

# FrameWork 3/19

Anna Gallagher-Ross and Jacob Gallagher-Ross on Gareth Long

## LOOKING AT THE FIGURES

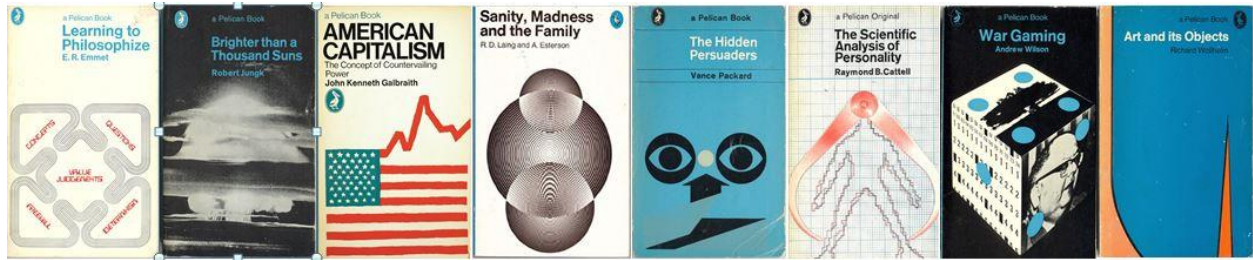
What captures the tenor of an era, especially an aspirational one? Romantic paintings often invite us to gaze at a picturesque ruin: a crumbling castle, say, that speaks of the folly of human striving and the pathos of decay. Sometimes our gaze is funneled through the vantage of a proxy viewer; more often, though, we're left to insert ourselves into the landscape, and its narrative of inevitable decline, to place our own fragile figures onto its ground.

Gareth Long's *Let's Look at the Figures* assembles the ruins of a vast, utopian intellectual project: the path-breaking Pelican book series, once ubiquitous, now almost forgotten. The exhibition translates design elements—the titular figures—from book covers published in three landmark years of the series, 1970, 1971 and 1972, into three sprawling constellations of sculptural forms, one for each year. As it does, it creates an intellectual fever chart of the era's preoccupations, anxieties, and fervid hopes, a graphic inventory of its characteristic structures of thought and feeling. The accumulation prompts an uncomfortable reckoning: what are the figures that will define our generation?

In the 1960s and 70s, in Britain and the Commonwealth, the Pelican imprint, a subdivision of Penguin Books, aimed to make big ideas available for small prices, in attractive and moderately priced paperbacks. These portable, pocket-sized books were suitable for reading during a commute, and friendly to the budgets of both undergraduates and the working class. Aimed at an avid audience of would-be autodidacts, the series published the latest world-shaking ideas—calibrated to wake the not-yet woke.

Scanning the titles of the series, you watch progressive thinking—or what the Pelican editors imagined that to be—expand from orthodox socialism to something far harder to characterize. Beginning with hortatory pamphlets by George Bernard Shaw, and left-wing histories by the likes of R.H. Tawney and G.D.H. Cole, the series branched out to include art criticism, psychoanalysis, and postcolonial politics; feminist and queer analysis coexisted with agriculture, economics, and biology. What did a modern person need to know to understand their place in the world? The series's capaciousness is at once optimistic and overwhelming. As the dizzying sum of “general” knowledge accumulates across decades of publishing and hundreds of volumes, we watch information and analysis chafing against the confinement of the books themselves. Gazing across the panoply, you can imagine knowledge exceeding its bounds—the Pelican series was like a proto-Wikipedia.

The three years of Pelican titles resurrected by *Let's Look at the Figures* are exemplary of the vivid design of Germano Facetti, art director of both the Penguin and Pelican series from 1961-72. Facetti grew up in Milan, and after surviving internment at Mauthausen during the Second World War, he worked as a designer in France and Italy, before landing in London, where he established his career. (As if forecasting the role he would play at Penguin, he was part of the visionary exhibition *This is Tomorrow* (1956) at Whitechapel Gallery, which attempted to imagine both the art and daily life of the future, and involved designers, architects, theorists, and artists creating work collaboratively in



teams.) Pairing sans-serif fonts like Helvetica with striking images and unconventional aesthetics—from photography to diagrammatic design—Facetti’s covers appeared to be ripped straight from a larger cultural collage.

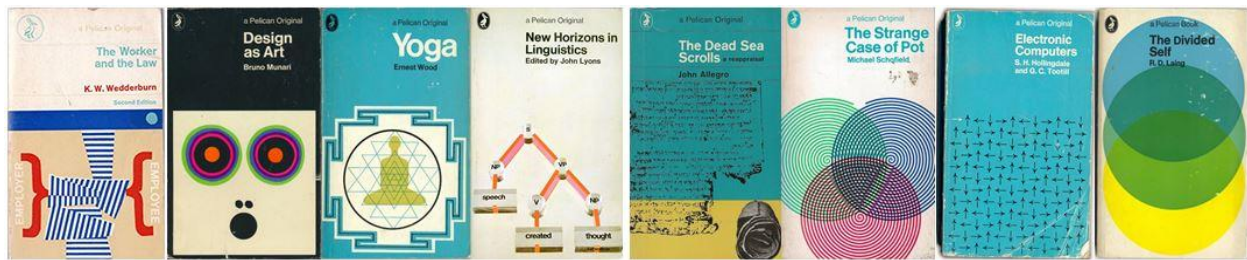
Taken together, the Pelican books encapsulate not so much a canon as a humane persona: they’re aimed at, and tried to conjure into being, an omnivorous general reader, one who might pick up Freud in the morning and Fanon at night, taking Friedan along to read on the train: a cultivated, progressive intellectual who’d combine the benefits of a liberal education with hardscrabble knowledge from the university of real life.

For a while, it seemed that ideal reader was real: in the 1960s, even in the 1970s, the Pelican series sold well, in tens, and even hundreds, of thousands of copies. A Pelican book became a self-presentational prop: by carrying a Pelican around, you advertised your membership in this vanguard book club. Your bookshelf could be a catalogue of your political and intellectual positions. But by the early 1980s, the series was moribund, kept going for wishful rather than commercial reasons. According to most accounts, the imprint was finally packed away and warehoused in 1984—a date that is precisely ominous enough.

The years that Long’s figures chronicle represent a transitional moment between the optimism of the 1960s and the increasing fragmentation of the 1970s: an era of epoch-making political victories—postcolonial liberation, increasing gender equality, gay rights, sexual liberation—and bitter interfactional feuds. The book covers from 1970-72 provide a visual record of rapidly expanding progressive thinking, as a once-mostly class-based leftism became intersectional. They’re an archive of intellectual ferment from the era of high theory’s high aspirations—beginning at the end of a violent but hopeful decade, ending on the verge of recession, crisis, and the birth of neoliberalism. (Long’s ordering of the 1970 list begins with a book called *America’s Receding Future*.)

To construct the figures, Long isolated one design element from each paperback cover, creating one sculpture for each book published in the transitional years 1970/71/72—a single gesture, in a single color. He cut the shapes from aluminum, spray-painting them in confetti hues as precisely harmonized as they are vibrant. At first glance, these dancing silhouettes have the assertiveness of primary shades, but they reward deeper attention with surprising subtleties.

Sometimes, the sculptures limn bold icons: the Magritte horse from the cover of John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*, or the Picasso bull—grabbed from *Guernica*—on a book about Spain. Frequently, they’re cutouts of cutouts: registering the outline of a cameo portrait in negative space, or the emanations of an energetic abstraction. Installed on two white gallery walls—1970 upstairs, 1971 and 72 below—the figures jostle for attention, and the visual surfeit might leave you jittery. The white spaces between glyphs glare with tantalizing but unsolvable connections.



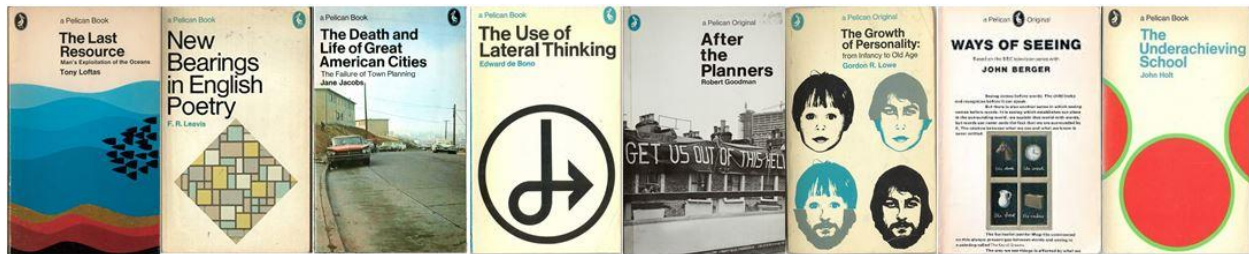
The exhibition yields an image of a crowded field of knowledge production, at once capturing the unforeseeable interactions of revelatory ideas in the minds of a reader, and the cacophony of a new mass market that published more books than anybody had time to read. *Let's Look at the Figures* presents a problem of intellectual history, rendered as a problem of performance: how can a spectator take it all in? Long, an artist often preoccupied by the vagaries of knowledge transmission, asks us to contemplate our own ways of seeing.

Standing back from the riot of colour on the wall, you see the clamor of an era, the outlines of provocative ideas competing for your attention. These objects are the residue of intellectual history, an archive of utopian aspirations described in design flourishes. They might make you think about the lifespan of an idea, how meaning and fervor inevitably fade in future generations—and even about the strange afterlives of the theories these books enclosed, some of which perform very different roles on today's intellectual stages. (Yesterday's provocations are today's orthodoxies; yesterday's received notions might suddenly be new again.)

Get in close, though, and formal concerns take over—you lose the big picture amid the intricacies of shape, material, and hue. And Long's figures are designed to compound this conundrum: from afar, they look slickly produced, as exactly stamped as a mass market paperback cover, flat, iconic. Zooming in, you get lost in the details and the dimensionality: left deliberately unfinished, the shapes are more roughly cut than you think, their edges gritty with paint flecks. You see the labour, the mark of human hands wielding the tools and the spray paint cans. And you might think of the work that produced the books: the painstaking thinking, writing, editing, designing and printing that went into producing a now-obscure book of theory or social history, once perhaps thought to be world-changing. The figure of a forgotten public intellectual has a particular kind of pathos.

In one way, then, *Let's Look at the Figures* is asking us to do what the Pelican editors wanted: to put it all together, to assemble a coherent interpretation from disparate pieces. But it's also pointing out the folly of that project, even as it laments the vanished possibility. (It's a test of your own intellectual background and sympathies: how many of these famous books have you read? Is it easier to spot the Picasso than to identify avatars of postcolonial politics?)

And Long slyly reminds us of a massive epistemological shift those editors only partly anticipated: the culture of print was already giving way to a new visual culture that would be propelled by television, advertising, and the even newer media still on the horizon. Images ate print. The age of information democracy those paperbacks hinted at has arrived, of course, but the results aren't as enlightened as the era's utopians would have hoped: we know a little about a lot of things, a lot about very little.



These graphic shards, torn from their book jackets, hint at what’s happened to the ideas that were once contained within: spilled out into the Internet, carved into byte-sized pieces or diffusing unacknowledged across Twitter, they’re at once everywhere and nowhere. We graze in the field of ideas as freely as a Pelican editor might have hoped, but in smaller morsels. Synthesis is perhaps more important than ever, but harder to achieve. Social critique is ubiquitous now, but it happens at a furious, iterative pace. Caught up in the churn of online debate, we don’t have time to peruse the latest paperback. We need politics in smaller, faster-moving pieces.

But we do live in the world the ideas embodied by the Pelican series made: some of their authors’ hopes for a better world have come into being, even as others remain painfully out of reach. Long’s metal sculptures—tangible, but partial—hint at this unfinished revolution.

As you look at the figures, trying to add it all up, you might pause for a moment to mourn the loss of the hypothetical new reader the Pelican series aimed to bring to being. Long’s scattered puzzle pieces, each a figment of a figment, gesturing back to a bygone vision of progressive education that could have been assembled one paperback at a time, conjure a lost accommodation between democracy and rigor, critique and canonicity—a time when figure and ground weren’t both always in motion, when something like general knowledge was still possible, desirable, *thinkable*. Looking at the figures, you might catch a glimpse of the informed citizenry of the world we’re still hoping to meet.