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FREELY ESPOUSING: OR SUBJECT, TO THE AVANT-GARDE

Toward the end of Lucy Lippard's foundational 1968 essay "The Dematerialization of Art," she writes, about Conceptual art (in which idea has supplanted or deferred the "art object" as a point of focus): "If the object becomes obsolete, objective distance becomes obsolete. Sometime in the near future it may be necessary for the writer to be an artist as well as for the artist to be a writer. There will still be scholars and historians of art, but the contemporary critic may have to choose between a creative originality and explanatory historicism" (Lippard 275).

Since at least the summer of 2008, when she delivered the keynote at the Conceptual Poetry Symposium at the University of Arizona Poetry Center, Marjorie Perloff has refocused her redoubtable and considered attention on new conceptual poetry, the appropriative work of Kenny Goldsmith, and associated "uncreative writing" pedagogy as antidote or counterexample to what she perceives, according to her 2012 essay "Poetry on the Brink," as a glut of workshopped poetry "well crafted" to be sentimental and epiphanic, facile and friendly lyric fare that *The New Yorker* would publish and that English departments would by committee deem a credit to any tenure-track applicant. Matvei Yankelevich in his July 2012 open letter to Perloff in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* has already articulated best and most definitively the fallacies in Perloff's roundup conclusions about all that we might call creative writing, and I won't attempt to duplicate the points of his excellent piece. Because the very terms of our shared language (his and mine and

maybe yours) about artifice, determinism, chance, constraint v. form, and indeterminacy we owe largely to the work of Marjorie Perloff, I share Yankelevich's special disappointment. I attended that 2008 symposium, in which one rather quickly met the realization (confirmed by Poetry Center staff) that Perloff herself assembled and invited the participants and respondents, including several of her graduate students, and one understood there that avant-garde favor was being transferred singlehandedly to those who had most cleanly cleared the erstwhile high marks of the post-Language-Poet melee. The conference was fascinating; the panels and presentations were provocative; and the confrontations over shorn subjectivity in wholly appropriated text, and about gender and difference at the straight white male center of the new conceptual writing, were completely stimulating and re-positioning. The only off note, for many of us, was Marjorie Perloff, who seemed to cling to a staunch purism about the absolute impersonality of the conceptual projects in question, their absolute incongruence with postmodern pluralism, the absolute impertinence of challenges about whom the movement seemed to exclude, and the historical equivalence of conceptual poetry to the gains of dematerialized art, particularly Marcel Duchamp's, more than ninety years ago. I think it is not from an objective distance that Perloff has conjoined the avant-garde and absolutism yet again, in her congratulation of work that best manifests the obsolescence of the "object."

For one thing, to claim that poetry has lagged flatfooted behind art in its conceptualist achievements discounts the thorough influence that conceptual art has had on poets of recent generations, those of us who have taken from conceptual art *not* some challenge to equate it in poetry but rather permission to borrow and try on the methods and stances and, especially rich for writers, the documents and *paratexts* of that art, those actions and performances. In conceptual art, those incidental scores and instructions and schematics and records for and of a performance became for some artists more stylized, more central the more they displaced and deferred the "art"—and writers

were there, were and are among artists, delighting in the “field notes” and methodologies and specs and cataloging metrics tangential to the art or performance. Where Allan Kaprow and Mary Kelly and Adrian Piper and Richard Long and Eleanor Antin were *paratextual*, precisely there, Jackson Mac Low and Leslie Scalapino and Bernadette Mayer and David Antin were and are *poetic*. And some, like Daniel Spoerri and Sol Lewitt and Teresa Hak Kyung Cha and Tom Phillips and now David Buuck and CA Conrad and Brandon Brown—and Kenny Goldsmith—were and are working so well in the arena that neither categorical distinction can be made.

To survey all the “project books,” as many call them, by poets no longer confined in or out of the academy by the lyric tradition alone is to see the influence of art that obviated craft as such to make idea and inquiry and document the “matter” (and used scientific process and procedural notation), even if some of these younger writers do not or, even, could not cite Vito Acconci or Yvonne Rainer as progenitors. Maybe, in fact, Marjorie Perloff—in targeting sentimentality or egocentrism or originality—has chosen the wrong thing to detonate; maybe the principle of *ut pictura poesis* is the center that no longer holds.

It may not be that poetry and art are on parallel tracks, separated and thereby analogous, but, rather that they cross and dovetail and diverge often. Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, though experimental, has never been considered a conceptual poet; but for years much of her poetry has seemed to emulate paratext. Consider the opening passage from “Texas,” in her most celebrated collection, *Empathy* (1989), “I used the table as a reference and just did things from there / in register, to play a form of feeling out to the end...” (25). I enjoy reading this alongside any part of the score Deborah Hay produces for a solo dance performance, “No Time to Fly”—for instance, one of its opening prompts: “What if my choice to surrender the pattern, and it is just a pattern, of facing a single direction or fixing on a

singularly coherent idea, feeling, or object when I am dancing is a way of remembering to see where I am in order to surrender where I am” (artist’s web site, 2010). Both pieces reference an experiment or performance that happens elsewhere, away from the text that lays out its method before us. Immersion in poetry as paratext, expressly incidental text, can make one reconsider as part of the family even the most epiphanic and lyric of writing. When in *The Prelude*, William Wordsworth accounts his habit of watching a “diamond light” outside his cabin door, where the sunshine sparkled from the surface of a rock “in constant springs,” and freeing his imagination to see there a shield over a knight’s tomb or the entrance to a fairy cave (so rapt he “could not have been bribed to disenchant the spectacle by visiting the spot”) he scores or annotates his small performance: “willful Fancy, in no hurtful mood, / engrafted far-fetched shapes on feelings bred / by pure Imagination: busy Power /...with her ready Pupil turned / instinctively to human Passions, then / least understood” (Book 8, lines 406-426). For a moment, one can read the vaunted Romantic verse as script for a performer in a possible movement piece; and to do so further suggests that authorship is mutable over time—and that influence is bidirectional, as well as transdisciplinary.

Criticism itself is a kind of paratext, one that is expectantly incorporated as part of the work in relational art (Marina Abramovich’s for instance). And when I think of Lippard’s anticipation of a critic who turns in his trade not to “explanatory historicism” but to “creative originality,” I think of James Schuyler, whose delicious art writings browse and remark and clearly train the selecting eye of his first poems, which are their intertexts, those collected in 1970 in *Freely Espousing*, the title of which is a queered description of method. As in his poems, I chase after the experience enlivened in all the seeing, the subjectivity, in this 1959 comment on a 10th Street gallery group show called “Twenty Seven Collages”: “The VICENTE has the sharpness of eye that values an ooze of glue;

PERLE FINE'S green and black is like thinking of the country in the city; ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG'S might be the last to attract notice, which is part of the joke but it is not a joke; AL HELD'S black paint and newspaper scraps make a point of impermanence; so, differently, does PATRICIA PASLOFF'S, like a paper lantern in dew;...ALEX KATZ is precise and funny about a rocking chair" (125). The poet is after art, but not flatfooted. Outside the frames, positioned and paced by the connections one makes, composed by them, populated alone, rotating and ricocheting and exploring the room, or putting just so a score for such a dance.

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