

CLOSE-UP

# For Real

ALISON M. GINGERAS

ON FRIEDRICH KUNATH'S *YOU OWE ME A FEELING* (2012)



Right: Page from Friedrich Kunath's *You Owe Me a Feeling* (Blum & Poe, 2012).



**EVERYDAY LIFE IS FULL OF VOIDS:** the suspended nowhere of idling in traffic, the serpentine line at the post office, the dreary waiting room at the dentist's, 3:00 AM insomnia. The creators of Instagram seem to have found a lucrative niche in these "empty" spaces throughout our circadian slog. More than just a means to fend off boredom or banality, the mobile photo feed proffers a temporary visual lifeline out of the abyss of anxiety and existential dread that can quickly overtake these vacant periods—images of voids to fill the void. "Idle hands are the devil's workshop": Today's popular *passe-temps* is designed to thwart or at least divert Satan's complots, albeit with filtered images and phantom communications that will eventually dissipate into the ether.

Killing time with my iPhone in the predawn hours, I stumbled on artist Friedrich Kunath's Instagram account and found the cover image of art historian James Elkins's rather unorthodox 2001 book, *Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings*, illustrated with an alluring detail of a tearful eye of the Virgin—Dieric Bouts's *Mater*

Right: Photograph from Friedrich Kunath's Instagram feed of a fundraising tennis tournament for the MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Sheats-Goldstein House, Beverly Hills, CA, October 26, 2013.

Below: Spread from Friedrich Kunath's *You Owe Me a Feeling* (Blum & Poe, 2012).





A collage called "No Matter What"

Two pages from Friedrich Kunath's *You Owe Me a Feeling* (Blum & Poe, 2012).



It took forever to get home

*dolorosa*, ca. 1460. A sucker for the Our Lady of Sorrows genre, I was immediately compelled to track down Elkins's study chronicling viewers' emotional responses to paintings. As I'd recently become obsessed with one of Kunath's artist's books, this sparked a conceptual chain reaction of thoughts about ways to grapple with time through images, art, and affect.

Kunath's *You Owe Me a Feeling* (2012) is visually seductive, mysterious yet insightful, and often very droll—a narrative sequence of staged photographs and concrete poems that form a melancholic tale for our current moment. A collaboration between Kunath (whose paintings and sculptures serve as backdrops and props for the story), songwriter and poet David Berman (best known for his cult band Silver Jews), and photographer Michael Schmelling, *You Owe Me a Feeling* unfolds with all the distinctive reverie of a *ciné-roman*.

An enigmatic and endearing portrait of the artist emerges from its pages—in the mode of “semi-classic semi-fiction,” to quote one of Berman's aphoristic lines. The artist character is based on Kunath himself, not only incorporating trademark imagery from his artwork (romantic sunsets, emotive animals, penny loafers) but also depicting personal obsessions and hobbies such as tennis (also visible on Instagram). To dispel any confusion with “truthful” autobiography, Kunath is portrayed by the ruggedly handsome former model Rudy Verwey. As a projection of a future, older Kunath, his doppelgänger is likewise, in real life, a European gentleman who is expatriated in the sunny dystopia that is upper-class Los Angeles.

Depicted primarily as a solitary figure, the artist in *You Owe Me a Feeling* performs both creative “work” (in a gallery, in his studio, holding a palette and crumpled paint tubes and looking contemplatively into the distance) and SoCal-style “play” (on the beach, on a sailboat, on a tennis court, driving a white Porsche convertible). With no pretense to documentary, but with a definite nod to pastiche, each lush image is precisely staged to heighten both the artifice and the sentimentality of its narrative vignette. We see “Kunath” lovingly cradling a grinning (then crying) foam-and-resin orange, gingerly positioning a large pin that reads I ♥ MELANCHOLY, and wading into the Pacific carrying a disconnected landline telephone. While there's no clear plot or resolution, “Kunath”'s journey is united by themes of existential emptiness and emotional malaise, propelled by the search for meaning (despite the nihilistic futility of that exercise). “Sadness is not co-terminous with hopelessness,” “The tennis court is a graph of atheism,” “Depression is the only way God / can contact some of us”: Berman's words act as a fragmented libretto for Kunath's wry fable of contemporary existence and of the quest for tangible affect.

That “Kunath”'s quixotic search for empathetic connection happens in the midst of all the Tinseltown fakery is the very point of this tale.

If taken at face value, Kunath and “Kunath” might be accused of celebrating their self-indulgent, first-world problems; *You Owe Me a Feeling* could be dismissed as an ironic ode to dissatisfaction and discontent against the deadpan backdrop of La-La Land affluence. Yet a literal interpretation of the narrative misses the point. When understood as allegory, this book becomes so much more: It asks questions about the very function of art in life, posing it as exactly that contradictory link between the artificial object and the interior sensation.

When actors in a tragedy feign weeping on-screen or on stage, there is nothing to stop the audience from responding with genuine tears. Likewise, *You Owe Me a Feeling* strikes a sincere chord through its strategic insincerity, its mimicry of our daily struggle with real life's voids—producing (at least in this reader) profound sentiment and revelation in its detachment from detachment. Art itself owes us a feeling. Kunath asks us to consider the affective function of art both virtually and physically—rather than focus exclusively on its sociopolitical or historical use-value.

I have even come to regard *You Owe Me a Feeling* as a contemporary incarnation of the *Andachtsbild*—a medieval genre of religious artmaking that is, in Elkins's description, “specifically intended to produce an intense emotional experience.” While we might not literally cry while turning the pages of Kunath's book, it prods us out of our stoic scrolling and blasé voyeurism—challenging us to flee the mirage-filled desert of twenty-first-century life. “O I have walked inside oil paintings,” writes Berman—echoing the way in which the intense, private contemplation of an *andachtsbild* can make the viewer experience feelings identical to the sorrow depicted in the image. This devotional identification was reincarnated anew in the roiling natural world depicted by the Romantics during the nineteenth century. And now we have an *andachtsbild* for our own attention-deficit-riddled era: That Berman's text is overlaid on a photograph of “Kunath” walking in the surf, “talking” on his outmoded landline, only heightens this allegory—for here is the sublime of Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* reimagined for a secular age, with vintage phone and perfectly distressed jeans. If Instagram is an ocean of manufactured desire—or is, to apply a line from Berman's text as its slogan, “where / boredom / meets / longing”—Kunath has created a contemporary book of devotions that gives us pause, his lachrymal orange just as oddly touching as it is real. □

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Clockwise from top left: Two page details and spread from Friedrich Kunath's *You Owe Me a Feeling* (Blum & Poe, 2012).

