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The dark labyrinth of conceptual poetries

I just finished writing the following for one of my prose poetry classes and without modifying it much, I'm including it on this blog.

The dark labyrinth of conceptual poetries . . .

Learn the language of mathematics . . . or wander in vain through a dark labyrinth. (Galileo, Opere V1232)

A week or so ago I attended about half of a poetry conference at the Poetry Center in Tucson curated by the critic Marjorie Perloff. Following various links from the Poetry Center's website for the conference, one is bound to locate an anthology of conceptual writing by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith (UBU). Throughout the conference participants seemed to be responding to the definition of conceptual poetry on this UBU site, and to differentiate it from other poetry movements or approaches in the past. The term conceptual has been used in the past for art and writing, but not as the name of a poetry movement. That and the addition of multi media possibilities seems the only major difference between the 70-80's work and now. Wikipedia, my somewhat democratic mostly reliable sometimes not website offers a simple description of conceptual art.

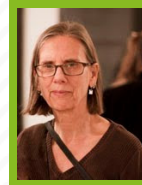
art in which the concept(s) or idea(s) involved in the work take precedence over traditional aesthetic and material concerns. . . . 'The idea becomes a machine that makes the art' (Sol LeWitt). . . . The inception of the term in the 1960s referred to a strict and focused practice of idea-based art that often defied traditional visual criteria associated with the visual arts in its presentation as text.

In the early nineties I edited a journal with a conceptual artist, Miranda Maher (and also with contributing editors Sally Young, Lewis Warsh, Chris Tysh, Don David, Michael Pelias and Tyrone Williams). In *Long News: In the Short Century*, we published conceptual-based art and writing mostly from the New York and Language schools. See:

<http://myweb.brooklyn.liu.edu/bhenning/long%20news.html>.

I was surprised when I read the introduction to the UBU anthology to find that their description was very close to what Miranda Maher and I had

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written as the philosophy for our journal *seventeen years earlier*—non-

expressive, not led by emotion, a direct presentation of language, using procedures like appropriation, collage, erasure, oulipian constraints, making poetry new, etc. Writing that is off-center, non-mainstream mostly non-referential, idea-generated writing. (With time passing, I've revised my interests to include autobiographical and emotive language and description *as it is* or reconfigured and re-examined with various conceptual frames and experiments.)

I just emailed Miranda and asked her what she thought of the wiki definition. (To see Miranda's work, go to <http://www.mirandamaher.com/>)

Hi Barb,

I would say that is a very good working definition. Love Wikipedia. Sol LeWitt was the big daddy of conceptual art. . . . Also, it might be helpful to be aware of some subtle (and not-so-subtle) visual art world distinctions.. 'Conceptually-based' is separate from 'conceptual'. My work is usually described as conceptually-based, rather than conceptual. I think this is because I am interested in what is conveyed by aesthetics and materials and they also play a role in my work. A lot of conceptual visual art is anti-aesthetic... meaning they add nothing that is not about the concept -- some even strip down existing objects/systems to their non-material/aesthetic idea-core.

Another undertone is that "pure" conceptual work tends to valorize the (ego) intellect. Especially the early (60s) work sometimes implied that it is possible to set up a premise and follow it through unsullied by human emotion, subjective foibles etc. Also, the early artists were predominantly white and male. Probably because their working idea of "intellect" was the white/male in power version. For me, the "pure conceptual" still seems to have that going on (either actual white males or women who are exceedingly male-identified). This is rarely spoken of however. Seems to be non-PC. Another under-cover association is that conceptual is the highest art form and all other approaches would be conceptual if they could (but aren't good enough). Many practitioners are heavily invested in that hierarchy. I'd be interested to know if this sort of B.S. has translated into the poetry community..

It's not that I dislike conceptual art -- the rigor of well-executed conceptual art is gorgeous. And when done right it has an austere, intellectual beauty similar to the beauty of pure mathematics (not that I can understand pure mathematics). The B.S. comes into it in attitude and personal interaction. . . . Perhaps there is a fundamental, internal contradiction -- Conceptual Art carries an implication of rigor not only in the structure of the work, but also in the makers' self-examination and self-awareness. But artificial, self-soothing hierarchies such as "my art-camp is better than your art-camp" would be the first to go if we were really being thorough in our thinking.

Ironically, it seems to me that truly strict rigor will always (eventually) dismantle hierarchies and lead to compassion.

I hope this helps.

xxxM

Back to the conceptual & other poetry conference. Tracie Morris and Charles Bernstein opened the conference. Charles Bernstein performed a monologue, recanting his involvement in radical inaccessible poetics and promising to never ever again partake or promote it. From now on he'll follow the poetics of the workshop writers of the 70's and 80's. Bernstein apologizes for his past involvement with meandering, obscure, intellectual, collaborative, social oriented prose. He apologizes for his techniques--fragmentation, collage, seriality, discontinuity, appropriation, multi-lingual languages, broken sentences and words. For all this nonsense. And for thinking that poetry could be a way of thinking. Instead he now promises to honor Poetry month and poetry contests and to write accessible poems that are appealing, emotional, narrative-oriented, sincere, authentic, traditional, in fashion, in Standard clear creative English, with right thinking, the best, the finest, the most profound, responding to the lives and feelings of ordinary run-of-the-mill folks. From now on he'll work in solitude and stop writing criticism.

Bernstein used the framework of Galileo's abjuration written when the Catholic Church forced him to recant his thesis that the world moves. Galileo's writing was banned and for a period of time he was imprisoned. Charles' performance was dramatic and set up some of the conflicts that have occurred in the past between mainstream poetics and other radical poetics. Of course, he's being sarcastic. Like Galileo, his narrator is not apologizing for anything. Unlike Galileo who was a reverent catholic, Bernstein is not a member of the school of accessibility. There was a lot of laughter in the room. Bernstein was one of the central language poets (although he's always been open to other poetics, too, and his own poetry is varied and more accessible than some. This piece was quite accessible). One might presume he's laying out the historical differences between language poets and mainstreamers. We have to remember though that there was also a tension between these mainstream workshop poets (I believe Perloff once called their work Mc-poems) and the Beat poets, New York School, the Black Arts Movement, etc. And there was also a lot of tension (and overlapping) between the Language poets and some of these other radical deviations from the norm/the center. These disagreements didn't show up, however, in Charles' monologue. Of course there isn't one poet we can focus on as representative of all the slamming and exclusion off-center poetries received. Historically, it looks like (to me and I might be wrong about this) that Galileo was singularly persecuted and later honored for his discovery. I'm sure I'm carrying this too far, as if it is an analogy between Bernstein and Galileo and it isn't, it's simply a rhetorical/fictional framework that was a very helpful opener for the conference.

Tracie Morris performed some of her verbal sound poems and variations, the sound of a vowel or a consonant becoming a thing of its own, and then morphing into something else that reveals something new. Conceptual performance poetries. Now and later in the conference --she sings, talks and analyzes African American sonic cultural practices, poetic tools and theories, transforming with against and in other contexts. The poetics of utterances and identity. I loved the sound of her voice. It was beautiful and sublime (to use subjective terms from the old world) and I liked witnessing how her poetry has changed over the years. Fifteen years ago when we were both semi-finalists in a poetry slam at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe—she was performing "My Boyfriend Says" and I was performing an Oulipian repeating and transforming poem, called "Satin Ribbons". She won and I temporarily quit my career as a performance artist.

In the evening, Marjorie Perloff gave the keynote address, talking about conceptual poetry and the connection to past poetries – Language poetry, concrete poetries, Oulipo, and the effects of digital technology. She described conceptual poetry as attempting to avoid subjectivity and originality. She described a book by Kenneth Goldsmith in which he copies an entire issue of the *NYTimes*, and publishes it under his name. She talked about appropriation of other texts, montage, juxtaposition, using documentaries and assembling a new work of art from other texts. Perloff concluded by describing Benjamin's *Arcades* as a conceptual project.

The next day I attended one group reading – Cole Swenson, Christian Bök, and Caroline Bergvall. Cole read first; I remember a poem about a French garden that eventually becomes a public park, from her book *Ours*. As she writes about this garden, she makes forays into philosophy, art, history. Her life history never seems to directly enter into the poem, but then it's everywhere. Perhaps she has visited this park and walked through it (as well as walking through many books). That's personal history, too, but the particulars of the walk (even if it's only a walk in books) are hidden within the fictional framing. Through the lenses of other texts Cole takes the voice of others, shifting interest and point of view, refracting away from speaking or making a singular point. After she read this poem she talked about the politics of turning private property into public parks. I liked that segue. I'm attracted to conceptually-based writing or "otherness" like Cole's, with her displaced "I", and her way of morphing history and lyrical language, definitely an investigative poetic exploration.

Christian Bök then performed his dramatic sound poems, manifestos and monologues, ironic, loud, sarcastic, a narrator explaining and as he explains whatever it is he is explaining, language morphing into sound. Some of his work with repetition reminded me of some of Anne Waldman's performances and some of those wild performances in years past in the Nuyorican Poet's Cafe on the lower east side and also of Marinetti and the Italian futurists.

Caroline Bergvall, read her monologues with language morphing from English into other dialects and languages. I enjoyed the rhythm and anticipating when the talk would slip into another register. Again all three of these poets worked with narrative framing while making weird turns and allowing eruptions in the texts. I enjoyed these readings the best of everything in the conference. I was unable to attend the Dworkin-Goldsmith reading.

After listening to the other readings on line, I still find it difficult to find much common ground between these poets except that they are all writing in opposition to the academic non-experimental workshop-model of the latter part of the 20th century. Some are conceptual purists and some are conceptually based as Miranda describes above. A little branching off here and there, but nothing really that astonishingly different, nothing that requires or demands a new name, a "new" movement.

Let me go on to the panels...

I attended three panels. The following is a compilation/collage of my notes. Beware—most of these quotes are not exact. There was a discussion of *Poetry pregnant with thought* and what this could mean and whether a birth takes place when we look at poetry as news that stays news. A comment was made by someone about conceptual poetry: *way back when it was language poetry*. At this conference, what I see is a generation of professional-poet-critics who are appropriating texts and manipulating language so reference is interrupted. Yea, and . . . performance poets and the New York School did this, too, but not so professionally. The work read at the conference seemed more accessible than language writing—perhaps because of those fictional frameworks. Charles Alexander pointed out that expression is always there even with a blank piece of paper with only the outline of a box. Someone said somewhere, written in the margins of my notes: *And what is materiality, anyhow? Conceptual writing is project-based writing*. Yes, projects from Homer to Pound to H.D. to Olson to the investigative poets and here in the world of the similar and not so similar perhaps but perhaps not conceptual writers. As points were made and unmade, I remembered Derrida's little trace in an argument that can always be pulled out and unraveled. Some unraveling here. Brian Reed thanked everyone and acknowledged that it was an unusual circumstance for a critic to be able to hang out and talk with writers of this caliber about what they are doing. Vanessa Place brought the woman's body into the room, assembling a response around the instructions for inserting a tampon, and taking us in and out of the intellect. While passing the mike, Marjorie Perloff admitted, *We don't even know what conceptual writing is...* Everyone laughed in agreement.

Some of the points Bök made (again I'm paraphrasing): *Poets have nothing to offer visuals artists anymore. If you want to find poetry, don't look for it in poems. Students hate poetry. They know nothing about anything. The avantgarde is suffering from a lethal dose of seriousness*. At one point he says that "newness" is different now, but he never explains what's new. *The value of the obvious*. Bök can be entertaining. Charles Bernstein's slide show: *The absence of conception had itself to be conceived*. At one point Charles intervened to remind everyone that *You can't be for or against subjectivity or emotion. Meaning is social and depends on context*. I think that could be a helpful chant that could be played over and over at conferences like this, just so writers and critics don't get too caught up in their individual discoveries and ideas.

Wystan Curnow: *Pretext. . . Is the idea now more interesting than the application?* Graça Capinha brought up some points about thingness as a

reproduction of the market and an absence of perhaps political and emotional engagement in this post post modern writing. That point was later debated. She made an argument for attending to the emotions: *No language is possible if the emotional part of your brain doesn't work first*. Stephen Fredman argued for a cross fertilization of art forms. He quoted Emerson: *It's as difficult to appropriate the work of others as to invent*.

And then the conference closed with a question that made some of the participants uncomfortable, a question about why women at this point in time were pretty much excluded from the UBU web anthology. This is one of six or seven questions that Laynie Browne asked in a survey of 100 writers. She constructed a collage using some computer analysis program from the responses. Marjorie was upset about the question, referring to it as foolish and a non-issue in our times. Laynie noted that of all the women she had surveyed, Marjorie was the only one who was not disturbed. I was surprised at Marjorie's response and at Barbara Cole's "Hey I'm a gal and I wasn't part of the survey . . . there is always an exclusion." Words like *essentialist* and *humanist* and *identity politics* were thrown around. But when an anthology is presented as being a historical text and there were definitely women involved in this poetics and they were not included, this isn't essentialism or humanism—it's a straight out misrepresentation. When I listened to the tape of this discussion over again, it's clear that Marjorie didn't understand Laynie's project—the collages were part of a survey of 100 poets. A conceptual computer framework was used to analyze/compose the results. And the point was not about asking for adequate representation for women despite their contribution. It was about publishing something and distorting history. It's too bad this point wasn't brought up earlier in the conference so there could have been more dialogue about it.

At home I started thinking, yea Miranda, a little white male b.s. here, too. I was wondering if I would have attended this conference if I were still living in NYC and the conference was held there. I'm not big on conferences; I've spent the last fifteen years trying to work myself out of the academy. Well, if it was a symposium at St. Marks, way back when they had symposiums, I would have attended, but then it would have been utterly different. First of all, the conference would have been organized by poets; the mission of the Poetry Project has always been poet-experimental oriented. The Poetry Center in Tucson does not have that same focus; they are a university organization and they represent a wide range of poetry. They do a good job at that and it was beneficial to have all these poets in Tucson at the same time and to have these discussions. Perhaps there were more attendees from the west and midwest because the airfare is cheaper. Or perhaps there are differences in emphasis depending on where we live. If the conference had been held in NYC, Bernadette Mayer probably would have been present and then the discussions about subjectivity and conceptual projects might have been quite different.

As I look back on a week of conversations during and after the conference, I finally agree with Vanessa Place's assessment in her blog that one of the outcomes was a rejection of the narrow UBU definition of conceptual work and an openness to perpetual possible conceptual poetry projects and I'll add "under various names, constraints and approaches."

Most of the conference is now available on the Poetry Center's website. You can listen to it--

http://poetrycenter.arizona.edu/conceptualpoetry/cp_index.shtml

You can also find the UBU anthology at <http://www.ubu.com/concept/>

Here is Vanessa Place's response to the conference --

<http://lesfigues.blogspot.com/2008/06/conceptual-poetry-conference-fit-to.html>

Labels: **Conceptual Poetry**

posted by Barbara Henning @ **11:02 PM**



3 COMMENTS:

 **At 12:46 PM,**  **Anonymous said...**

hi barbara. i admit to being jealous of your attending the conference. fortunately for me, they posted several video files and audio files so I can virtually attend. Lyn Hejinian read in milwaukee last month and I was thrilled to see her.

Paul

www.wordsalad.wordpress.com

 **At 10:03 AM,**  **mark wallace said...**

Thanks for this detailed report, Barbara. Lorraine and I were at the conference at Evergreen College that was more or less around the same time and so couldn't make it to Tucson. I appreciate that you have some concerns regarding some of the hierarchies that some of the writers here seemed to express, directly or indirectly. I think there's something a little retro male in the work of Bok especially and I wonder why people so often overlook it.

 **At 8:20 AM,**  **Unknown said...**

I appreciated your posting Barbara. As someone who was around in the "old" language poetry days (I was in Ron Silliman's SR selection of bay area poets); participation though gendered was pretty equal numerically. Does it matter? Does identity or class of origin matter? Yes, if you are going to give a larger political meaning to your work. You can see this process in "canonization" -- many more women published in journals than anthologies of the modernists, and the postmodernists. What is odd, is that the new formalists seem more open to women's writing than the supposedly more radical conceptual writers.

Best, Carol

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