

Books

According to Plan by Rob Kovitz

by Gary Michael Dault

In a still-famous cartoon by Shel Silverstein from 1950, the American poet, singer-songwriter, screenwriter and cartoonist drew two hairy, long-forgotten prisoners chained to both the wall and the floor of a tiny dungeon cell with a high, barred ceiling-window frustratingly far above them. One prisoner is turning to the other and is saying (no doubt in a furtive, clandestine voice), “Now here’s my plan.” The drawing was used for the cover of Silverstein’s 1960 book, *Now Here’s My Plan: A Book of Futilities*.

It would be fun to think of this mad new, catalyzingly ingenious, brilliantly exhausting Rob Kovitz book-assemblage, *According to Plan*, as yet another book of futilities, but while that might be convenient, it wouldn’t be at all fair—or useful.

Like Kovitz’s previous books, especially *Room Behaviour*, 2000, and the prodigiously fecund, formally exuberant eight-volume boxed “novel,” *Ice Fishing in Gimli*, 2009—which I once delighted in identifying, in these pages, as a “Menippean satire”—*According to Plan* is a juggernaut of immersive, walk-in anthropology, a “montage book,” a “super-cut bookwork” (as the Treyf Books press release puts it) that holds out the possibility, if not the promise, that as a result of the encyclopaedic, totalizing way the author/compiler strip-mines his chosen subject, in this case the *Idea of the Plan*, light may well be finally cast on the word’s murky banality.

According to Plan begins innocently, harmlessly enough—with all of Kovitz’s books do—with an apparently helpful assaying of the subject. The book’s first section is titled “What’s the plan?” and right away it dawns on you that though the word “plan” is so

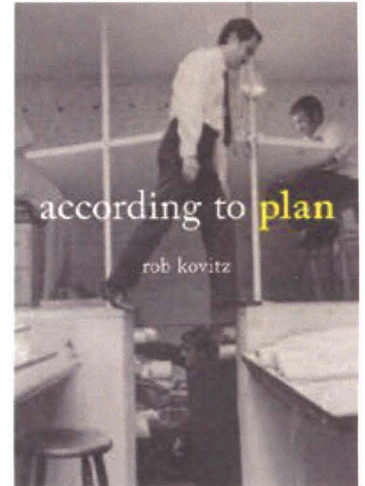
ubiquitous as to be semantically inert, it is really not easy to say what a “plan” really is.

Is it a guide? A map? An intention? One online dictionary calls a plan “a scheme or method of acting, doing, proceeding, making, etc., developed in advance.” Another suggests a plan is “an orderly or step-by-step conception or proposal for accomplishing an objective, a proposed or intended course of action, a systematic arrangement of elements or important parts; a configuration or outline, a drawing or diagram made to scale showing the structure or arrangement of something,” ...and so on.

But just listen to the white-noise hiss of all this. The preceding paragraph is easily the most boring paragraph I’ve ever written (or rather copied out) in my entire life. It’s witheringly abstract, blandly generalized and bone-crushingly bureaucratic. That’s what most plans—and the discussion of most plans—are.

So how come the 668 pages of *According to Plan* make for such an invigorating read? Perhaps because by the time you have read, skimmed, scanned and riffled all the way to the book’s final section, “exit plan” (each appearance of the words “plan” or “planning” in the book is printed in bold face), it has become clear that not only have you sojourned sumptuously in the realm of Plan but that you have been inescapably privy to the author-compiler’s outrageously omni-directional, omnivorous reading practice. Indeed, you feel you have walked every step of the way at his archival side, and you are likely to find yourself aghast at the method in his bibliophilic madness.

As an ignoble corrective to my tendency to find Kovitz’s tireless



dedication to one subject heroically wondrous, I found myself wickedly trying to come up with examples of “plan” the master compiler just might have overlooked. I thought there was a good chance, for example, that he may have missed the title of Ed Wood’s film, *Plan 9 From Outer Space*. But no, *there it was*. The breadth of the man’s reading and research is staggering. And at the same time deliciously eccentric.

Who can make planning amusing? The planners themselves, apparently—but only with the assist of Kovitz’s genius for juxtaposition, for the wit evinced by his accumulating revealings of entertainingly unlikely narratives where you had detected none before, for his cheerful ironies (there is no real anger in the book, only absurdity).

Here’s a typical sandwiching of planning delicacies (comic, wistful, poignant, tragic), packed into the space between pages 78 and 81: beginning on page 78 is an excerpt, with photographs, from the Asbestos Cement Products Association, *According to Plan: The Story of Modern Sidewalls for the Homes of America*. In this comically leaden section, a helpful Sidewalls guy is explaining things

Visual Art

Clare Twomey

by Krystina Mierins

to a remarkably attentive housewife-consumer. "That's right. It's the planning that makes all the difference between happiness and headaches as the years go by...." (I do wish Kovitz supplied dates for his gleanings). This is so glutinous it's almost touching. And I suppose it's true too. But what immediately follows, on page 81, amplifies everything we've just read: "But what do you think of the plan of the curtain, Barbara? It is a charming one, is it not? No matter, whether I be at work, or about to retire to rest, or just awakening from sleep, it enables me to know that you are thinking of me...." This is from Dostoyevsky's *Poor Folk*. Well, you can see the *frisson* of abutment this kind of editorial choosing and positioning causes, the exchange of mutual plangencies it releases.

As it rolls relentlessly along, *According to Plan* lifts itself out of the mire of office-speak and bureaucrap and begins to approach the Status of Dream. It announces, in exhibit after exhibit, the touching desire we all possess to discover or construct a less painful, chaotic and more clarified, parsable future for ourselves.

According to Plan is a beneficent minefield. What looks at first like a big sweaty, unreadable conceptual-art joke gradually turns into an exploratory vision of what makes us human. Plans are *ideals*. They are, therefore, maybe the best part of us. ■

According to Plan by Rob Kovitz, Treyf Books, 2014, 670 pages, \$36.00

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White Lilliputian figurines appear to dance, tumble and march across the floor of a dimly lit gallery at the Gardiner Museum in Toronto, where British ceramicist Clare Twomey was invited to create an installation inspired by the museum's collection. The artist selected three examples from the Gardiner's 18th-century *commedia dell'arte* porcelains, and by creating myriad simulacra has raised questions about the value of authenticity, of both the artist's hand and the object itself.

The three originals were scanned to create moulds so that Twomey, along with five assistants, could create the more than 2000 reproductions. The artist then arranged the copies in a haphazard way, creating the effect of a chaotic crowd. The surface of the majority of the figures is matte, but a few are glazed and these are placed randomly. These glinting insertions are read as more polished, complete works. The inclusion of moulds and broken pieces, and the scattered stacking of objects produces a dynamic effect spread across the vast floor.

The white reproductions are overseen by the three colourful originals displayed at one end of the gallery, set on high pedestals and protected in vitrines. This arrangement indicates a hierarchy that appears to privilege the originals, whose backs are turned to the audience. It is impossible to examine these; instead, visitors are able to crouch down to inspect the copies. As is usual in the museum context, we are distanced from the precious originals.

Opposite the vitrines, tools and moulds are arranged on a large table. This workbench is where one member of the small team



of ceramicists works on-site each day producing additional reproductions to add to the installation. Twomey subverts the artist's traditional role by relinquishing control over the project. For this component of the exhibition, she no longer determined the production or arrangement of the objects.

Gallery lighting highlights the originals and the ceramicists' workbench, which face each other across the dimly lit field of white copies, and a relationship between the maker and the 18th-century porcelains does emerge. The originals represent the highest quality and are validated by the institution. The makers are confronted with this as they endeavour to achieve comparable success, although within a value framework entirely different from that of the originals. The unpolished figurines with visible seams and made in 2014 would have been discarded if produced in the 1700s. However, Twomey's fabrication process does echo in some aspects that of the original porcelains. The 18th-century statuettes were designed by a modeller (perhaps comparable to the role of artist), and then moulds were used in a factory to cast the object. Many individuals were involved in the creation of the final product, similar to the evolving Gardiner