



Corrected Slogans: Reading and Writing Conceptualism

by Courtney Fiske

Corrected Slogans: Reading and Writing Conceptualism **(Triple Canopy, 2013)**

Vladimir Nabokov was famously irreverent about modernist art. In *Ada, or Ardor*, Cubism is bunk “bric-à-Braques,” a sculpture by Henry Moore resembles “a huge hideous lump of bourgeois mahogany,” and avant-garde painting deflates into “progressive philistine Art, bootblack blotches, and excremental smears on canvas.” For an author who so partook in modernism’s zeal for involution and chance, Nabokov’s jabs (though partly in jest; by his pen, too, “Proust” was an anagram for “stupor”) are difficult to square. His remarks distill the disconnect—dull yet sustained, like a low-level hum—between modernism in writing and modernism in the arts. An oft-invoked narrative holds that New York’s Abstract Expressionists assumed the mantle of a displaced European avant-garde in the 1950s. Post-war poetry, bound to manifest itself in language as art was not, never quite matched the radicalism of art’s formal innovations, or so the story goes.

Fast forward to the present, and conceptual writing, a movement which coalesced in the early 2000s, is billed by its critics as a belated rehearsal of conceptual art’s transgressions. *Corrected Slogans*, published by the online magazine *Triple Canopy*, seeks to soften the hardness of that line. The book transcribes, with ample edits and annotations, a series of four moderated conversations (“À Rebours,” “Black and White Debates, Gray Matter and Red Herrings,” “Commonplaces,” and “Automatic Reading”) held in the fall of 2012 at the magazine’s Greenpoint home. Conceived as an extension of *Postscript: Writing After Conceptual Art*, an exhibition held concurrently at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, each discussion pairs artists (R. H. Quaytman, Ken Okiiishi, Margaret Lee, and others) with poets (K. Silem Mohammad, Ariana Reines, and Aaron Kunin among them) in an effort, as the foreword avers, “to establish new critical discourse around conceptual art and poetics.” Poet and translator Matvei Yankelevich nicely captures the book’s thrust in his exchange with Michael Corris, a participant in the 1970s collective *Art & Language*:

The idea that nothing interesting has happened in poetry in 50 years is partly a way of institutionalizing “conceptual writing”—or a group

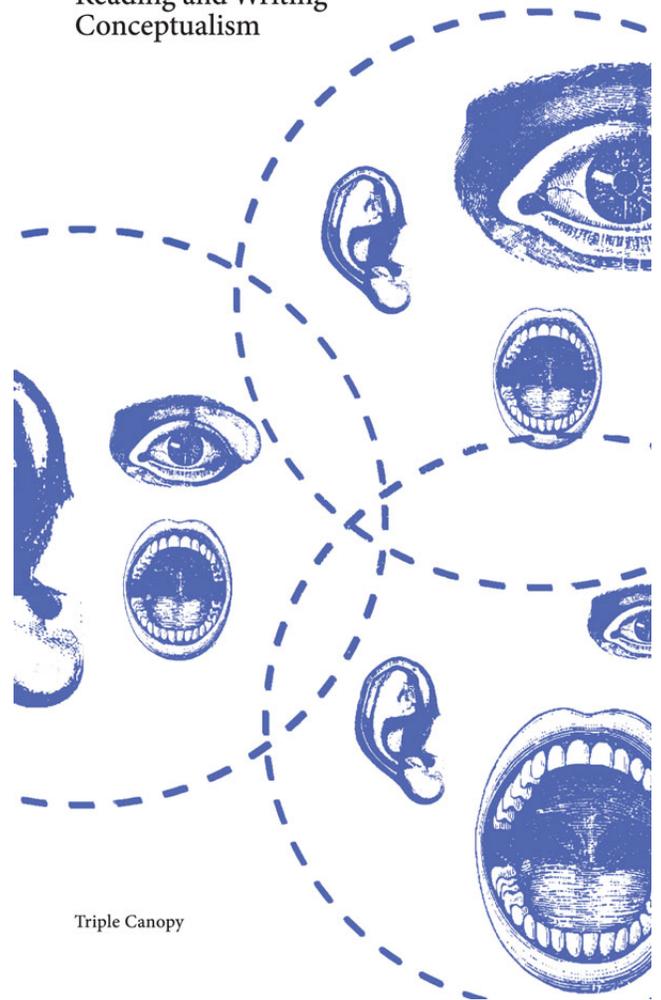
of people who think of themselves as conceptual writers and want to mythologize the origins of their movement. To me this is all completely unhelpful. We end up with this facile question: How can conceptual writing learn from Conceptual Art? How does conceptual writing come out of Conceptual Art? Michael and I are saying that there has been a constant back-and-forth. And we run into trouble when we delineate between the two.

Founded in 2007, *Triple Canopy* tasks itself with “slowing down the Internet”: capturing the absorptive, tactile experience of reading in print while mining the web’s possibilities for interactive media. In an analogous way, *Corrected Slogans*’s copious annotations, which appear in purple on the left-hand side of each spread, serve to “slow down” the book. They’re not quite footnotes—sidenotes seems more apt—and their function departs from that of a scholarly gloss, which serves strictly to cite and clarify. In its more peripheral usage, the footnote is the academic’s equivalent of a swagger: a way to show just how much you’ve read about a subject in ways that might otherwise confound writerly flow. Referencing Samuel Delany’s 1966 sci-fi stalwart *Babel-17* in the same breath as an 1818 letter by John Keats, *Corrected Slogans*’s left-hand commentary retains some of this bluster while cleaving from the text at more oblique angles than pedantic exegesis would allow.

Though some notes explain the text, fleshing out an obscure reference or excerpting a primary source, others orbit around it, enabling a multiform view. The result is a book that makes room for its reader, encouraging the sort of loose, impressionistic connections that the best reading experiences conjure. A discussion of picture-based language links to filmmaker Stan VanDerBeek’s manifesto for an unfinished project, the *Movie-Drome*, 1963–66, a series of immersive domes whose kaleidoscopic constellations of images imparted information in the most universal form possible: pictures. Ariana Reines’s remark that no one reads Proust cover to cover—mentions of *A la recherche* serve more as a badge of intellectualism than evidence of 3,200 pages perused—directs to the novelist’s preface to his translation of art historian John Ruskin’s *Bible of Amiens*. “Ruskin’s thought is not like that of Emerson, for example, which is entirely contained in a book, that is to say, an abstract thing, a pure sign of itself,” Proust writes, summarizing, in effect, what his magnum opus has become.

Like its publisher, *Corrected Slogans* sidles curiously between print and digital. Its fastidious edits, a vestige, increasingly, of the printed page, lend it the feel of a dog-eared book, removed from the web’s frictionless slick. At the same time, it takes the footnote and subjects it to the logic of the Internet. Its annotations seem beholden to the sort of tangential wandering through sources that

Corrected Slogans: Reading and Writing Conceptualism



Triple Canopy

Google and its bevy of digitized books enable. Search for a phrase, and you're bound to end up elsewhere, often in a topic only tenuously threaded to your initial query. Viewed through this frame, *Corrected Slogans* hypostatizes the web's abstract flow, where every text yawns into another.

The discourses that circle around, supplement, and oftentimes eclipse art—to the point where we speak of “reading” an artwork—are repeatedly broached. In “Commonplaces,” Margaret Lee discusses her series of rebuses, composed using Google Image search. Typically, a word is thought to evoke a single image: Say “car” and the vague outline of an automobile materializes in the mind. The web, however, frustrates such one-to-one mappings. Filtered through Google's endless skein of tags, “*car* is never just an image of a car,” Lee says. “It's a working model of Freud's unconscious,” poet K. Silem Mohammad continues. “All of the puns and metonyms are right there on the grid.”

If art has always slipped between the visual and the verbal, the Internet accelerates the skid. Our access to information is structured by search engines, where words translate rapidly into images, then slide back into text. The effect, it seems, is that images are increasingly spoken by words. The demand on contemporary art is that it be “legible”: a term historically applied to writing, not art objects (perhaps as a result of the settling of semiotic frames, inherited from structural linguistics, in art history's methodological toolbox). If texts have always circled around modern art—the more abstract it became, academic W. J. T. Mitchell has argued, the more theories surfaced as supplements—the twin of contemporary art is the text: the press release, the catalogue essay, the artist interview, the critical précis.

Modern art feinted freedom from language; contemporary art smashes the ruse. “I think visual art *needs* to be read,” R. H. Quaytman, who organizes her panel paintings in chapters, remarks in “Automatic Reading.” “That's why there's this insane emphasis on press releases. The legibility must be clear.” A nearby note cuts to Dan Graham's gloss that, in order to qualify as such, an artwork need not only be displayed in a gallery, but reproduced as both text and image (a review with an attendant photograph) in an art magazine. Given that, as Margaret Lee discerns, the market drives the imperative that artists forge a signature, limpid style, illegibility assumes a critical edge. “I think it's a good thing to misread, misunderstand,” Quaytman muses. “Maybe that's a mechanism for survival right now.”

The question of illegibility circles back to “Commonplaces,” where Yankelevich argues that the radicalism of a conceptual tome inheres in its resistance—else, its outright apathy—to being read. If conceptual art's central subversion was that art need not be seen but simply thought, the conceptual writer's coincident breach is that the book need not be read. In a conceptual tract, tautologies and self-generating schemes displace the individual's encounter with the text. The work often unfurls beyond the printed page as an event or action, poet Mónica de la Torre explains, citing Juan Luis Martínez's *La Nueva Novela*, 1977, as an example of “prompts for poems to happen elsewhere.” Stripped of narrative's linear logic of beginning, middle, and end, the conceptual book need not be “finished,” artist Erica Baum suggests. The experience is akin to that of viewing a Pollock or a

Rothko, Baum adds: “There is no way to say you’ve completed it.” Close reading of a conceptual text—or, perhaps, as Yankelevich implies in his “Open Letter to Marjorie Perloff,” reading it at all—threatens to vacate its most radical gesture.

“I like the idea that you can know each of my books in one sentence,” Kenneth Goldsmith, Conceptual writing’s self-anointed spokesman, divulges on a left-hand page. This, despite the fact that his texts are often vexingly long: *Day*, 2003, a verbatim rehashing of every word of one day’s *New York Times*, measures 836 pages. Its conceit harks to that of On Kawara’s *One Million Years [Past]*: a typewritten transcription of the years 998,031 B.C. through 1969 A.D., the year of its creation. Like an encyclopedia, it’s not an opus that lends itself to silent, cover-to-cover scrutiny. When displayed, it’s ensconced under glass; when read, it’s read aloud in a minimalist enclosure, where reading is figured a performance so tedious as to be absurd. It’s both a book, page-bound and legible, and an object, bulky and uncommunicative. (Another Goldsmith-Kawara parallel: the artist frequently folds the cover page of an appropriately dated *New York Times* into the stretcher bars of his iconic date paintings.)

If the “difficulty” of Goldsmith’s *Day* secures its modernist stripes, its hyperbolic performance of length makes it at once cumbrous (it weighs three pounds) and strangely weightless. “In its purest form,” Yankelevich contends, conceptual writing, “by making these huge objects, seems to be dematerializing the book, saying, ‘We’re not actually interested in reading.’” They’re works that, as *Triple Canopy* editor William S. Smith observes, tend to emphasize their own physicality: “the material qualities of the codex, the page, the binding.” It’s a paradoxical strategy: dematerializing an object by making its objecthood all the more apparent.

Avant-garde film doesn’t figure in these discussions, but, in the spirit of *Corrected Slogans*’s left-hand asides, it’s an interesting avenue to consider. Both literature and cinema make explicit temporal demands on their audience. A film’s running time dictates how long its viewer will have to spend with the work, just as a book’s page count prescribes how many hours its reader will have to clock. Their ties to time—or, more precisely, to time conceived as duration—seem at once more necessary and more literal than those of other media like painting or sculpture, whose existence in space fails to delimit the length of a viewer’s engagement. The conceptual tome’s impossible extent finds parallel in the long-duration films made during conceptual art’s heyday in the late 1960s and 1970s. Take Andy Warhol’s *Empire*, 1964: Like Goldsmith’s *Day*, it’s a film that, despite spanning 8 hours and 10 reels of 16mm, can be summarized in a sentence. Only the most determined cineastes can claim to have seen it in full. Its “resistance to spectatorship,” as art historian Pamela Lee puts it, is part of the point.

Unoriginal, unexpressive, dematerial, “linguistically turned”: each descriptor tethers conceptual writing to an art historical lineage. More difficult to decode are the ways in which the former diverges from—or, more radically, rethinks—its artistic inheritance. If conceptual writing attempts to clear a space outside of art history, of what this space consists, precisely, remains vague. What

derails a view of Goldsmith and his peers as, in Smith's words, "flattening and depoliticizing these historical tendencies in art and literature, reducing their intertwined legacies to a menu of clever procedures for manipulating text—the inheritance of a brand?" *Corrected Slogans* puts forth such provocations, then leaves them to ramify. Perhaps, as Yankelevich hints, fresh insights will emerge only if we insist, every so often, on inverting our optic: on refracting art by poetry's lens.

CONTRIBUTOR

Courtney Fiske

COURTNEY FISKE is a writer based in New York.

RECOMMENDED ARTICLES



HIROSHI SUGIMOTO with Phong Bui

MAR 2016 | ART

A few days after the opening reception of his recent exhibit *Sea of Buddha* at Pace Gallery (February 5 – March 5, 2016) Hiroshi Sugimoto took time out of his constant travel to remote locations around the world for his "Seascape" series—a routine that results in near-perpetual jet lag that he has learned to accept and love—to welcome *Rail* publisher Phong Bui at the gallery.



EMILY MASON *The Intuitive Print*

by Jessica Holmes

JUNE 2015 | ARTSEEN

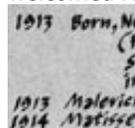
"If you ponder a rose for too long you won't budge in a storm." The work of octogenarian artist Emily Mason shares roots with those words by poet Mahmoud Darwish, on the importance of adhering to one's intuition.



CLIFFORD ROSS with Phong Bui

JUL-AUG 2015 | ART

On the occasion of his multiple exhibits, including a major mid-career survey at MASS MoCA, the artist Clifford Ross welcomed *Rail* publisher Phong Bui to his West Village studio to discuss his life, work, and more.



Letter from the Editors

by Alex Bacon and Barbara Rose

AD REINHARDT | FRONT ONLY

At the time of Ad Reinhardt's early death in 1967 he was best known for his seminal black paintings, which had become recognized as forerunners of new artistic developments of the moment, such as Minimalism and Conceptualism. It is only now that the many and varied aspects of his career and life are becoming the focus of intense scrutiny and debate.

SUBSCRIBE

to the *Brooklyn Rail*

start your subscription today!