

HEAVY LIFTING

Book work by Felicia Rice
 Foreword by Felicia Rice
 Poems by Theresa Whitehill
 Preface by Inge Bruggeman

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Reviewed by Peter Tanner

In November 2023, Felicia Rice reached out to me about a book review of an artist book anthology published in *Openings*. The review had specifically mentioned an entry in the anthology that addressed one of Rice's book works. Rice took issue with what our reviewer said about her work. She and I began a very pleasant email exchange regarding artist books and their important work in increasing the visibility of issues that are not often understood from one end of the United States to another, specifically the Latino aesthetic of *rasquachismo*.

What grew from this email conversation was an offer to let me see and review one of Moving Parts Press's most recent books, *Heavy Lifting*. *Openings* doesn't usually publish reviews of individual artist books, but when an artist like Rice offers to send you a book, there really is no way to refuse, and I remain grateful for the opportunity.

The creation of *Heavy Lifting* came out of a moment of very personal crisis for Rice. In 2020 nearly one thousand structures were destroyed in the Santa Cruz mountains in a megafire that also burned Rice's home, letterpress printshop, and her entire inventory of artist books. Though she had begun to work on *Heavy Lifting* in 2019, during the post-fire process of rebuilding her life it became particularly relevant as a project that addresses contemporary issues. The text itself therefore presents the evolution of her perception of her own crisis as it addresses the collective crises that have become part of our daily lives.

I received the standard edition of *Heavy Lifting* from Rice, enclosed in a gray clamshell box. The sedate outer case belied a beautiful and complex book work and other materials within. Once the clamshell box was opened, the first thing that captured my eye was the title on the cover of the book and the beautifully printed birds that festoon it. Nested underneath the main book was the digitally printed companion book that, unlike the artist book itself, includes all the poems written by Theresa Whitehill specifically for this book project. Below the companion book was a small envelope, 3 x 4 inches, with the words, "A FILM EXPERIMENT / ON HEAVY LIFTING / MOVING PARTS PRESS." Inside the envelope was an SD card that contains a seventeen-minute experimental film, in which several of the poems included in *Heavy Lifting* are read aloud in combination with striking music and visual projections and performances. I enjoyed watching the recitations, as each included demonstrations of the stages of the printing of *Heavy Lifting*. The film animates this artist book, bringing it alive with readings, projected images from the book, and music. The multimedia presentation creates an experience that reading such a work requires, along with how art can work as book experience and archive of ideas, thereby containing more than can be solely perceived through a single medium. Thus what is experimental about the film is how it shows that reading and interacting with art, and in particular an artist book, is an animated and dynamic activity.

Peter Tanner teaches Spanish Language and Literature at the University of Utah and is editor of Openings: Studies in Book Art. He has a PhD in Latin American literature, an MA in Latin American Art History, and a BEA in Painting and Printmaking. His research focuses on artist books from Latin America.

Returning to the primary artist book, the viewer confronts the conundrum of how to



access it. The work is not easy to open, and it's even more difficult to put away. This is plainly by design and associated with the questions that are addressed within *Heavy Lifting*. It opens using complex nested double accordions that unfold like alternating, flailing bird wings, similar to the bird wings depicted on the cover. Each page and image connects to the poems by Theresa Whitehill. Image and text are imbricated in such a way that the reader/viewer must navigate through the work, manipulating the folds and images to see the layers of text and image juxtaposed into and onto one another. It could be enough for some readers/viewers to feel overwhelmed. That too is by design, for the heavy lifting addressed by the artwork is one that we each deal with during our days and years of everyday life.

The interwoven double accordion folds, the play of the images and text, and the text itself work together to present an unfolding panoptic view of the complicated “collective crises” that have become quotidian. These include: the crisis of COVID and its long-term impact upon our daily lives; the crisis of health care and questions of its cost and accessibility; the crisis in our prison system, not just in the United States but also around the globe; the crisis of racism and all the insidious ways that it has been institutionalized and unfortunately accepted, often as beloved and despicable traditions; the crisis of politics; the crisis of immigration and how it's a phenomenon defined not just by the arrival of immigrants, but by what causes them to flee wherever they're from, catastrophes in which we are all complicit; the climate crisis that contributes to and exacerbates all of these other crises; the crisis of extraction that is not unique to capitalism but is part and parcel of every economy on the planet; the housing crisis that is not only a present crisis, but like all of these others, one with long-term civil and social implications for the stability of future generations.

This book, our world, the complexities that we live with and lift daily are not for the faint of heart. While the work could be enough to cause one to lose hope, it also represents, arguably, a platform from and with which to lift such burdens. As a realist, I find the book both delights and depresses. That said, I also see, as someone who frequently looks at book works as though they're attempting to heroically change the world, a great deal of introspection and hope.

The book presents its reader/viewer with some terrible, condensed realities to shock them into the present. It does this by highlighting and ruminating upon existential questions that we should be discussing everyday. Not only do we discuss these crises, but we are all living them whether or not they are discussed. We each perform this heavy lifting to such an extent that it has become ordinary to the point of acceptance. This apathetic acceptance is our greatest threat. Many of Whitehill's poems, including the eponymous poem, "Heavy Lifting," address aspects of this burden. One poem in particular, "Letter to a Stranger in the Wind," caught my attention:

This face is a study of pain.

Your face is a map of this time.

You have to be patient.

You must wait for what is true.

You also have to be impatient.

**You have to insist, you must
speak even if speaking**

is a kind of gibberish. But it won't be how

**you think. It won't be
how you expect, or**

**shine. Your face is a study
of pain. My face is a**

map of this time.

Heavy Lifting is a map of the world around us, where our impatience must not become apathy. Our faces are faces that have lived through and studied pain. We are each a map of this time encased in flesh. We have to insist and speak, even in gibberish, from a place of hope, for a better world. We are each our own Atlas that holds our own worlds together. Like the book, daily life is complicated and raises more questions than it answers. However, by raising a mirror to our potential apathy, Rice and Whitehill have reminded us and invoked in us our own knowledge of the power we have as individuals to do the heavy lifting needed, day by day, and thus move the world from where it is now to where and what we desire it to be. ■