Conceptualisms, Old and New

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Before conceptual art became prominent in the late 1960s, there was already, so Craig Dworkin has suggested in his "Anthology of Conceptual Writing" for Ubu Web (http://www.ubu.com/), a form of writing identifiable as conceptual poetry, although that term was not normally used to discuss the chance-generated texts of John Cage and Jackson Mac Low or the "word events" of George Brecht and La Monte Young. In his Introduction to the Ubu Web anthology, Dworkin makes an interesting case for a "non-expressive poetry," "a poetry of intellect rather than emotion," in which "the substitutions at the heart of metaphor and image were replaced by the direct presentation of language itself, with [Wordsworth's] 'spontaneous overflow [of powerful feelings]' supplanted by meticulous procedure and exhaustively logical process."

The first poet in Dworkin's alphabetically arranged anthology of conceptual writing is Vito Acconci, whose early "poetry," most of it previously unpublished, has now been edited and assembled, again by Dworkin for a hefty (411-page) volume called *Language to Cover a Page,* published in MIT Press's Writing Art Series (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006). I place poetry in quotes here because, strictly speaking, Acconci's word texts —constraint-based lists, dictionary games, performance scores, or parodic translations-- are not so much poems as they are, in the Wittgensteinian sense, complex language games, in which the page has not yet been replaced by the video screen, the tape length, or the gallery space. Indeed, as Dworkin argues in an earlier piece on Acconci for *October* (95 [Winter 2001], pp. 91-113), there was no sharp break between Acconci the poet, and Acconci the video artist, performer, and recently architect and designer. On the contrary, the later work is best understood as the continuation of the earlier by other means. And if this point is granted,

then the writing of the '60s takes on added importance: it constitutes, so to speak, the first act of the artist's complex meditation on the ability of language, whether verbal, visual, aural, or kinetic, to represent emotion and intellect.

To some degree, this preoccupation allies Acconci to Fluxus, but his is a very different trajectory from George Brecht's or Yoko Ono's. Born to Italian immigrant parents in 1940, Acconci grew up in the Bronx, graduated from Holy Cross College in Wooster, Massachusetts in 1962 and the University of Iowa Writing Workshop in 1964. The latter was, in Acconci's day, *the* place to go for initiation into the poetry establishment: Acconci took a course on translation from Mark Strand, and an exact contemporary of his at Iowa was Charles Wright, whose lyric of the period included lines like the following:

The moon, like a dead heart, cold and unstartable, hangs by a thread

At the earth's edge,

Unfaithful at last, splotching the ferns and the pink shrubs.[1]

Nothing could be more unlike Wright's intense, concrete imagistic evocation of the moon over Stone Canyon than Acconci's "READ THIS WORD" (1969):

READ THIS WORD THEN READ THIS WORD READ THIS WORD NEXT READ THIS WORD NOW SEE ONE WORD SEE ONE WORD NEXT SEE ONE WORD NOW AND THEN SEE ONE WORD AGAIN LOOK AT THREE WORDS HERE LOOK AT THREE WORDS NOW LOOK AT THREE WORDS NOW TOO TAKE IN FIVE WORDS AGAIN TAKE IN FIVE WORDS SO TAKE IN FIVE WORDS DO IT NOW SEE THESE WORDS AT A GLANCE SEE THESE WORDS AT THIS GLANCE AT THIS GLANCE HOLD THIS LINE IN VIEW   HOLD THIS LINE IN ANOTHER VIEW AND IN A THIRD VIEW SPOT SEVEN LINES   AT ONCE THEN TWICE THEN THRICE THEN A FOURTH TIME A FIFTH A SIXTH   A SEVENTH AN EIGHTH

(Acconci, p. 111)

Here the poet tracks the actual process of reading each word, one at a time, until they literally complete the eighth line. Arbitrary as these "instructions" seem, with their

permutation of "next," "now," "then," and "again," and their morphing of "read" into "see,"

and then into "look at," "take in," and "hold this line in view," the fact is, as one learns

when one tries to reproduce the poem, that Acconci has to work hard, adding spaces so as

to produce a justified right margin and make eight, so to speak, equal eight,

Such early experiments paved the way for the publication of *O to 9*, the stapled

mimeograph journal Acconci edited together with the poet Bernadette Mayer between 1967

and 1969. *0-9*, which went through seven issues, featured poets like Clark Coolidge and

Ted Berrigan, Fluxus performers like Dick Higgins and Emmett Williams, and artists like Sol

Le Witt, Adrian Piper, Dan Graham, and Robert Smithson. *0 to 9* published Jackson Mac

Low's first poem series governed by chance operations, the "Biblical Poems." Recognizing

the journal's importance, the small but increasingly important Ugly Duckling Press, based in

Brooklyn, has just reprinted the entire run (736 pages) in one volume priced at $40.

Why the reprint of *0-9* and the publication of Acconci's early writings at this

particular moment? Why the new interest in the material word, in proceduralism, dictionary

definition, and a dogged literalism that refuses the metaphoric mode of mainstream lyric or

the mimeticism of so much Establishment painting and photography? One reason, surely, is

the current nostalgia for the Bohemia of the late 60s-early 70s, for the moment when poets

and visual artists were still likely to live in Village walk-ups and Brooklyn tenements,

defying, not only of the bourgeois world of business, but also the university. The tolerance

and eclecticism of our own art world, which embraces abstraction as well as hyperrealism,

neo-pop as well as austere conceptualism, was still unheard of: the *0-9 poets* were

intentionally outrageous and confrontational, defying even the "advanced" aesthetic of Black

Mountain and the Beats. Poetry, Acconci declared, contra Charles Olson's poetics of

process, should "use language to cover a space rather than dis-cover a meaning."[2] And the

lyric "I" was replaced by an "I" in dialogue with, and often shaped by, the "you" who

confronts the words spoken or the action taken in a given performance, whether live or on

video.

A second, more specific source of Acconci's current appeal is surely its anticipation of the new digital poetics.   In recent years, we have witnessed electronically generated text that falls under the rubric of what Kenneth Goldsmith, its chief proponent, has dubbed "uncreative writing." In such writing—witness Goldsmith's own *Day* (Barrington, VT: The Figures, 2003), made by reproducing, word for word, and from first page to last, an entire issue of the *New York Times,* appropriation is all, or is it? In transforming newsprint into digital text and refusing to discriminate between headlines and snatches of advertising copy, between front-page article using oversized font and the tiny Dow Jones numbers, the *Times* becomes curiously unrecognizable. Goldsmith has argued that in the information age, the poetic function is not to produce new writing--we have too much already—but to force us to see what the language environment we live in looks and feels like, to make it strange.

According to Dworkin (*Language to Cover a Page,* p. xvi), Goldsmith produced *Day* and related texts without any familiarity of Acconci's early writings, most of them unpublished and hence quite unknown. How uncanny, therefore, that thirty-five years before Goldsmith produced his book *The Weather* (Los Angeles: Make Now Press, 2005), a transcription of a year's worth (December 21, 2002-December 20, 2003) of hourly weather bulletins on WINS (1010), New York's all-news radio station, Acconci should have produced a numbered text called "Act 3, Scene 4," that begins like this:

1. The sun rises today, Thursday, December 26, 1968.

2. At 7:18 A.M., sets at 4:34 P.M., and will rise

3. tomorrow at 7:18 A.M. The moon sets today at 11:49

4. rises at 12:10 P.M. tomorrow and will set tomorrow

5. at 12:38 A.M. Warmer weather and clear to cloudy skies

6. will cover most of the eastern portion of the nation

7. today while snow is expected to fall on the western

8. lake region, the Northern Plains States, and from

9. the upper Mississippi Valley to the plateau region.

And it goes on in this vein for another ten pages (Language to Cover a Page, 388-97), the sober report cut up into 350 more or less equal line lengths in all. Related texts that follow are based on the New York City Report, as heard on the telephone at a particular moment recorded (see p. 398). And these experiments pave the way for such early video pieces as *Filling Up Space* (1970, 3 min.), in which, against the backdrop of a brick wall, the artist enters and walks from one side to the other, back and forth, row after row.

What interests me here, however, is less the similarity between "Act 3, Scene 4" and Goldsmith's *The Weather* than the difference. By taking his language, not from the straightforward facts in the newspaper but from radio, where the announcer must jazz up the weather report so as to attract listeners, Goldsmith gives weather reporting an entirely different spin. For example (p. 26):

> Uh, it's that old Christmas song, "Let it Snow, let it Snow," not so this afternoon. A lot of cloud cover, twenty-six degrees but see, this is just one piece of our latest storm system. It's actually going to move farther away tonight, so the clouds part company, low fifteen to twenty, then clouds quick to return tomorrow. (p. 26).

Goldsmith further thickens the plot by giving each one-minute broadcast one paragraph, arranging the paragraphs in a seasonal cycle with four chapters, "Winter," "Spring," "Summer," "Autumn," and—in a curious clinamen—omitting certain days (when he was on holiday or out of town), so that the prediction made in one broadcast is not followed up by the next. Indeed, even when the days recorded are consecutive, the weather forecast is often wrong. And then, in the spring of 2002, the weather news reported suddenly emanate from Baghdad, for the Iraqui war has broken out. So *The Weather* turns out to be an ironic narrative.

Found text, we discover, can mean many different things, and not all appropriations are equally interesting or amusing. Digital recording and scanning, not yet available to Acconci in 1968, has made a great difference. All the more reason why *Language to Cover*

a Page is such a timely and intriguing book. It provides the missing link between the first

forays into a non-representational, non-expressivist poetics and its current incarnations. By

the time he was thirty, Acconci seems to have recognized that body language, this time

covering the video screen rather than the page, created a more satisfactory relationship

between himself and his audience than the straightforward author-reader relationship could

accomplish. But the verbal stage. as presented here, was never abandoned; it was merely

incorporated into the larger space of such masterpieces as *The Red Tapes*.

Notes

[1]Charles Wright, "Stone Canyon Nocturne," *Country Music: Selected Early Poems*

(Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), p. 139.

[2] Vito Acconci, "Early Work: Movement over a Page," *Avalanche* 6 (Fall 1972), p. 4.

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