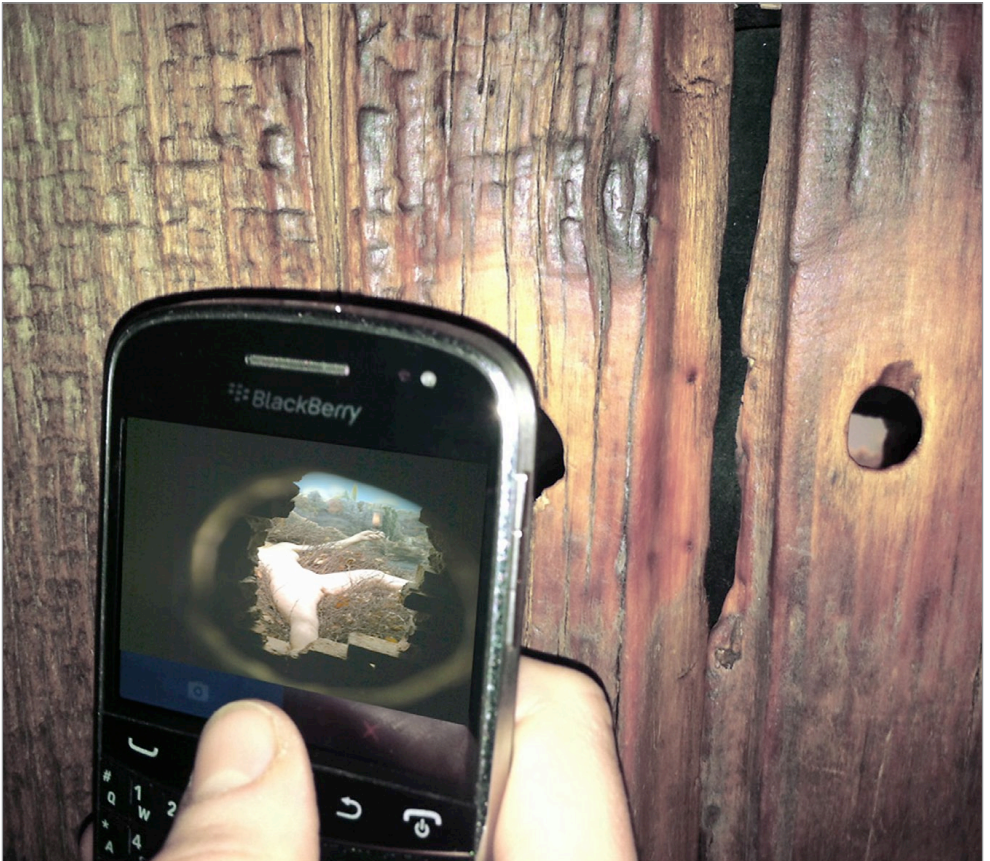


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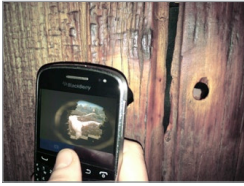
**BOOKS_EXPANDED_FIELD:
AN INTERVIEW WITH
BADLANDS UNLIMITED**

*Paul Chan, Ian Cheng & Micaela Durand
Badlands staff and artists, New York*

BY LATITUDES



#OpenCurating Badlands Unlimited



01 Ian Cheng
iPhone on BlackBerry on
Étant donnés, with
Rachel Rose. From *How To
Download a Boyfriend*
(Badlands Unlimited, 2012)

FOUNDED IN 2010 BY ARTIST [PAUL CHAN](#) – BEST KNOWN for his cycle *The 7 Lights* (2005–8) and *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*, realised in collaboration with Creative Time and The Classical Theatre of Harlem – [Badlands Unlimited](#) is a New York-based publishing house whose motto is “books in an expanded field”. Its publications and editions in paper or digital forms (e-books for iPad or Kindle) acknowledge that “historical distinctions between books, files, and artworks are dissolving rapidly”. Badlands aspires to re-imagine the activity of reading as it encompasses the artist book, choreography and poetry, 3D, experimental typography, historical translations as well as the format of the group show.

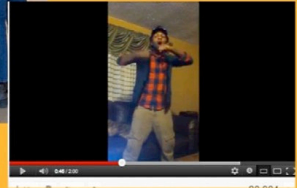
Latitudes: We’re really interested in how the e-book might function as a piece of – for want of a better term – “interaction design” in relation to a physical exhibition. The Badlands e-book *The Help, A Companion Guide* relates to [Rachel Harrison](#)’s 2012 solo show at Greene Naftali Gallery and draws on all kinds of preproduction and installation images that you’ve [described](#) in an evocative way as “playfully link[ing] her finished sculptural works to a constellation of materials and services that express the immanent sociality at stake in every work of art.” In what kinds of ways do you think that e-books can reach towards new possibilities for exploring this sociability or in-process nature of the work of art or exhibitions – ways not available to printed books?

Badlands Unlimited: We did Rachel’s book as an e-book because we love Rachel’s work and we could do it faster and cheaper. So to us the new possibilities relate to production and distribution, not reception, which in the last analysis we have no control over. But what we love is that we could publish something as complex and layered as *The Help* and do it with speed and precision for a reading and looking public. And isn’t this what is at the heart of your question, given that what is faster and cheaper is what constitutes as new today?

L: Yes, certainly the speed and economy of e-books is at the heart of their new possibilities. In terms of the precision and generosity of production, it is significant that *The Help* is very much focussed on engaging with the preproduction of an exhibition. Related to this, it’s interesting to

Share





02

observe how “behind the scenes” or “making of” photos or videos of an exhibition have become increasingly prevalent as art institutions have become more readily engaged with social media in the last few years. The idea behind the [blog of the 2013 Carnegie International](#) also engages with the process of formation of an exhibition in terms of its ideas and research. (This has also fed back into print with, for example, [DOCUMENTA \(13\)’s *The Logbook*](#)). Do you perceive such trends as being linked to this “faster and cheaper” production and distribution of content?

BU: There’s something out of synch between the time it takes to produce work and the compulsive need to display content now, especially on social media network feeds like Facebook where persistent presence is expected. They say that a human being can only have so many thoughts in a day – tied to the basic caloric economy of our body – let alone expensive creative thoughts!

02 Page from
Rachel Harrison
The Help,
A Companion Guide
e-book, 131 pp
(Badlands Unlimited, 2012)

Between the three of us at the Badlands office, we post about extreme discounts, press and shout-outs by our growing roster of authors, and pirated PDFs we find online – it’s kind of a deferral to do whatever it takes to maintain a sense of presence without depleting our creative thought meter! We typically don’t like to post “making of” or “behind the scenes” content – we always want the projects we’re truly excited about to feel like they came from nowhere and that no one asked for them or expected them.

L: How do you see the kind of content Badlands publishes for iPad and Kindle as disruptive to (or intersecting with) existing platforms such as museum audio guides?

BU: We have no beef with museum audio guides.

L: Sure; what we’re interested in is that in some senses Badlands approaches to e-books suggest a negotiation between the experience of an exhibition and that of a catalogue, between presenting artwork and presenting commentary and context. Let’s talk about the idea of the group exhibition as an iPad e-book and *How To Download A Boyfriend*. How do you distinguish between publishing, editing and curating in this context, or is there any reason to? Can you describe how it was put together?

BU: For this particular e-book, there was no distinction between the roles of curating, publishing and editing. It was the first time we published through Apple’s very own iBooks Author software, so we were in a new territory. iBooks Author markets itself as the GarageBand for e-books so it is pretty user-friendly as much as it is pretty user-frustrating. After stripping and copy-pasting its own template and finding ways to cheat Apple’s template limitations the e-book kind of developed its own Badlands theme. It feels pretty seamless flipping through it. The role of editing felt instinctual: this artist responding to this other artist’s interactive quiz, and collaboratively we each tweaked the book until it felt ready.

L: What kind of brief did you set for the artists in inviting them, how did the process begin?

BU: It’s funny because the title “How To Download A Boyfriend” came first and the book came later. I [Micaela] had been working at a middle school with a lot of tweens and when I started working for Badlands, Paul asked me what book I would make with a bunch of twelve-year-olds

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03 *How To Download A Boyfriend*
group exhibition
as interactive e-book, 58 pp
(Badlands Unlimited, 2012)

and I said, “probably something like ‘How To Download A Boyfriend’”. Since then Badlands was kind of set on making a book with that title. So we emailed friends and artists we thought could contribute to an e-book by that name and after looking through it, felt that it couldn’t be anything *but* a group show.

L: You have billed it as “the first of its kind”. As artists and publishers, what value do you place on innovation in this respect?

BU: Both artists and publishers think a lot about format, how a thing is constructed to exist, move, and be legible in the world. Publishers tend to standardise and optimise formats, while artists often want to extend, corrupt and conflate formats. At Badlands, we are both artists and publishers, and *How To Download A Boyfriend* in many ways embodies our contradictory impulses and roles. *How*



Question 6 of 6

If we ever break up can I still use your Netflix account?

A. Yes.

B. No.



Check Answer



04

To Download A Boyfriend is the first of its kind insofar as it is the first time the e-book format has been conflated with the format of a group exhibition. The DNA of a group exhibition – its heterogeneity, its activation of the multiple audiences for each of the participating artists – then assumes the benefit of an e-book’s DNA, namely its ability to circulate widely online as a contained object of value. This is different from the many online exhibitions that appear on websites in that e-books, unlike websites, are consumed within the focused space of an e-book reader app and not in the endless distracted disposable feed space of a browser. It’s a minor technical difference, but it’s a huge difference experientially. We value these kinds of innovative shifts.

L: We love the daft “interactive” multiple-choice survey research questionnaires. For example, “What names do you stream into a cat crusted pillow with OK Cupid howling on a laptop nearby?”. Answer: “a picture says a 1000 words”.

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How far do you agree with *The New Yorker* that *How To Download A Boyfriend* “is beating the market at its own game”?

1. Strongly disagree.
2. Disagree.
3. Neither agree nor disagree.
4. Agree.
5. Strongly agree.

BU: All of the above.

L: Of course! Much of the imagery of *How To Download A Boyfriend* has been taken from the web and used for new purposes, yet as an e-book form it still chooses to remain closed off from the web (although of course it uses it for its distribution). Do you have an interest as a publisher in exploring editing and publishing tools which are open to the web, or part of it?

~~~~~  
“The question for us isn’t whether we are open or not, but whether we can survive and thrive as a publishing house by embracing every facet of a book’s social life today.”  
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BU: Badlands is interested in anything that our favourite artists and writers use in writing or making the books they choose to publish with us. And you make it sound as if being open is an either/or. For instance, *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans: A Field Guide* exists as a hardcover book that one can buy at a bookshop, a multimedia e-book one can buy and download on their e-reader, and a free set of PDFs. The idea of selling and giving away books is also true for the *What is? series*. So the question for us isn’t whether we are open or not, but whether we can survive and thrive as a publishing house by embracing every facet of a book’s social life today.

L: It’s also interesting to mention the Wolfgang Tillmans show at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. The catalogue, with essays and installation photographs, is free to download as a PDF, and in the exhibition itself visitors can take a printed copy of an artist books which includes every photograph in the show.

But we’d agree that it is not as simple as the extremities of open versus closed; our question was a rather synthetic one. Perhaps what we were reaching for is how, as distributors of content which spans “old media” and “new media”, you relate with the question of openness as a perception of an increased appetite for participation, and new tools for social reading, for annotation and sharing – a situation characterized by Daniel G. Andújar in our interview

with him: “the public does not want to limit itself to being receivers of information ... it wants to interact with these new media, participating in the process of transmission of information, and to be an active part of the evolution and transformation of this information into knowledge”. Still quite a synthetic question perhaps!

BU: It seems like participation in the current formats of new media has been relegated to blog and video comments, Facebook comments, responses to tweets and retweets. It’s all great and we enjoy that PR dimension of the publishing process, but it doesn’t affect the books we make, nor do our books address participation and openness in any direct way. As a business, we have to be real about things like Facebook being about promotion and a zone for expressing enthusiasm or hatred over the projects we release. That’s what it is for better and worse. There would need to be deeper, infrastructural change to publishing formats and distribution networks and social media networks at large for a qualitatively different kind of participation to emerge. And whatever it is, it would have to deal with the basic burden of participation.

L: In terms of the economics and the social life of books, do the contributing artists share a profit from sales in the case of *How To Download A Boyfriend* or your single-author books?

BU: It depends on the book. The artists in *How To Download A Boyfriend*, for instance, received an artwork [by Paul] in exchange for being a part of it. Yvonne Rainer receives royalties from sales of her book, *Poems*.

L: Ian, your contribution to *How To Download A Boyfriend* is a shot of a photo being taken with a BlackBerry through the peep hole of Marcel Duchamp’s *Étant donnés* (1946–66) at the Philadelphia Museum of Art [image 01]. Did you make the image especially for the publication? Is there any connection with the Rachel Harrison e-book and exhibition, which shares its title with her photograph of the back door maintenance entrance of *Étant donnés* – does this take us back “behind the scenes” again?

BU: I [Ian] went to see *Étant donnés* for the first time on a date with my girlfriend. She was photographing the landscape scene through the peep hole with her BlackBerry. The BlackBerry viewfinder echoed the solo interface effect

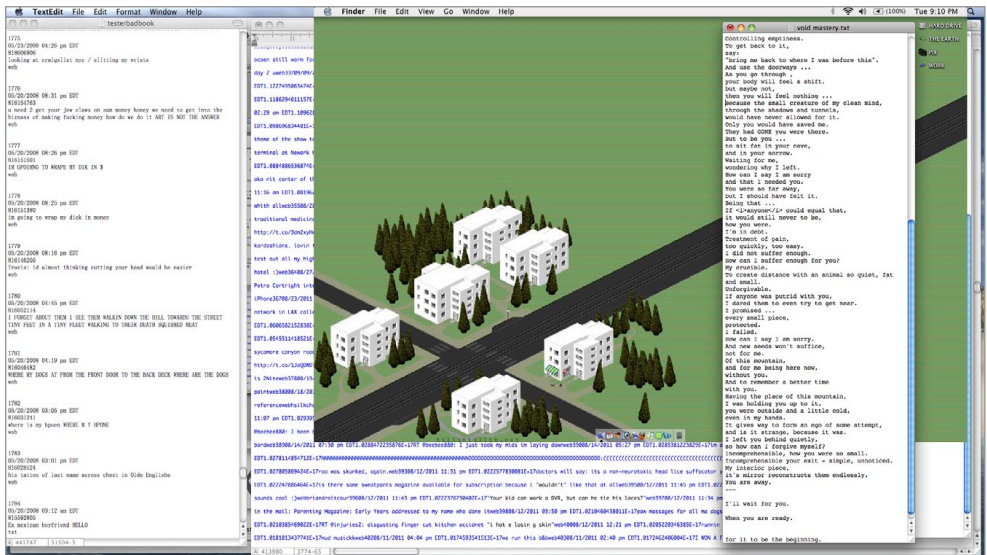
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05 Page from
Petra Cortright
HELL_TREE
e-book, 107 pp
(Badlands Unlimited, 2012)

that Duchamp had originally designed by putting the locked wooden doors with peep hole between the viewer and the dioramic landscape. This experience of eroticism through this banal flattening into image, along with being a record of that date with my girl early in our relationship, made sense with the spirit of *How To Download A Boy-friend*. I guess unlike Rachel Harrison's image "behind the scenes" of *État donnés*, I'm more interested in amplifying the coefficient of illusion present in Duchamp's last work, because that is precisely what it offers.

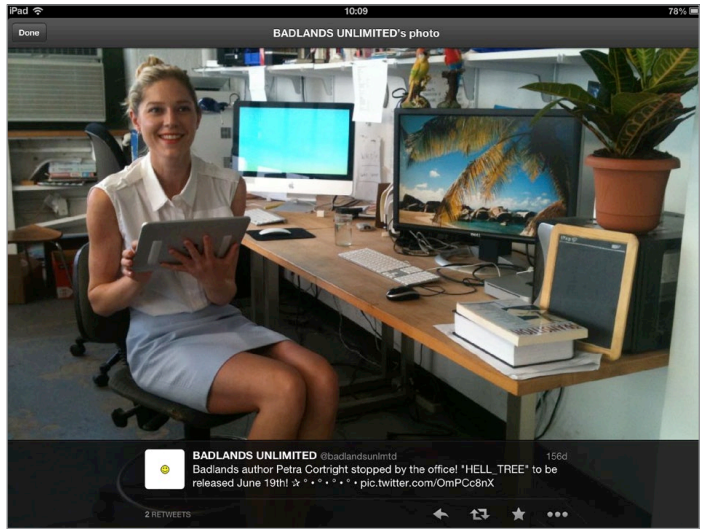
L: Despite its name HELL_TREE by Petra Cortright shows something quite beautiful happening within the intersection of technology, personality and publishing – between inputs and outputs. In this sense would you agree that Badlands is acknowledging that this intersection is expanding faster than “old models” can cope with?

BU: In publishing, biographies of famous people are historically among the most popular kind of books. People want to know how celebrities came to be, perhaps in hopes of uncovering a model for how to better live their own lives or finding out that their own insecurities are shared. And on the internet, celebrity personalities abound even more in a highly documented, if trivial, way via the paper trail



#OpenCurating *Badlands Unlimited*

06 @badlandsunlmt
tweet from 12 June 2012
“Badlands author Petra
Cortright stopped by the
office! “HELL_TREE” to be
released June 19th!
*”



06

of Twitter, Facebook, personal blogs, YouTube channels, etc. Petra is one of our favourite artists and her work is so enmeshed with the way she occupies being alive in her various online appearances. *HELL_TREE* isn't a biography of Petra, but it offers some of the interior texture that a biography would offer, here in the form of screenshots of Petra's desktop with her daily notes, Twitter logs, Live-Journal archives, work files. It's a bit like Kurt Cobain's *Journals* for our information obese times. But you know, published with love.

L: Micaela, can you tell us more about the idea behind *AD BOOK* by *BFFA3AE*, the net art collective which you are a member of? Was it entirely formed through open submission – everything that was received was included?

BU: *AD BOOK* is an e-book that consists entirely of advertisements purchased by artists and institutions. The idea behind it was simple: make a book that pays for itself. Advertisers pay to be in the book. As long as you pay the fee (maximum \$5) you are published in *AD BOOK*. Advertisements are usually the thing no one wants but has to have in order to fund the content of a book/magazine/whatever. When you buy a magazine, you buy it because you want to read about a particular something or someone in it but you are also by extension purchasing the



07



08

07 08 Pages from
AD BOOK by BFFA3AE
e-book (Badlands
Unlimited, 2012)

advertisements included. *AD BOOK* attempts to illuminate this concept by stripping down the book to the barest form of this idea. It's also just a funny idea for a book. BFFA3AE had the idea and Badlands helped us pursue it in an e-book format which we were pretty excited and super thankful for.

L: Final question, with your futurologist hats on – is the e-book a transitional format? In which direction do you see Badlands going in this respect?

BU: Well there's a huge push by Apple to turn all school textbooks into e-books, and sales of e-books have reportedly eclipsed sales of physical books on Amazon. Maybe one day those giants will fall to a new format and we'll be reading inside our corneas, or audiobooks will plug in our head and be conflated with interior monologue, or we'll be reading morphing etchings on stone. But for now, we really like the focus and straightforwardness of the e-book and think that's here to stay for a while. We're tangentially interested in publishing apps as stand-alone artist projects, as well as publishing artists editions, whether physical or digital. **#**

'books_expanded_field:
An Interview with
Badlands Unlimited'
by Latitudes (Max Andrews
& Mariana Cánepa Luna)

17 December 2012

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