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His Back Pages

Gill Partington



For twenty years, Alejandro Cesarco has been making fake book indexes: alphabetical lists that look authentic enough, down to their page numbers and layout, but are actually free-floating artefacts. For the first time, the whole series of seven indexes is on show, [at the Witte de With gallery](#) in Rotterdam (until 5 January). Each refers to a different ‘imaginary book’. They are not endmatter but ends in themselves.

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In contrast to the colourful multimedia goings-on downstairs, the show on the top floor of the gallery is an austere, monochromatic affair, the bare white walls hung with uniform rows of black-and-white inkjet-printed text. You might wonder how much mileage there is in such a simple if absurdist gesture, but spend time with Cesarco's indexes and it's surprising how they draw you in. They make you read rather than look, and show what a complicated act that is.

There are subtle differences that mark out one index from another: typeface, column layout, pagination. What kinds of book would each of them belong to? They prompt you to read between the lines and conjure up their phantom narratives. One has entries for Derrida, Freud, 'abjection', 'parrhesia'; another, 'boots: that made you too tall, 7'. Running through the exhibition is a concern with affect and emotion; the apparently dry lists gesture towards books suffused with melancholy and swirling currents of feeling:

anger, 8, 34, 57, 80
anxiety, 6-7; and separation, 26, 42
apologies, 6, 21, 33, 59

But since the books don't exist, an intriguing question is what exactly is being indexed here. Perhaps it's the artist himself. 'Cesarco' can be found among the Cs, but he's visible everywhere in the show: the wall text describes the indexes as 'a form of self-portraiture that unfolds over time'. We learn his tastes in movies and music (Hitchcock, Agnès Varda, Cocteau Twins, John Zorn), get a glimpse of a typically unhappy adolescence ('mirror, 69 | miserabilism, 78 | mixed tapes, 13'), perhaps find out where he went on holiday ('Brasil: summers in, 89-92'). Read as biography, the index becomes a surprisingly confessional mode: 'doors: slammed ... doubts ... dreams'; 'autoeroticism 12, 74, 82; infantile, 69, 70'.

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The lists are revealing about Cesarco's work, too, positioned somewhere between the worlds of art and writing. The indexes owe as much to the elaborate literary games of Georges Perec as they do to the text-based conceptual art of Lawrence Weiner; as much to Borges's imaginary libraries as to Duchamp's wit. All are name-checked somewhere. If a common complaint about contemporary art is that it's hard to see what it's 'about', Cesarco craftily turns this idea on its head. No need to wander the gallery in bafflement; these artworks are an exhaustive A-Z of their own themes: 'Avant Garde: and tedium, 162'; 'book, the (cont.) and conditions of reading, 77'; 'Conceptualism, 70'; 'index ... as work of art 23, 113, 215'; 'list-making, 207'.

An index is something that points towards something else. But Cesarco's create a short circuit, pointing to themselves. They index the index, asking about its constraints and potential as a form. What uses can it be put to, and what can it convey? One of the works is entitled *Index (A Novel)*, suggesting we might read it as an economical and elliptical narrative in its own right. The entry on 'Waiting' tells a story through its subheadings: 'at the café ... at the door ... because she is late ... endlessly ... for a letter ... for a sign.' At other moments, the lists ask to be read as poetry:

pleas, 70-71
please, 39
pleasure, 71
poems, 16
possessions, 2, 77
positions, 24

Cesarco has taken a device that's conventionally used for ordering information and reinvented it as a means of disruption, cutting across categories and producing startling juxtapositions: Belle and Sebastian appears next to *Being and Time*, Vanilla ice cream next to Paul Valéry, and punk next to Proust.