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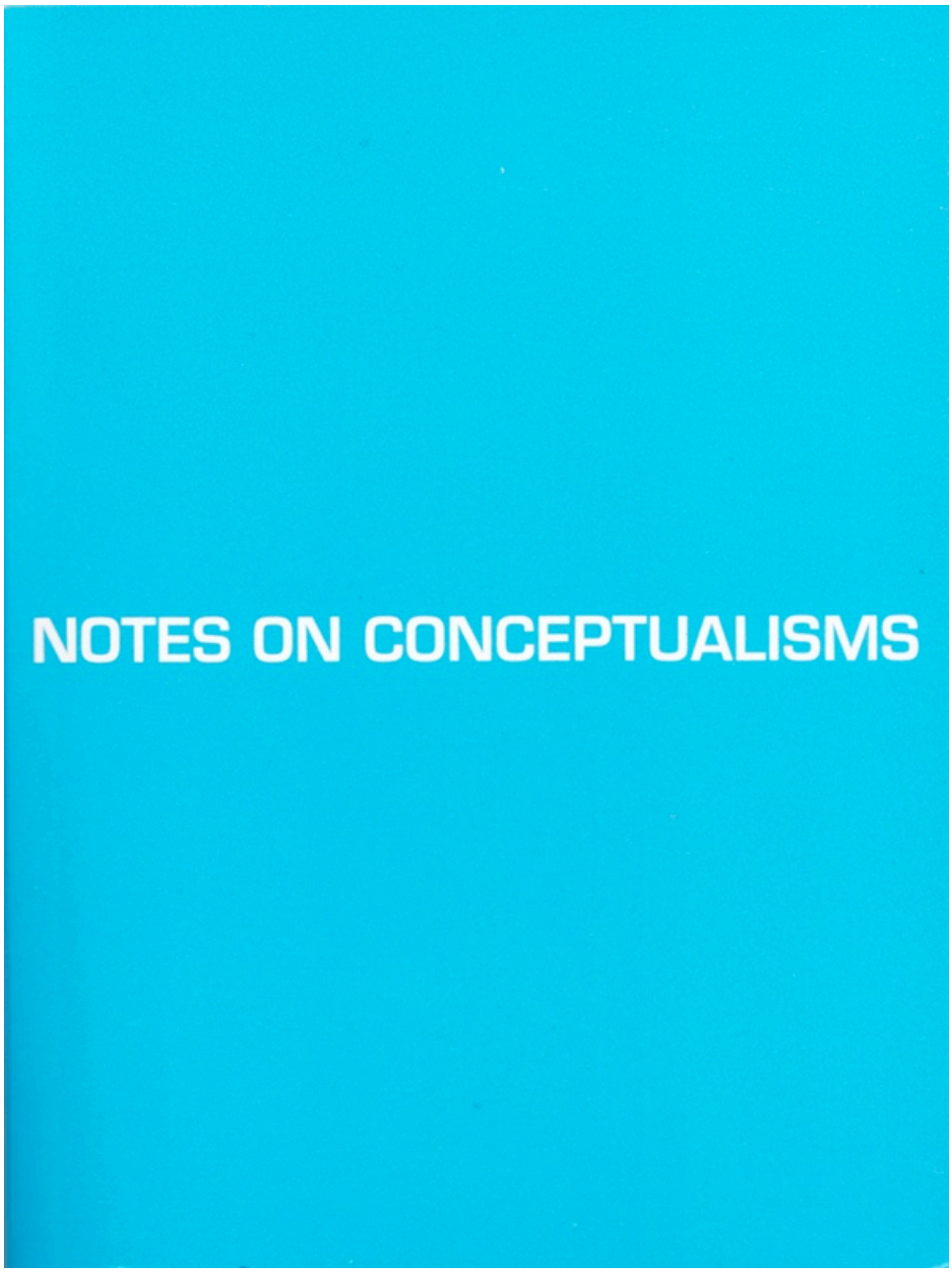
Robert Fitterman and Vanessa Place's NOTES ON CONCEPTUALISMS

By Thom Donovan



Robert Fitterman and Vanessa Place's book *Notes On Conceptualisms* is one of the first books to take on the term "conceptualism" in relation to recent practices in contemporary poetry, offering a preliminary textbook on the subject. There is a lot to unpack in this tiny book (the book is pocket-size, and comes to 76

pages). One of the first things a reader notices is the book's organization through "notes." Rather than rehearsing mastery through more discursive modes, Fitterman/Place write notes calling attention to their collaboration as provisional—a kind of sketch, or draft towards a more extensive study. Through these notes and by using the term "conceptualism" in the plural, Fitterman/Place invite others to write their own "notes on conceptualisms," thereby opening-up a conversation.

As in the writings of Walter Benjamin (who is a source of inspiration for this book), an aphoristic style guides Fitterman's and Place's prose. There is a lively turn of thought that I appreciate and admire about their project. There is a also an effective "mathiness" about the book's organization, the book's sections and paragraphs being assigned numbers with letters to indicate sub-headings, questions, asides, and critical detours. Like Spinoza's axiomatic *Ethics* or the *Philosophical Investigations* of Wittgenstein, the organization of the material lends something hyper-logical to the book offering a taxonomy of conceptualist writing practices.

This taxonomy is based on a number of categories such as the "pre-" and "post- textual," and the differences between what the authors call "pure," "hybrid," and "baroque" conceptualisms. Whereas a pre-text refers to a set of textual objects as they are given or found in their original context, a post-text refers to a pre-text after it has been altered in some way by the author. A pure conceptual operation transfers a pre-text directly to a post-text (like a Duchamp readymade); a hybrid one alters the pre-text on its way to post-text; and a baroque one does not involve appropriation—does not engage pre-text, that is—yet is conceptual by the fact that it is motivated by a set of procedures, constraints, or parameters delimited prior to the composition process.

The taxonomy Fitterman/Place provide is elegant, and the result of years of trying their hands at conceptual writing. It is also the result of a want to delineate a pervasive tendency in the field of poetry. If the term "conceptualisms" is a direct reference to '60s and '70s conceptual art, Fitterman/Place also seek to distinguish conceptualism in poetry from conceptual art. They do so through a few crucial terms, the foremost being allegory.

The term allegory they derive from a discourse after Goethe, and radicalized in the 20th century by Walter Benjamin. A work of art is allegorical if it resists hermeneutic closure and remains open to multiple levels of interpretation. As Benjamin writes in his book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*: "Allegories, are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things." For Benjamin, this fleeing/fleeting quality of cultural products (virtual ruins) relates to their place within a capitalist economy. After Benjamin, Fitterman/Place view conceptualist works as allegorical insofar as they exceed their symbolic meaning, thus elude the equation of significance with commodification.

Conceptualist works tend to critique social life by reflecting it perversely. This seems true of many of the books which Fitterman/Place make reference to in their *Notes on Conceptualisms* (such as those of the Flarf collective), but perhaps most of all of Fitterman's work itself, whence the poet skillfully mediates his reader's attention to "junk language" (the language of commerce, instruction, advertising, chat rooms). That a source text (a pre-text) gets moved from one place/context to another is the crucial strategy in the conceptualist trend. As the epigraph to Fitterman's *Rob the Plagiarist* (Roof Books, 2009) goes, quoting Jean Luc Godard: "It's not where you take things from— / it's where you take them to." So much of what is contemporary is hybrid and glossolalic; taking language from different places, one not only puts it somewhere else, but rewrites and reshapes its meaning in the process. Through the use of Internet search engines such as Google and other methods of search and retrieval within an information-based economy, contemporary poets take part in work being done across the arts, which also involves appropriation, sampling, recontextualization, and reenactment.

As Fitterman/Place point out, the situation of "hybrid" conceptual texts is an obvious reflection of the marketplace. That hybrid conceptualisms in particular represent a kind of carnivalization-a turning of the world upside down-one can have no doubt; but the situation of the marketplace is carnivalesque as well. As

Fitterman puts it in *Rob the Plagiarist*, referring to the sea change that took place in marketing strategies and consumer culture in the 1970s:

> In the consumer culture of capitalism, the saturation of mass media culture and the relentless machine of corporate advertising had created the kind of cultural simulacra that changed the game. As marketers quickly discovered, if the new young customer did not know what he or she wanted (salad bars, food courts), the market strategist could continually create new possibilities, fantasies, even new values or simulated values, crafted in board rooms, that exist side-by-side with "real" values. (The popular rise of the personal credit card only deepened the grooves on this path.) As such, for writers and artists coming of age in '70s and '80s, the notion of multiple identities and appropriated identities is a sort of native language, a natural outgrowth of the multiple personas that have been engineered and then targeted by market strategists. (14)

Conceptualisms engage the fact that contemporary readers/subjects are immersed in a masquerade-like atmosphere of commodities, and to refuse or deny these commodities—to "prudishly" criticize them or "hedonistically" indulge them—often defines who and what one is. The risk of this relation the text establishes to commodities is the risk of a bad faith. By our unavoidable participation in this atmosphere, how do we not succumb to cynicism? How can we oscillate some sense of irony (or gallows humor) about our condition with critical agency, action, and vulnerability—being exposed to others by our consumer desires and appetites?

A compelling attempt at this oscillation occurs in Fitterman's poem "This Window Makes Me Feel," collected in *Rob the Plagiarist*, which Fitterman explains was written as a portrait of 9/11 through language taken from Google searches after the event: "This Window Makes Me Feel, written in 2002, was propelled by my interest in appropriation. I.e., what would a text read like if it were entirely subjective, but not my personal subjectivity. I started googling the phrase 'this feels' or 'this makes me feel.' The further I wrote into this text, the more it resonated as a response to 9/11, even though none of the borrowed language speaks directly to that event" (107). In Fitterman's articulation of a non-personal subjectivity that emerges through appropriation, I am compelled by the current possibilities of conceptualism to presence collective inter-subjectivities which transcend, or antecede, the stratification of subjects by a tradition of lyric poetry. Through procedure, constraint, reappropriation, and other forms of meditation taken up by contemporary poets, the poem is revealed to be a site of discourse and a site of counter-hegemonic strategy rather than the expression of a unique individual-the subject perceived as autonomous and individuated.

Central to Fitterman's/Place's book, as well as *Rob the Plagiarist*, is an acute historical awareness of the connection between conceptualist practices and the discourse of otherness, and especially feminist discourse, which Fitterman and Place explain has a unique place within the development of appropriation practices among an *avant-garde*:

> 5d Craig Owen's article on female appropriation art of the 1980s, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernity," points out that [Benjamin] Buchloh's article on allegory missed the crucial gender-fact that these artists are all women, and that "where women are concerned, similar techniques have very different meanings." [...] Stephen Heath: "Any discourse which fails to take account of the problem of sexual difference in its own enunciation and address will be, within a patriarchal order, precisely indifferent, a reflection of male domination." (27)

Fitterman/Place lay on-the-line the fact that appropriation for women and minorities was (and remains) a necessary means by which to undermine and transform situations of power. So, too, how the other resists through ventriloquy and tactical appropriation of language that has led to her exclusion or oppression remains a major preoccupation of much conceptualist writing. Conceptualisms "do the voices" in this sense. They are politically charged by the ventriloqual, pirated, and mongrel.

For Fitterman/Place, conceptualism also extends to the still pervasive discourse of institutional critique: by reframing certain texts, conceptualist poets have launched critiques of the institutional tendencies and conventional location for poetry: "Things to be considered in institutionalism: the reading // the reading series // the course materials // the blurb // the introduction/afterword // the gilt by association // the transparency of the language // the Conference // the Project // the Manifesto // the School // the Scene // the Situation // the short lyric of self-definition // the Now" (50).

The problem of textual authority also relates to the problem of institutional critique: i.e., the way certain texts attain and maintain their authority within a culture via their particular institutional situation. Here, the poem's/poet's situation in relation to MFA programs, multi-million dollar organizations for poetry as the Poetry Foundation and the Academy of American Poets, widely disseminated magazines such as *The New Yorker* and *Paris Review*, as well as, of course, the academy in all of its manifestations-publishing, curriculum, grants, endowed chairs, admissions and hiring committees, etc.—becomes crucial for the "meaning" of the poet's work.

How can text lose its mystifying sheen, and how, through their profanation, may texts liberate conditions of possibility for readership and active reception/participation? How, in the words of Kenneth Goldsmith, can the death of the text's authority give way to a "thinkership"—the text used as a conduit for thinking, communicating, and acting?

Whereas conceptual art prioritized the dematerialization of the art object as a means of overcoming art-as-commodity, conceptualist practices in recent poetry deconstruct the authority of author and text by prioritizing ideas as the principle source of a work's authority. Doing so, conceptualist writers invite their erstwhile readership into a discourse about poetry's function as a site of institutional, epistemic, pedagogical, and social authority (rather than into debates about how "good" or "bad" a poem may be). Economics is still a big target for poetic conceptualism, but not so much the status of the poem as commodity since poetry tends to operate in a much smaller economy than that of visual arts (the poets whom I know best, for instance, tend to subsist through a gift economy by which the poet is communally vetted, whereas visual artists tend to operate in an economy of commodity exchange even when their works are contesting the very economic system through which their works find subsistence).

Like a theme, the word "failure" recurs through *Notes on Conceptualisms*, and has an ethical ring to it, a ring returning us, I believe, to Benjamin's sense of allegory:

> Conceptual writing proposes two end-point responses to this paradox by way of radical mimesis: pure conceptualism and the baroque. Pure conceptualism negates the need for reading in the traditional textual sense—one does not need to "read" the work as much as think about the idea of the work. In this sense, pure conceptualism's readymade properties capitulate to and mirror the easy consumption/generation of text in the larger culture. Impure conceptualism, manifested by the extreme baroque, exaggerates reading in the traditional textual sense. In this sense, its excessive textual properties refuse, and are defeated by, the easy consumption/generation of text and the rejection of reading in the larger culture. [...] Note: these are strategies of failure. // Note: failure in this sense acts as an assassination of mastery. Note: failure in this sense serves to irrupt the work, violating it from within. Note: this invites the reader to redress failure, hallucinate repair. (25)

In an age of constant collation, social networking, the search engine, the remix, and the emergent dynamics of Web 2.0, *Notes on Conceptualisms* brings its readers up-to-speed about the state of the art, accounting for a quite broad range of practices in contemporary poetry. Where their notes leave off, there is generous space for us, a thinkership, to provide our own notes and enter the conversation. For those not familiar with conceptualist practices in poetry, I can recommend few better places to start than *Notes on Conceptualisms*.

Thom Donovan lives in New York City where he co-edits ON Contemporary Practice, *edits* Wild Horses Of Fire *weblog, and curates both Peace Events and SEGUE reading series. He is also an ongoing participant in the Nonsite Collective. His first collection of critical writings,* Critical Objects 2005-2010, *is expected in 2011. He currently teaches at Bard College, Baruch College, and School of Visual Arts.*