 'vandalises' some of them. Besides immersing them in a larger, chaotic picture, she adds blots of pink-red colour on girls' cheeks (in the way of make-up brush); she splashes colour on people's bodies; she paints black or grey masks on people's faces and spoils their smiles by colouring (and effacing) their teeth (Figures 4-5). Outrageously funny, her acts carry serious connotations. On the one hand, these manipulations show the vulnerability of images – primarily female – that are over-exposed. On the other hand, these 'assaults' on icons of girlhood, which, produced and released in the context of popular culture, are extremely pervasive, evoke the iconoclastic gestures of British suffragettes in the early 20th century, who disfigured works of art preserved in (hence officially legitimised by) the cultural institution of the museum. Their raids had not only intended to destroy representations of female beauty and/or patriarchal ideals but also to promote new sights and insights[11]. Disguised as innocent play, Bee's 'vandalism' – in tune with the "tragic twist" of Drucker's narrative – is therefore meant to resist and subvert the influence of apparently innocuous images, which are instead representative of biased notions of female adolescence.

[11] The series of attacks started on March 10, 1914, when Mary Richardson slashed Velázquez's *Venus at her Mirror* at the National Gallery, and concluded on July 17 of the same year, with Margaret Gibb's disfigurement of Thomas Carlyle's portrait by John Everett Millais. For an accurate examination of the events and the complex relationships among art, politics, and social justice, see Arcara (2022).

Figure 4. From *A Girl's Life*. Courtesy of Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, and Granary Books, Inc.

Figure 5. From *A Girl's Life*. Courtesy of Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, and Granary Books, Inc.

Bee's own pictures, finally, exhibit an inherent transformative character that contradicts the fixed images of representations and turn the page into a dynamic field of vision and action. Most images belong to the vegetal world (trees and flowers), which is characterised by growth and development. Here you can see them branching out on the page, usually starting from, or surrounding, a different item. Natural generative images of this kind are matched by the transforming and equally generative power of other pictorial elements. Arrow lines, for instance, develop 'organically' into different forms, changing into leaves and flowers, or into snakes, with a consequent conversion of their trajectory from a straight one into a sinuous one (Figure 6). Other figures include cherries, birds, female shoes, eyes, and insects (bees, butterflies, crickets, ants), which lay over or are contiguous with those from teen magazines. Regenerative transformation and contact eventually secure continuity and fluidity among images of diverse kind, origin, and production.

Absence of clearly defined borders also concerns the relationship between pictures and words. Unlike traditional illustrated texts, there is no boundary between image and text, no separate plane of representation, with the image on a different page or clearly detached from the text by framing borders and/or portions of the empty space above and below[12].

[12] Writing about Magritte, Foucault identifies this "slender, colourless, neutral strip" dividing the text from

Figure 6. From *A Girl's Life*. Courtesy of Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, and Granary Books, Inc.

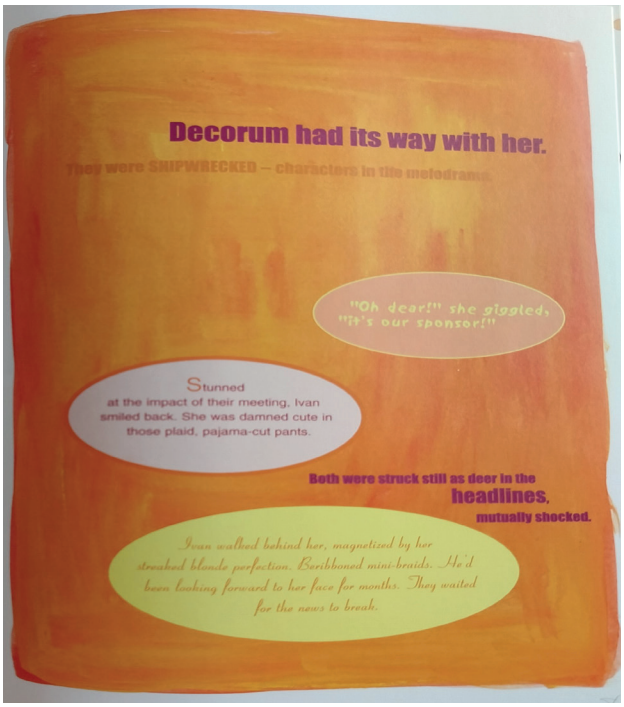

Figure 7. From *A Girl's Life*. Courtesy of Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, and Granary Books, Inc.

Any difference is instead reduced by the emphasis on the visual and material aspect of writing (embodied language), with words acquiring a peculiarly pictorial quality for the use of different colours, font (and therefore shape), and page configuration. Splitting a longer narrative into pieces, Drucker finds the unit of her measure into disjointed sentences that gain the concentration of poetry and/or of the image. When sentences are framed – usually by regular oval or rectangular outlines – they turn into a sort of pictures hanging on a "page wall" or figures on a canvas (Figure 7). Otherwise, they often interact with the other visuals, following the direction of the depicted elements (with circular or zig-zag movements) instead of progressing conventionally (the linear movement from left to right, up-down) (Figure 8).

In work of this kind, narrative content is secondary to and depends on what the writer and artist *do* on the page and to what effects. Engaging in the replication of female narratives and images that claim to show (but indeed prescribe) what a girl's life is, they create a new system where variation (the "tragic twist") and variety (images from different

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the image as a "common frontier" where relationships of designation, nomination, description, and classification are established. Such a space is "an absence of space, an effacement of the 'common place' between the signs of writing and the lines of the image" (1982: 28-29) where "attacks [are] launched by one against the other" (1982: 26). *A Girl's Life*, on the other hand, turns the whole page into that "common place" between words and images: harmony and peace are restored; conflict is replaced by peaceful dialogue that favours integration and mutual empowerment.

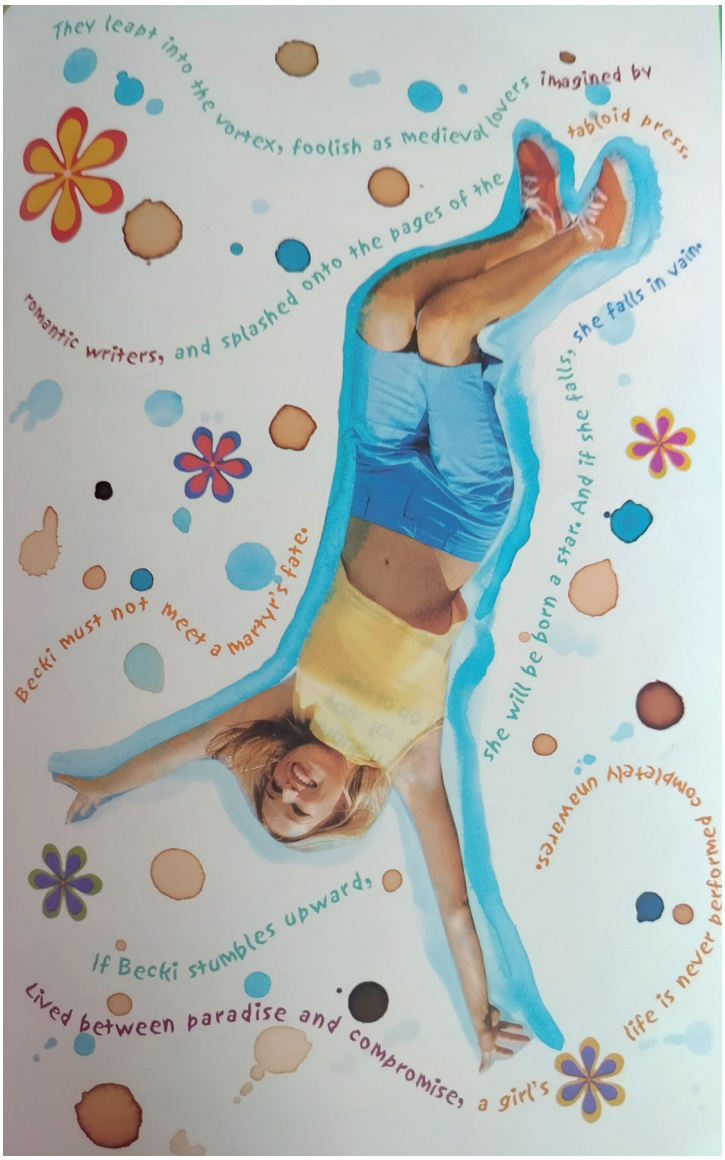

Figure 8. From *A Girl's Life*. Courtesy of Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, and Granary Books, Inc.

material and discursive contexts) disrupt those images and narratives. Against gender performativity, which confirms biased notions of identity through the reiteration (and naturalisation) of conventional codes of behaviour (Butler 1990), they oppose performance as conscious and shared acts of resistance and transgression to produce change. On the page, this is to be seen in the various alterations that narrative patterns and images undergo: from replication in a different context (with defamiliarising effects) to more active engagement in transformation (Drucker's "tragic twist"; Bee's 'vandalism' against teen pictures); from fluidity of boundaries (between words and images; among images of different kind and production) to generative and transformative patterns (where Bee has one figure develop into another), and textual reconfigurations (the transgression of graphic and typographic conventions).

In the end, the 'operative system' of *A Girl's Life* successfully raises what Drucker names, in the text, "Ecstatic awareness [was Becki's downfall]". This oxymoron well suits the eccentric and transgressing character of a work that opens to difference and alternative meanings. If "awareness" implies conscious knowledge or understanding and is mind – and male – related, "ecstatic" connotes the opposite sphere of feeling ("ecstatic state of good feeling")[13], which is conventionally female related. Furthermore, it is appropriate that "ecstatic" sounds like "aesthetic", because Drucker and Bee's aesthetic program centres upon displacement and

[13] From Greek *ekstasis*, i.e. "entrancement, astonishment, insanity; any displacement or removal from the proper place", or from *existanai*, i.e "displace, put out of place, […] drive out of one's mind"; employed by 17th-century mystics for the "rupture" of the soul in contemplation of divine things (https://www.etymonline.com/word/ecstatic, consulted on 2/08/2024).

removal from 'proper' place to show the inconsistency of gender platitudes[14]. The vision of the text involves readers in an experience of 'rupture' (to be also intended in the literal sense of "breaking": of the fragments collaged on the page; of conventions) that helps them see through the illusion of glamour and reach heightened awareness: "Lived between paradise and compromise, a girl's life is never performed completely unawares" (Drucker & Bee 2002).

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[14] "Doing good and having a great time. Saving the dolphins, the earth, and the starving orphans while making out with your crush in a room with cool stuff. That's what a girl's life should really be" (Drucker & Bee 2002).

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