

***Notes on Conceptualisms* by Vanessa Place & Robert Fitterman**  
Reviewed by Ron Silliman

Notes on Conceptualisms appears an unimposing project. The slender sky-blue book, collaboratively written by Vanessa Place & Rob Fitterman & published by Ugly Duckling Presse, slips easily into one's rear pocket, which dooms it into carrying the subtle inverse impression of one's own backside. But it's a book you're going to want to carry around with you as you go about your daily business, being the most ambitious & serious account of the dynamics underlying emergent poetics in the United States I've encountered in years. In this sense, the little volume makes a big noise - it wants to stand on its own alongside Spring & All, Call Me Ishmael & more than a few volumes by my own age cohort. Specifically, it wants to place conceptual writing - including flarf & more than a few kinds of appropriative techniques - into a historical context that renders all that has come before obsolete & irrelevant. It may have cordial relations with other avant & post-avant projects over the past 50 years, but conceptualism (so framed, at least) also wants to consign them to the dustheap of history. It's a vantage point from which I find myself being positioned alongside Auggie Kleinzahler, Dana Gioia & Charlie Simic, just one more example of the past. I would anticipate, therefore, that my reaction(s) here ought to be viewed with some caution.

Notes on Conceptualism's principle assertion is quite simple & stated in the first sentence of the book's title essay, the only part of this project actually produced jointly by Place & Fitterman:

1. Conceptual writing is allegorical writing.

The use of numbering here is interesting. Following the general schema of Wittgenstein's Tractatus, with its presumptuous attempt to capture all-that-is-the-case into a set of seven numbered sentences, augmented with a structured (and numbered) series of comments & comments upon comments, Place & Fitterman's argument proceeds 1 through 13, with the notable difference that the Ur-set of master sentences is incomplete. There is no number 3, for example, although we do find 3a & 3b. Later, we don't get even this much, going straight down to 9a1, 9a2 & 9a3, leaving a careful (if not, by then, overtly cautious) reader to wonder not only the "nature" of 9a but of 9 itself, which may or may not have to do with the tensions between fidelity & community.<sup>1</sup>

The antithesis of allegory here would appear to be mastery. All of the debates betwixt the "mainstream" & its antagonists, between the School of Quietude & post-avant writing, can be (and are, here at least) reduced to a quarrel over the question of what is masterful writing. But mastery, Place & Fitterman want

to argue, is not the question, it is the problem. Old, patriarchal bad bad mastery. Thus:

Failure is the goal of conceptual writing.

This is a more important point than it might seem, tucked as it is (a paragraph all its own) toward the end of 3b. It is, for example, the link that joins a project like Kenny Goldsmith's scanning in of The New York Times for September 1, 2000 to create the 836-page edifice that is Day & the origins of flarf in a spoof response to a writing contest scam by sending in only the worst poems imaginable, which were of course accepted into the resultant "prize anthology," available to contributors at considerable cost. Both projects - Conceptualisms poses it as a scale, upper limit allegory (Goldsmith), lower limit baroque (flarf) - are predicated on unreadability as a new index of opacity in the work of art.

In this sense, conceptual writing supplants the rejection of closure - a common post-avant value - with the rejection of mastery. The ability to accept or reject (or opt for any compromise in between) closure is itself always already a claim on mastery. And thereby a claim on all the institutional paradigms that underscore it. Unreadability extracts opacity from the materiality of the word (where it has resided since the High Modernists) & focuses it instead upon or within the social context in which language occurs. What is interesting about appropriated language, the argument would seem to be, is not what is being said, but rather the ways in which we, the Reader, bounce off its impenetrable surfaces:

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 and the devaluation of reading in the larger culture. Impure conceptualism, manifest in the extreme by the 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.

This may sound like checkmate to anyone still practicing in pre-conceptual terms - we're all consigned to the purgatory of the "adorable detail," whether that is the image of the poet looking up from the kitchen sink or rose bed in the garden to have a quiet (but meaningful) epiphany, or a devastating linebreak or enjambment (there are many roads to mastery & all of them, it says here, basically are corrupt). But I'm not so certain - and Place & Fitterman aren't quite as dogmatic as I'm making them sound.

The first problem is theoretical. Some of what is intriguing about conceptual writing are the reversals it invokes with regards to the truisms of literature in general: boring is the new interesting &, conversely, interesting is the new boring. Setting conceptualism up as a spectrum, however, reveals exactly what doesn't work with this binary model: far from surrounding pre-conceptual poetics, this approach attempts to come at it from all sides, like collies herding so many wayward sheep. The reality - an argument that my critics have been making with regards to my own use of the SoQ/post-avant divide<sup>2</sup> for some time - is much messier. This was precisely the point Holland Carter was making in last Friday New York Times, discussing the violence that that generational retrospectives do to the work of the period they purport to represent.

Jordan Davis, in his generally scathing look at Laura Miller's *The Magician's Book: A Skeptic's Adventures in Narnia*, underscores the same point by looking at the earlier divide between modernism & its predecessors. Miller finds the "magic" in the work in C.S. Lewis precisely because, as a child, she identified powerfully with one of the Narnia characters, Lucy. This sort of immersion in the imaginary of another referential being is a hallmark of pre-modern literature, but it ruptured Wordsworth's autobiographical narrator's attempts to cross the alps in *The Prelude*, confronting instead the presence of his own ever-active consciousness. The whole of modernism might be read as a shift first figured by that glance into the abyss of consciousness - from that moment forward one was not literate if one identified with a character. Literacy, as I learned as early as 9th or 10th grade, did not actually begin until one began instead to see not through the eyes of any single character, but following the author instead. One can see this acted out almost with a stations-of-the-cross methodicalness by James Joyce as he moves from the fussy realism of *The Dubliners* to the modular realism(s) of *Ulysses*, each chapter presenting the "tale" processed through a different filter, to the filter-centric *Finnegans Wake*, wherein the tale, to the degree that there is one, is something heard over & over in what feels like a distant background, echoing like thunder.

C.S. Lewis put that distinction a little historically later than I would, but he knew which side he fell on all the same. Davis writes:

One of Lewis's main critical points in *The Discarded Image and English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* is that the so-called Renaissance in English letters was not a return to classical models but a rejection of the considerable systematic achievement of the medieval thinkers. Where others saw the new emphasis on the originality of individual authors as a shift of Copernican proportions, Lewis saw it as a tragedy of the Commons, a privatizing of the shared inheritance. Miller gets it half right, praising Lewis's spirited syncretism, while mislabeling it "medievalist." It's true that Lewis and his Oxford colleague J.R.R. Tolkien are mutually responsible for the armor-and-cleavage circuit of Renaissance Faires and Medieval Festivals, but Lewis never dreamed of returning to feudalism and poor sanitation. He did see a major shift, though; in

his inaugural address at Cambridge he sees the great divide coming sometime between Jane Austen and ourselves.

It is not an accident that the first truly successful novel in the English language, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, unites narrator & character, attempting to submerge the author thereby. There is less than a 40 year gap between this new form's absorption of pre-modern reading techniques and the first edition of Wordsworth's poem. By the time we reach Whitman & Dickinson, the poem has already moved on, at least for some of its practitioners. But the dynamic is ineluctable & the novel is sucked along the same path some 150 years after Laurence Sterne.

The death of the author - a fatality acted out in critical theory more than in poetry - supposedly was yet another moment of such cleavages in the history of reading, writing & attention. Conceptual poetry both notices these recurring break points, not to mention the uglier reality that the earlier modes never actually go away - intellectually, the anti-modernists are still afraid to look down as they venture across that gap in the mountains<sup>3</sup> - and tries to both replicate that moment yet again & step outside the paradigm at the same time. But it's not possible to do both both simultaneously: "glorious failure," Conceptualism's antidote for the "adorable detail," is in fact just another mode of detailing & glorious as a category is all about mastery.

The second problem is more prosaic: conceptualism is not new. It has existed as a category within the visual arts for over 40 years - Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object 1966-1972* - documents its heyday. Russian poets around Dimitry Prigov applied the term to writing at roughly the same time. Place & Fitterman are not unheedful of this history - they cite visual arts examples constantly:

The readymade emphasizes the subject nature of aesthetics by reducing art to pure object. The readymade is thus the most aestheticized object, existing only as art. The readymade is also the most subjectified ethic, entirely reliant on its communicative capacities, hovering as object in the midst of this transaction.

Simultaneously subject & object, the art thingee becomes what Place & Fitterman call a *sojject*. *Ugly Duckling Presse* will even sell you a t-shirt with this logo (fittingly perhaps, none come in my XXL size). The neologism stands for - tho I think Place & Fitterman would deny it - the transcendent Other that conceptualism must both announce its desire for & inevitably fall short of reaching:

when the word is the wound (the site of failure), there are two extreme forms of mimetic redress: isolate and seal the word/wound (pure conceptualism), or

open and widen the word/wound (impure conceptualism and the baroque). The first is the response of the silenced subject, the second, the screaming subject.

Note: this is the difference between negative and positive space.

This moment occurs less than 2 very short pages from the end of the title collaboration & is immediately followed by the following allusion to the wordiest of the 1960s' American conceptualists, Joseph Kosuth, who for awhile was associated with the British movement Art & Language:

12c. This kills Kosuth dead.

Rise Kosuth.

\* glorious failure!

The final section of the essay is a return full-circle to Wordsworth's glimpse into the abyss of the alps:

13. Glorious failure because among the crises catalogued by/in conceptual writing is a crisis in interiority.

A crisis in interiority is a crisis of perspective. In jettisoning the normative (or the normative of the normative), we are left with the contingent or relative normative, which is no real normative at all, and worse still, recapitulates the same problems (by default and paying attention to something else) as the old normative normative. In other words, we reject the province of the monoptic (fixed) male subject heretofore a marker of success. This is the difference between Narcissus and Medusa. This is the difference between the barren and the baroque. This is the problem.

Note that the solution is not provided by the machine ex deus.

This brings us back to meaning, and the possibility of possibility.

This is allegorical.

This attempt to tie off the essay in a big bow is nothing if not masterful, which is of course precisely the problem. At the very least, it's master-wishing.

Beyond this single essay, just over 60 percent of the book, the collaborative nature of *Notes on Conceptualisms* tends to break down. The introduction - which tries very hard to concede that it is not the end-all & be-all of conceptualism or conceptual poetics - is by Fitterman. Place adds an essay on narrative, image & reference, "Ventouses," which defines reference as "a sequence of reference" (I much prefer the formulation: the unfolding of meaning in time). "Ventouses" - the term is the plural for a middle-English word for glass, i.e. the clear container of referential theory - actually has the best writing in the volume, perhaps simply because it isn't the two authors bouncing back & forth off one another - but doesn't say anything about reference that language poets haven't been saying for 30 years. The final section is Fitterman's Appendix, a short list of six different types of book-length examples:

Appropriation

Appropriation with Sampling

Without Appropriation

Constraint / Procedure

Documentation

Flarf

These lists are indeed short, with between four and eleven examples per category, for example, Constraint / Procedure in its entirety:

Bök, Christian. *Eunoia*

Brown (sic), Laynie. *Daily Sonnets*

Nufer, Doug. *Never Again*

Place, Vanessa. *Dies: A Sentence*

As the neo-Dada performance work *Eunoia* & Laynie Browne's *Daily Sonnets* both should underscore, such constraint-based literature is as old as rhyme itself. Even Vanessa Place's 50,000 word sentence, *Dies*, replicates a virtually

identical project by Iven Lourie from the 1970s called, I believe, Lip Service. Why the work of Jackson Mac Low, e.g., Stanzas for Iris Lezak, are not on this list is a question worth raising, even though Fitterman has warned us in the introduction there was no attempt at completeness. Ditto a more recent example of flarf: Michael Magee's My Angie Dickinson. Is the appropriation of Emily D's verse forms too "masterly" to qualify?

The ragged spots & gaps are as telling as the smooth surfaces & slick finishes elsewhere in this book. It may well be, for example, that conceptual poetics is not yet at the stage where it can understand itself as being (simply) the latest generation in a debate that has gone on now for at least a quarter of a century, and that there is more that joins these poets to their ancestors than, in fact, drives them apart. But I can promise them that this day of recognition is fast approaching & can be fended off only by denial & foolishness.

Still, that takes nothing from this little blue book. It is, as I said before, as ambitious an intellectual project with contemporary poetics as I've seen in some time. As such, its impact will be both profound & lasting.

<sup>1</sup> Does an artist "tell the truth" if that consigns her/him outside the circle of the accepted, the old politically correct/incorrect debate, may well be the rabbit (or rat) hole that Place & Fitterman have chosen not to take us down here.

<sup>2</sup> In truth, I haven't done as well articulating the relationship between these two broad traditions as I might have. It has been much more of a dialog than an either/or, at least from the post-avant perspective (most post-avants have at least some background on the other side of the street, as do I), tho the precise nature of this dialog - "culture war" would be one extreme - continues to be debated on all sides.

<sup>3</sup> Thus the institutional ferocity with which the SoQ attempts to hold onto its prizes, its MFA programs, its access to trade publishers & their distribution networks isn't (only) about annihilating anything they don't understand, so much as it may be fear simply of not understanding, of confronting a text & not knowing what (or how) to read. Anti-modern writing is always already pre-literate.