

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A Book Review in rebuttal: Sloppy "Scholarship"

I've never before had the occasion to review a book mostly in terms of what it says (or in this case doesn't say) about my work; but I find no better way to reveal the limitations of Johanna Drucker's *The Century of Artists' Books* (New York, Granary, 1995) and would rather not resort to the ruse of getting someone else to elaborate my objections, more superficially "acceptable" though that appearance might be. At least in discussing my own efforts in this medium, Drucker's book appears to be an inadvertent illustration of my suggestion in *A Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes* (1993) that, "When a professor writes three words about an avant-garde subject, one of them is likely to be superficial and a second to reveal ignorance, even if the writing comes accompanied, as it usually is, by encomia from other academics."

Drucker's definition of "concrete poetry" speaks of "forging an unity between the visual and verbal aspects of a work." This definition does not accurately summarize the initial "concrete" manifestoes, although it does describe many examples anthologized under the "concrete" label. Drucker continues, "Concrete poets take the concept of materiality of language farther than earlier experimenters, trying to forge inseparable bonds of meaning and presentation through visual form." Once again, the first part of this sentence ("materiality of language") reflects concrete theory; the second, about visual form, does not. My Dictionary says that "[C.P.] aims to reduce language to its concrete essentials, free not only of semantic but syntactical necessities. The true Concrete Poem is simply letters scattered abstractly across the page or a succession of aurally nonrepresentational (and linguistically incomprehensible) sounds."

Drucker's critical fuzziness accounts for why my own books are initially classified as "concrete," right after Eugen Gomringer (one of the original theorists), Ernesto M. de Melo e Castro, and John Furnival, though I've never used to epithet to define my own work, clearly preferring "Visual Poetry" in essays reprinted in *Twenties in the Sixties* (1979), *The Old Poetries and the New* (1981), and *Wordworks: Poems New and Selected* (1993), among too many (though apparently not enough) other places. Needless to say perhaps, Furnival's work is likewise more visual than concrete. Were Drucker to reinterpret my poetry, she might find the "concrete" epithet applicable to my book *Solos, Duets, Trios & Choruses* (1991), but it isn't mentioned.

"Kostelanetz," she writes, "characterized these 'concrete' works as 'emphasizing the fragmentation of language,' " but that last phrase sounds unfamiliar to me as well as untrue. (Drucker didn't locate it, when I asked

about its source.) She sees in my poetry a "seemingly endless number of approaches to the deconstruction of language," which I don't think true either, flattering though it might be. It would be more correct to identify variety, perhaps unparalleled (except for Dieter Rot), as one principle behind the sum of my many book-art books, most of which she appears not to know. Whereas most book artists have favored one or another format (honoring the visual-art marketing principle of instantly identifiable signature), I've made spine-bound books (both perfectbound and saddle-stitched), ladderbooks, looseleaf books, newsprint books, and Lord knows what else, whose contents have been primarily either words, numerals, lines, or photographs.

Under this heading of "Concrete Poetry," Drucker discusses my minimal narrative *One Night Stood* (1977), which she finds reflecting my "'concrete' agenda." This is likewise news to me, as the entries in this book, each no more than two words long and syntactically conventional, document events in a distinctly linear and thus fictional affair. While acknowledging the "small and thick, hand-sized" paperback edition, which has one event to a page, she seems not to know the tabloid-sized newsprint version, whose pages contain many of the same events (in the same sequence). What makes this omission disappointing is that the purpose of the two-edition *One Night Stood* is discovering whether the same precise text in radically different formats can generate different reading experiences.

Were Drucker more familiar with book-art books of mine published in the 1980s and 1990s, she might have noticed that the short entries in *One Night Stood* foreshadow my later, more developed interest in scrupulously minimal fictions that have been published in many magazines since the early 1980s and collected in a 1994 book of that title. On Page 352 Drucker cites the "Edizioni Amodulo, n.d." edition of my *Accounting* without acknowledging that I have long identified that edition as defectively incomplete (e.g., in any list of my "Book-Art Books" or "Archae Editions" for the last decades), instead certifying the 1973 edition published by PN Books. She seems not to know other books of mine containing numerals arrayed in expressive shapes, such as *Exhaustive Parallel Intervals* (1979), which is incidentally featured in the Robert C. Morgan essay acknowledged in its entirety on p. 332 of her footnotes. (This reflects a scholarly failure to seek out examples evidently known to her.) She seems not to know my photograph book *Reincarnations* (1984), my loose-leaf books *Rain Rains Rain* (1976) and *And So Forth* (1979), or the narratives collected in *Short Fictions* (1974) and *More Short Fictions* (1980), all of which are still in print, even though the first could have been

acknowledged around page 213 and the last pair around page 270.

Drucker seems likewise unaware of my oft-reprinted manifesto on "Constructivist Fictions" and thus of the several books (174-1991) exemplifying the principle. This accounts for why she can suggest in her first footnote on page 332 that the epithet "Suprematist" might be more appropriate to *Inexistences: Constructivist Fictions* (1978), whose square pages beyond the initial two are all wholly blank. Though superficially persuasive within the limited evidence she presents, this caveat depends upon her ignoring those other "Constructivist" books that likewise have square imagery and/or format. With this larger context for *Inexistences* in mind, she might have accounted for how a resonant verbal frame, printed on the cover and opening pages, can give meaning, in the tradition of Conceptual Art, to the absence of ostensible content. Perhaps this last theme would have become more apparent if Drucker had known the likewise nearly-all-blank companion to *Inexistences*, a larger and thicker book also published in 1978, *Tabula Rasa*, which clearly is sub-titled "A Constructivist Novel."

Need I say that I didn't intend for Professor Drucker (Yale) to illustrate so vividly my characterization of academic avant-garde criticism and that I've inadvertently wasted more words about her mistakes and ignorance than she wrote about me (!). I wanted to like this book, because I agree with her general orientation toward book-art, rather than illustrated books, painter-writer collaborations, or "livres d'artiste". Her

commentary does introduce a large number of practitioners, though omitting, at times conspicuously, John Cage, Alain Arias-Misson, Jean-François Bory, Manfred Mohr, Don Celender, Paul Laffoley, Wally Depew, M. Vaughn-James, Claes Oldenburg, Allan Kaprow, Barbara Rosenthal, R. Murray Schafer, Carol Stetser, and Merce Cunningham-Frances Starr, all of whom I've discussed in essays that someday ought to be collected into a book.

More than once Drucker's text reminded me of anthologies of mine that she seems not to know--*Imaged Words & Worded Images* (1970), *Future's Fictions* (1973), or *Breakthrough Fictioneers* (1973)--all of which are still in print and perhaps available in better university libraries. Wishing her ignorance and illiteracy was limited to my books, I nonetheless noticed on page 106 her reference to "John Dos Passos's text from his novel *Metropolis*," which sounds like a thoughtless translation back into English of his *Manhattan Transfer*, and her recurring insecurity about commas that are both inserted and omitted to excess. My predispositions notwithstanding, the level of error and ignorance here does become provocative, especially to anyone familiar and concerned with the subject. Perhaps Drucker did better in her discussions of other book artists *Manhattan Transfeand* that the next book on this needlessly neglected subject will do better, at least by me.

RICHARD KOSTELANETZ continues to produce book-art books, including *Wordworks: Poems Selected and New* (BOA, 1993), *Minimal Fictions* (Asylum Arts, 1994), *Ecce Kosti* (Archae, 1996), and *Openings* (Depth Charge, 1996).

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