

# What Would Lynne Tillman Do?

written by Christopher Walker | February 4, 2015



*What Would Lynne Tillman Do?* by Lynne Tillman

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192 pages – [Red Lemonade](#) / [Amazon](#)

Lynne Tillman has been variously described as “experimental,” “minimalist,” and “a writer’s writer”—but none of these labels will tell you anything useful, so far into cliché have they sunk. If you want a better epithet, you might begin with something like “polymath.”

Born in 1949, Lynne Tillman has had a busy career thus far, producing a quantity of work that the rest of us can admire, enjoy, and perhaps grow jealous of. She is well-known (in America, certainly in New York; less so in Europe) for her fiction, but it is in her narrative works of non-fiction that I think her greatest talent resides.

*What Would Lynne Tillman Do?* is a collection of essays, articles, and other fragments; the organizational conceit is the alphabet – there is at least one entry for each letter – running from A is for Andy (about Warhol) to Z is for Jonze (about Spike). As a conceit it is something, I suppose, to help the reader move about the book, but it stretches itself all out of shape, especially when you consider that the last entry, the aforementioned Z is for Jonze, runs to a single paragraph, a superficial review of *Being John Malkovich*. You begin to wonder if this piece had been included just for the sake of rounding out the contents page.

Most of the topics Tillman covers are related to fine culture, though some might only be of interest to a niche audience. There might not, for instance, be much overlap between those who enjoy the photography of William Eggleston (best known, if you can say that about him at all, for a picture of a tricycle) and those who are familiar with the precise language used by Marx in his political tracts.

If you keep an open mind and are willing to explore areas previously untouched, you may well find, if not enlightenment, then at least finely crafted cultural entertainment. The first essay is a prime example. As an Englishman born in the last year of the seventies, the life and times of Andy Warhol have never had the kind of importance attached to them as for Americans born, say, in the mid-sixties. In fact, the only titbit of information that has stuck in my mind about Warhol is that he once experimented with creating his art on the Commodore Amiga, the same computer that marked my own entry into the world of technology. You can keep your cans of soup and prints of Marilyn Monroe – this was where it was at for me.

I can’t say that this feeling has changed after reading “The Last Words Are

Andy Warhol," but I do now understand much more of the place that Warhol occupies in the history of art, as Tillman illustrates here:

Warhol dropped the mirror, let it crack into pieces, and instead held a tape recorder up to life. He saw a god in the machine and used as many as he could—a notes the arrival of video, a new toy, to the Factory—and Warhol didn't fear the loss of authorship to machines, when his hand, literally, wasn't in or on it; he constructed another kind of artist, who directs machines, people, uses technology, whose imprint was virtual.

Ok, now I can see the relevance and impact of Warhol: though I am not grabbed by the lapels and shaken about by his work, I do see that his influence has become pervasive in the way that many of us look at modern art, at how that art is created, and how the process of creating art—the idea of authorship—can itself be considered art as well. Thank you, Ms. Tillman, for showing that to me.

It's interesting that this notion of authorship is broached so early in the book, since later Tillman herself hands over the creative reins. "A Conversation with Etel Adnan" is literally that: Tillman asks the questions, or directs the conversation with pointed statements, but the content here is generated by Adnan. I had never heard of this poet/playwright/painter before, and I cannot honestly say that I will be rushing out to buy any of her work — sentences like "if I can talk of the idea of Being separated from objects, then I can also say there is no Being outside manifestation" don't sit well with my constitution, and act as warning signs telling me that I'd struggle with the work in question — but that's not to say that the interview isn't worth reading. Tillman keeps to the background but through her direction you can see that the conversation explores more interesting places than it might have done with a less invested interlocutor.

Coming back to Eggleston, you might be wondering how Tillman crafts a piece about a photographer that remains interesting without ever showing the photographer's work. This is not an easy skill, though here she is helped by Eggleston himself, a resolutely interesting character: "a romantic figure from the old school: courtly, handsome, alcoholic, not going quietly into that good night." Tillman then spins away from the photographer: he becomes a key that unlocks greater clarity of meaning in other situations, such as the death of the artist Mike Kelley, and the destruction of a jail in Tijuana. The article — brief compared to the interview that precedes it — works because the viewpoint never settles for long in one place, instead zooming from one image to another as quickly as I might in browsing 500px. That's one way to discuss photography if you don't have any photographs to show.

Tillman is at her strongest when she analyses areas that require an enormous investment of time and intellectual energy to first master. If you need to read a hundred books and have a hundred conversations just to be able to write a cohesive essay about an artist's work, Tillman strikes me as the sort to do it. That said, she is not so good at the prosaic and ostensibly topical. Take the Marx article I mentioned earlier, "Body Parts for Sale." In her examination of the language Marx uses to describe commodities, she is revelatory in the truest sense—reading her essay you come to a greater

understanding of both the theory and the modern application. But the essay begins with a dated anecdote: Tillman recounts the telling of that dry old urban legend, the one where the victim of the story wakes to find his kidney has been stolen. Had I read this in 1991 I might have found it as ghoulish as the author professes, but for a book published in 2014 this is a marked anachronism.

This leads me to the one great complaint I have about *What Would Lynne Tillman Do?* The writing shows an author who can move beyond clichéd ideas and expressions and into far more fertile territory, whilst ensuring that her individual voice remains present in every essay. However, having spent a good many hours in Ms Tillman's company, I could never shake the feeling that I was looking through somebody's scrapbook. It was either Martin Amis or Christopher Hitchens—I have a terrible memory and for once Google is no help—who said that there comes a time in every writer's life when he goes back through all the articles he has written and says, "There's a book in here somewhere." It's a completist's vision, you might say, and I understand the urge myself. *What Would Lynne Tillman Do?* is a fine compendium, but you come away wishing that you had been given something meatier to sink your teeth into, something that span more dynamically in orbit around one particular idea, much as with Janet Malcolm's superior *Forty-One False Starts*.

Simply put, this is a great introduction to the works of one of the twentieth century's more important cultural essayists, but only that: an introduction. It whets the appetite; fortunately for all of us, it is not the only Lynne Tillman book out there.