

I'm Not There: Juan Luis Martínez's *La Nueva Novela*

Introduction, Mónica de la Torre

Oxymorons galore. “The Eternal Return” is a curious choice for a collage serving as epigraph to a book of poetry entitled *La nueva novela* (The New Novel) with little that actually fits the bill of newness promised in the book’s title. Yet the epigraph is indeed just the beginning of a Borges-worthy labyrinth of recycled found texts and images whose author *is* and *is not* the Chilean Juan Luis Martínez (1942-1993). Following in the footsteps of Marcel Duchamp’s readymade and Nicanor Parra’s antipoetry, and in synch with late ’70s and ’80s appropriation art, he openly admitted that in the case of *La nueva novela* it was his aim to write a book: “for which I haven’t written anything but which I can claim as my own.”

A poet/artist of more than two minds, Martínez doubles his name on the cover of his book, and in both instances, puts them within parentheses and crosses them out: (~~Juan Luis Martínez~~), (~~Juan de Dios Martínez~~). Despite the many pages written on this self-effacing gesture announcing the refusal of a self-described “manipulator of signifiers” to claim authorship, readers insist on attributing the book’s multiple components to him: the myth of the author is a hard one to give up, hence its eternal return. Suffice it to say that even what he did write is written as if by someone else, for Martínez is the ever-unreliable ventriloquist of a novel that the readers get to write. A seditious

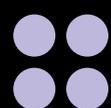
shape-shifter à la Fantomâs, a latter-day Pessoa with a variety of technologies at his disposal to deflect subjectivity and expand the field of writing, there are few registers Martínez failed to rehearse in *La nueva novela*. Voicing the language of mail order forms, assembly kit instructions, encoded bibliographies, seemingly neutral photographic captions, scientific propositions, philosophical syllogisms, cryptic footnotes, obscure annotations, pataphysical arithmetic, and absurdist psychological tests, he emits open-ended, unrealized utterances requiring the reader to complete them.

If one is hard-pressed to find anything that looks like an actual poem in *La nueva novela*, it’s because the only poems in the book are virtual and on the brink of happening. Be they written or in graphic form, what we find in Martínez’s book—an assembly kit, really, à la Julio Cortázar—are instructions for language events triggered by the reader’s involvement with the pages of the book, language events yielding, perhaps, an inexhaustible number of happily unwritten poems.

The context: Villa Alemana, Viña del Mar, circa 1977—not Paris, not New York, not even Santiago de Chile. A self-published, self-distributed book on the outskirts of the outskirts, the second city of Chile’s second city, as Viña del Mar is a beach destination and not the Bohemian Valparaíso and Villa Alemana is on the outskirts of this now faded resort town. *La nueva novela*’s production and distribution mode and Martínez’s sly, detached, and ambiguous voicings afforded him the possibility to safely expose officialist rhetoric, parody the dictatorship’s paranoia, and hint at the

disappearances of those opposed to the regime. Yet those who could have possibly censored the book couldn’t read between the lines: this was a time when books on Cubism were banned due to their possible link with Cuba...

La nueva novela is not a canonical book; to this day it retains its marginal cult-status amongst local poets. Therein, perhaps, lies the answer to its perennial explosiveness: within its pages, the Western tradition and its distorted iteration as a South American dictatorship are carnivalized, turned on their heads. If *La nueva novela*’s multivocality and provisional status remain intact, it’s because of the book’s insistence on its virtuality: witness a novel perpetually in the making.



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