

Infinite Baldauf: Corrie Baldauf and the *Infinite Jest* Project

[slated for publication *Hyperallergic*: Jan/Feb 2015]

When a tweet from @CorrieBaldauf breaks into your twitterstream, it is captivating and disorienting for a number of reasons. More often than not, she is live-tweeting her progress through her latest iteration of the *Infinite Jest* Project, an exercise in literature, obsession, and social media that Baldauf has been working on since 2013.

Baldauf initially began the process of flagging all the references to color in the text—more than 2,600 of them—as a sort of mechanism to help her concentrate on the process of reading David Foster Wallace’s infamous masterwork, a notoriously difficult literary achievement that divides readers on one side or the other, or in many cases, lost in the middle. Her early attempts to tackle the book stymied, Baldauf “realized that the part I cared the most about was the color references, and that was going to be the familiar, intriguing thing that was going to help me focus, to commit.” Color figures strongly in much of Baldauf’s work, which includes *Optimism Filters*, and exquisitely meticulous visualized recordings of overhead conversations.

Over the course of the next three or four months, Baldauf was able to make her way through *Infinite Jest*, the color-flagging helping her to stay committed, even as it slowed her down, requiring an average of four breaks a page. But the dynamic of this process as a project emerged around page 200, when, though fully committed to the reading at this point, Baldauf continued to flag colors. “It started as a tool, which is how someone would

start drinking coffee, or start doing cocaine,” Baldauf says, “But once the tool resolved the problem of not-reading it, that was when it became an obsession.”

Ironic, or maybe exactly fitting, that the novel whose major theme is obsession in all its forms, and which features an “entertainment” so powerful in its ability to take the viewer out of themselves that it delivers every viewer into basically a vegetable, has brought an obsessive quality to Baldauf’s project. After completing her first edition of *Infinite Jest*, Baldauf moved on to a second copy. Baldauf refers to her habit of duplicating as “Only Only,” which is drawn from a typo found in Zorn’s translation of “*Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*,” by Walter Benjamin, an occurrence that Baldauf feels adequately sums up the entire essay.

The color tabs began as the mechanism that draws Baldauf away from herself (in her desire not to read the book) and into the world of *Infinite Jest*, ironically producing a unique art object, which has its own aura of appeal – in the months that Baldauf has gone public with her project, it has generated conversations with hundreds of people. “It’s the first project I’ve done where the conversation is as creational as the making,” she says. In her second iteration, Baldauf has added what she calls “digital intimacy,”

This is where she began live-tweeting her reading of *Infinite Jest*, utilizing social media—a medium that has an addicting quality all of its own. “Seeing a book in your twitter feed is nostalgic. It’s a surrogate from a literary time.” This quixotic collision marries twitter—one of the shortest of short literary forms—with a titan of the long form.

Now, as she has begun her third edition of *Infinite Jest*, with ever-increasing specifications to her process that require greater cost and care (much like other addictions), Baldauf is forced to consider some tough questions about the ongoing nature of her project.

“I’ve pictured in my mind a really tall stack,” she says, “but it’s up in the air. Usually I don’t think there needs to be more than two. Two is already many; why would you ever need more than two of something? It’s redundant.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m going to stop after this one,” Baldauf says. She pauses to reflect, then burst into her infectious laughter, “But that’s just what an addict would say, isn’t it?”