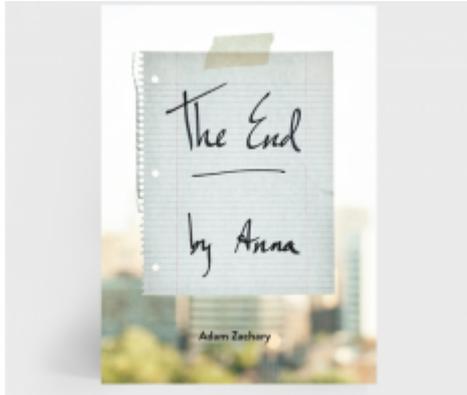


# Most Melancholy Spectacle: A review of The End, by Anna – by Adam Zachary

written by Aaron Boothby | February 3, 2017



*The End, by Anna* by Adam Zachary

Metatron Press, 2016

108 pages – [Metatron](#) / [Amazon](#)

The text provokes, but what does that mean? Perhaps a provocative text is a machine for generating questions you may not have asked otherwise. Questions at least feel better than answers, which everyone seems to have but make nothing move. The questions generated vary and are unpredictable. A text can't know how *you*, as a reader, will react, like a piece of art cannot, and this is where metaphor, a device for the transmission of meaning, can seem to fail. If the artist doesn't care what the work means, only that it is enacted as spectacle in the most simplistic way, where does this leave meaning?

In *The End, by Anna*, by Adam Zachary, such a work, itself called "The End," is presented at the beginning of the book along with a couple pages of notes. Because it never is enacted, "The End" exists only as archival text. It's inert, for now. What follows this is a biography doubled into autobiography and a list of artworks completed by Anna, last name never given, the very young but prolific artist whose life is cut short before "The End" can be completed.

It's the short, biography-as-autobiography by the narrator of the events leading up to Anna's death that makes the book a novella, a messy entanglement of human actions rather than a description of an unfinished artwork. The narrator, known only as "I" (and "A.K." in one note), is an archivist and co-executor of Anna's estate, who is compelled to respond to increasing interest in the artist's work. An assistant, both in the brief story of Anna's life and in the archival afterlife, "I" is complicit in ways that distress the provocations of the work itself, because "I" desires to see the work enacted by potential readers, asking, in a final note, "if you're even considering it, please do get in touch and allow me to persuade you." As a document, the collection of texts reads as a sort of message sent out in precisely this hope of finding readers who may complete the work.

What is "The End?" A proposal for a piece of live-streamed performance art that is not quite suicide (though the artist will die), where the Anna (or any artist choosing to make the work) is flown to a remote location, confines herself to an area limited by the frame of a video camera, waits to expire and decompose. The act rests on an absolute lack of conflict, a possibility of making the horror of death moving by controlling spectacle, and confounds most notions of suicide; Anna isn't compelled to death by anything other than the demands of the piece of art she has imagined. As the narrator says, "I saw no real evidence of depression, anxiety, or personality disorders." Anna is not sick; Anna is perfectly healthy, able and beautiful. That path of rationalization for the work is closed. It's outside the bounds of any contemporary debate on suicide.

"The End" rests on a definition of enacted spectacle as superior to metaphor supplied by Anna, when she encounters a formalist poet in a writing workshop who suggests writing a poem is "like building a house." Instead, Anna argues, "A poem should burn a house down." With the narrator's participation she burns down an abandoned house and films it, calling this a poem and presenting it as such. Challenged by another student that this is too *unlike* a poem to be one, she looks up, rejects, and then alters the Wikipedia entry for "Poem." The last line of her inserted definition is: "we need a word for the purest form of art, and we may as well use poetry." After this episode, the narrator says, she decides "to abandon the label of poetry...begin to simply *do* things." It's the last time she attempts to define her art.

For Anna, the work "wouldn't matter if not for its documentation. It's about the *spectacle*" and so her death becomes simply part of the equation: to create the spectacle, this one, requires a death, which is hers. The lack of conflict is total. Sentiment is present only in the form of Anna's boyfriend, Olivier, who reacts furiously against her decision and later is the cause of her accidental death, making the completion of "The End" impossible.

As for the narrator telling this story, whose own is inextricably bound up with Anna's, we're mostly left to wonder. They exist as reflection and contrast: Anna's mirroring shadow. What we know comes through in reactions to actions by Anna, things said by Anna, except for one section where the narrator recounts attending a performance by Marina Abramovic and having a conversation with her about "The End." We learn that the narrator is a sometimes lover of Anna and Olivier as a comment in passing; they never discuss it. That they are a trans woman is revealed by another character Jane, a trans woman who replaces the narrator in the lover/assistant position, when she includes the narrator in a statement about *us*, which makes the narrator uncomfortable. Anna is she, Olivier is he, Jane is she, but the narrator is only "I." These questions ultimately may be beside the point, because the primary identity of the narrator is absorbed into their dedication to Anna, their position of archivist. Anna seems to suck up the agency of all those around her.

It's left to Jane to be the political counterpoint to Anna, as Olivier is the sentimental and "I" is the shadow. Though she also loves and collaborates with Anna, she notes the lack of any social aspect to Anna's work, the obscenity of her plan to waste a perfectly healthy, able, body. "Jane," the

narrator writes, "was the first to challenge Anna on the vast privilege that 'The End' drew upon." Anna replies that she considers "'The End' to be above privilege...It'll be such a universal work that it will be above everything." It matters that Anna's reasons for everything are more or less vague abstractions, that she seems a tourist in queer worlds and engages in reducing all bodies to spectacle perhaps *because* she has a perfectly good body to waste, because she is beautiful and her family wealthy and no one has even died in her life.

This is unsentimental literature and reading sentimental reasons, such as does the archivist/assistant love Anna?, doesn't feel appropriate. It's better to say they believe in Anna's work, though they cannot explain why: "...I didn't understand much of her work – and though much of it was, by her own admission, neither sophisticated nor particularly well-informed – Anna was brilliant, the most inventive mind I ever met." Don't we want to enable the brilliance of our friends? Aren't we willing to go too far because we, ourselves, feed off and perhaps require that brilliance to sustain ourselves?

What would one see, if "The End" was playing in a large room of a gallery, in the dark? A naked young woman alone on barren ground perhaps shivering in the cold, or lying motionless, as a corpse being consumed by animals. How long could it be watched for? What would be transmitted by the gesture? What would be added by the note, fixed to the gallery wall, that yes, the artist died in the process? What gallery would show such a piece? Speculative work asks us to imagine it's insertion into the lived-world. Would it be profound, to see the fragility of a body exposed? Yes, one wants to say, *but as image*. Yet what would one see? A human body consumed in the production of spectacle. Horror, that is, but voluntary. Sadness, too, a profound sadness which is perhaps the most pervasive texture in this story ultimately about waste. Every body, after all, will be wasted, exhausted, in what is a matter of time: the urge to make that into art is grotesque but mirrors quite precisely many desires of this current age, and our melancholy.

When Anna dies, an actually shocking instant, it's the lack of control, the impossibility of purity that one is made aware of. The archivist notices the dirt of the flowerbed "had begun to absorb her blood in a parody of her planned rot into some distant soil" and when they kneel next to her they "feel...wet with an unidentifiable fluid and I was sad and was so angry." That a novel expressing so much lack of sentiment about death can be make the reality of a death so shocking, carry the horror and ugly finality of it into the text, is a powerful moment. Art's intentions toward purity are thrown, almost comically if it wasn't so awful, into juxtaposition with lived reality. Death, despite being rendered artistically countless times, is fundamentally unartistic in its actuality because its fact carries no meaning. Only the spectacle of it can be made to do that, but the spectacle can't be fully controlled: it consumes even its practitioners.