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BOOK REVIEW / CULTURAL THEORY AND CONCEPTS

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## A Book, An Endless Love Affair

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*By Jan Baetens*

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*BUS SPOTTING + A STORY*, a collaborative work by Paula Roush (images) and Mireille Ribière (text) is a work to fall in love with. It is also the perfect example of what Borges called a *book of sand* – that is, a work that is apparently simple but actually infinite, since each time one reopens the book, it proves to have lost the pages one already knew while surprising the reader with new pages that she had never seen before (Borges's book of sand is of course the symbol of what great literature should be and what it can do with a reader, but this is another discussion).



Dedicated to ‘transport enthusiasts’ and short-listed for the Photo-Text Award at *Les Rencontres de la photographie Arles*, the world’s most famous photo festival, *BUS SPOTTING + A STORY* is generically defined by the authors as a ‘photo-essay’. This term, however, is slightly misleading (but don’t worry: after all this is a book of sand!), for it does not draw attention to another dimension: *BUS SPOTTING + A STORY* is also an artist book, that is ‘a limited hand-made book, which is usually exhibited and, with a lot of luck, purchased by a museum or a collector (which basically covers the costs of production)’. Roush and Ribière’s work is a superb example of craftsmanship and invention and demonstrates that a book is not only what can be found between two covers. *BUS SPOTTING + A STORY* has no cover in the traditional sense of the word, it is more a collection of various items of various forms, content and sizes, whose profound unity is the world of bus-spotting (of course the book includes a discussion on why the term of bus-spotting is not appropriated to characterize the love of transport). As a book object, *BUS SPOTTING + A STORY* is deeply linked with the rediscovery of the sculptural dimension of texts and pictures, which are not only 2D objects, but also 3D objects. There is more than a hidden relationship between *BUS SPOTTING + A STORY* and Chris Ware’s *Building Stories* (Pantheon, 2013), which is equally fascinated with the idea of the book as ‘container’ of many different objects and treasures.

At the same time, *BUS SPOTTING + A STORY* is a very personal and creative appropriation of a vital strand in modern photography and writing, namely found footage, more precisely: found photographs. However, since these pictures happen to contain a dizzying variety of words and inscriptions, found photographs are also found texts (it is, of course, not a coincidence that Mireille Ribière is not only writer but also photographer and that Paula Roush similarly combines word and image in her various assignments). *BUS SPOTTING + A STORY* is based upon found images of double and single-decker buses, mainly from the fifties and the sixties, which are arranged in such a way that the new sequences – for there is of course more than just one rearrangement – suggest not only a bus ride through time and space (reading the book becomes a kind of armchair bus-spotting) but prove capable of generating a fictional thread, logically linked with the passionate love the original photographers experienced with the subject of their images. The fiction that appears as a kind of watermark through the pictures and that is elaborated in one of the parts of *BUS SPOTTING + A STORY* is not surprisingly indebted to the world of melodrama, romance and photo novel. Text and image fit so well that one no longer knows whether the latter has inspired the former, or vice versa.



Roush and Ribière have composed a work of endless fascination and of great visual and textual beauty. Moreover *BUS SPOTTING + A STORY* is an intriguing case of blurring the boundaries between two auras: that of the unique and individual work of art (the book is not part of the trade publishing industry) and that of daily life, to which the authors pay a deeply felt tribute, which calls to mind, among many other things, Georges Perec's praise of the infra-ordinary – one more thread to follow in this eye-opening creation.

<https://www.msdm.org.uk/bus-spotting-a-story/>

Paula Roush and Mireille Ribière, *BUS SPOTTING + A STORY* (London: msdm publishers, 2016; edition of 250)

