



Fabulas Feminae. Susan Bee and Johanna Drucker. (Litmus Press, 2015)

In their new collaboration, Johanna Drucker and Susan Bee pay homage to a range of historically celebrated women—“feminae” as diverse as Sojourner Truth, Lady Murasaki Shikibu, and Lucille Ball. Each fabulous fabula’s fabled life has had a mythical impact on our culture, particularly on the generations of women artists they inspired. In 25 collages and accompanying prose poems, *Fabulas Feminae* probes the nature of biography and the ways any representation, whether image or text, holds up a distorted mirror to the life it reflects. Bee’s lively collages combine historic photographs and paintings of their heroines with imagery from pulp novels, mass-produced stickers, and an iconography of flowers, arrows, polka dots, and swirls. Many figures seem to radiate a nimbus of energy, creativity, and wisdom. For instance, a red aureole encircles Rosa Parks, “Mother of the modern day that we waited so long,” as she gazes down at her fingerprinted hand. Though her body appears restrained, from her head sprout a sunflower and pansy, a bee (the artist’s surrogate?) hovering near the uppermost petals. A large green and purple bow at her back evokes a butterfly’s wings, making Parks herself a nymphalid ready to take flight. While a struck-through bell rains multi-colored tears, Bee undercuts this grief with sparkly high-five stickers and children in karate uniforms:



Susan Bee and Johanna Drucker, from “Rosa Parks,” *Fabulas Feminae*, n.p.

Each brightly-colored collage faces a text by Drucker that responds to Bee's imagery in its expressive design (an x of negative space within Joan of Arc's entry echoes the ropes that bind her, Hannah Hoch's text mimics a gridded collage).

EMILY BRONTË

Remembered for her only now
a classic. Pseudonym mythologized
as one of enduring combination elements of
passion human psyche Haunt me then, haunt me.
Born fourth of five siblings, motherless aged three.
Two sisters died and children reading penning kingdoms
independent homesick and so ill. Contaminated runoff
water from the churchyard. Educated at home featured
stories they enacted. Solitary strange. Father dined alone
they created imaginary filled notebooks. Fantasy pleasure
names and characters, Gondal. A name of book vanished,
journal fragments. Small house, grey stone Branwell's decay.
Governess travelled tormented and absolute. Notebooks
and private poems in one volume all three sisters. Music and
power more genius "than it was supposed this utilitarian age."
Another manuscript never found. Patriarchal values land
and nature. If healthy and prosperity only brief letters
hunger for life fame love happiness. Worked at a school
from early morning until and broke from stress the bitter
work day. At home taught and practiced German
piano French essays no students to their school.
Bleak moors isolation rebellion.
"No coward soul is mine."
Other-worldly passions.
"Riches I hold in light es-
teem." Acclaim after death re-
fused to reduce ambiguity later
multivocal works. Innovative and
original loftier exercises of the intellect."
Deeply spiritual reclusive creative. In rebellion
little freedom not as others told her to. Through
writing to change the preciousness of and power. Soul to
survive. Caught cold and died. Interred, "no poisoning doc-
tor" saying she rejected and no remedies. "Do not leave me in this
abyss where I cannot—"

Susan Bee and Johanna Drucker, from "Emily Brontë," *Fabulas Feminae*, n.p.

These poems are constructed, a note tells us, "(sort of) by the Hapax Legomenon, a natural language processing program that automatically condenses large quantities of text into an abstract." Because of this contraction, each past-tense entry applies a matter-of-fact tone to utterly jumbled language—enacting the highly partial way we remember admired figures. Fragmented and campy, they also include deeply resonant moments, as in the Emily Brontë entry, which begins:

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Shaped into a silhouette that echoes Brontë's portrait, the poem's purple-hued type seems "haunt[ed]" by her passionate intensity. Rather than pinning these heroines like exotic butterflies (as the Latinate title implies), Drucker's lovely computer-assisted poems acknowledge our inability to capture these wild things, embracing the hilarity of our attempts to render an artist's life in a single page. The choice to condense their biographies this way brilliantly matches the feminist ethos of the project. "Hapax legomenon" refers to a word that appears only once in a given corpus; thus the software named for this linguistic feature removes a text's recurrent words (Drucker's "sort of" in the note suggests she has tinkered with the results, a clinamen that doubtless improved them). Because it forbids repetition (a constraint Doug Nufer obeyed to compose his *Never Again*), the Hapax Legomenon suggests that, though we emulate these women, they are in fact one of a kind. Drucker and Bee's tributes highlight the ways they, like artist Sonia Delaunay, "transfor[m] the world brighter and more exciting," throwing caution to the wind much as the Hapax throws grammatical constraint out the window.