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1

Aesthetics of Space: Cubism to Language Poetry

Cubism and the use of collage techniques are both illustrations of the beginnings of a turn towards the 'spatial' in the twentieth century, a turn which was, in part, to escape the over-determination of classical ideas of perspective and historical notions of progress which no longer seemed possible, and to develop artworks which could represent the fragmented nature of modern experience. If this was an experience characterized by an inability to maintain a common perspective over past, present and future, whether that perspective was ideological, ethical or optical, then the freeze-frame of Cubism and the fragmentation of collage provided both the method and the form for its representation. They could simultaneously represent despair at a lack of unity and coherence, while suggesting that coherence might result from a process of rearrangement, as well as demonstrate the increasingly individualized nature of experience.

Collage is a visual example of what Walter Benjamin would subsequently refer to as a 'monad', 'time filled by the presence of the now' (Benjamin 1999b, p. 263), a moment in time in which different perspectives could come together, and his unfinished 'Arcades' project uses that method for its construction by combining quotations from a variety of sources. For Benjamin this process was also dialectical; by showing different aspects of an object or an idea, and by placing those different aspects in a construction that the reader could reconstruct in a variety of formulations, he could maintain movement between the objects within the work. Although elements from different periods of the past were taken out of a continuum and located within a collaged 'present', in order to suggest new relationships, they remained in a relationship with the past from which they came and in the continuum of that past. Benjamin's reason for placing them in a 'now', within which new relationships could be formed, was political, and was to develop dialectical relationships between objects which would demonstrate the ways in which narratives of continuity conceal political, economic and social structures of control.

In his essay 'Collage' the art critic Clement Greenberg refers to collage technique as 'a major turning point in the evolution of Cubism, and therefore a major turning point in the whole evolution of modernist art in this century' (Greenberg). Collage featured in the work of the initiators of Cubism very briefly, however, and Braque and Picasso did not begin making collages until 1912 and had stopped making them by 1914. Despite the brevity of its use in Cubism, the ideas of collage and its practice continued to exert an influence and feature in a variety of other art movements, including Dada and Surrealism from the early to mid-century, and late twentieth-century and contemporary site-specific and installation work. There is also a renewed contemporary interest by digital artists, and the principles of collage underlie much digital art.

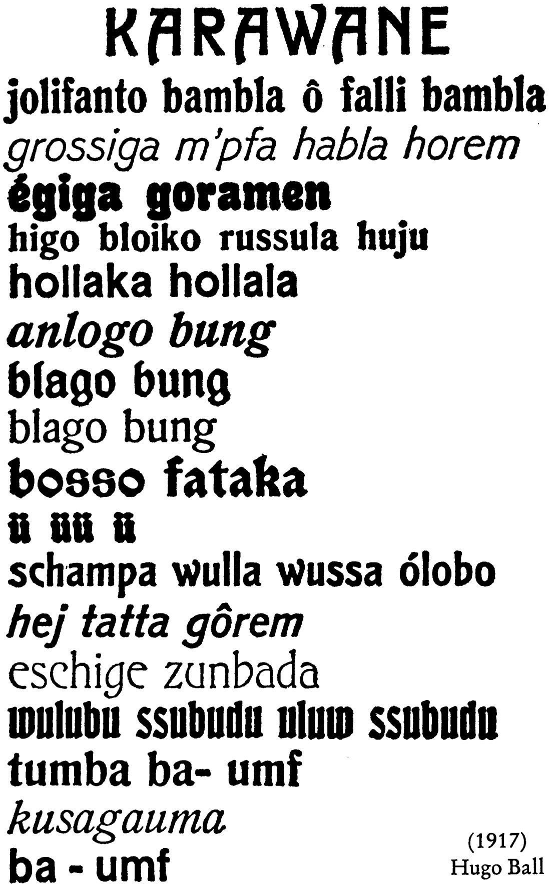
Cubism challenged the fixed viewpoint that had dominated Western Art since the early modern or Renaissance, and introduced the possibility of a number of simultaneous perspectives. The two main approaches to Cubism, the earlier 'abstract' Cubism in which the subject was fragmented into its constituent parts, and the later 'synthetic' Cubism in which an image was constructed out of pre-existing elements or objects, was bridged by collage, which simultaneously introduced into cubist paintings something of the 'real world' through its use of found materials, emphasized the plasticity of the work and its sculptural qualities rather than the illusion of the picture surface, and implicitly questioned the relationship between the elements within the work. Literary collage, or collaged texts, drew readily on these ideas. Modernist works by writers such as T. S. Eliot in 'The Waste Land', Ezra Pound in *The Cantos* and Louis Zukofsky in *A* use collage techniques as do many others, particularly from more international and internationalist avant-gardes. Without wanting to repeat my more extensive treatment of visual texts and their emphasis on the materiality of language in later chapters, these ideas include some important elements of structuralist and post-structuralist thought. A literary collage, made up of a variety of texts from a variety of sources, makes evident the intertextual nature of all texts. The collage can situate the everyday next to the exotic, and relationships between objects in a collage become paratactic rather than hierarchical. New forms of correspondence between ideas and objects otherwise held apart can form new types of conjunctions and disjunctions; relationships become based on principles of contiguity and coincidence rather than via syntactical structures and more formal logic. Collage provides a mechanism through which the writer, by bringing together a variety of texts within the single space of the work, and often by putting texts from different times and contexts together, can function in a more liberated and liberating present, free of literary 'history'. Collage can imitate the semiotic overload of the contemporary urban experience, and both provide a means of representing it, and provide a means of reintroducing a sense of agency through the reordering of experience; a process which has its digital counterpart in the ability to 'drag and drop' a selection of texts from the seemingly endless supply on the Internet, into a single document.

Tristan Tzara made the link between the process of visual collage and the process of writing poetry more explicit. His instructions are:

> TO MAKE A DADAIST POEM
> Take a newspaper.
> Take some scissors.
> Choose from this paper an article of the length you want to make your poem.
> Cut out the article.
> Next carefully cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them all in a bag.
> Shake gently.
> Next take out each cutting one after the other.
> Copy conscientiously in the order in which they left the bag.
> The poem will resemble you.
> And there you are – an infinitely original author of charming sensibility, even though unappreciated by the vulgar herd.
> (Rothenberg and Joris 1995, p. 302)

The process simultaneously critiques the idea of the poem as the product of an individual, lyric sensibility, while still claiming that the final poem will reflect something of its maker. The method also questions both the authority of the author and the authority of syntax and logic as methods of structuring language. What has been removed by the physical act of cutting up a newspaper article is the conscious intent of the author to give the text meaning, lifting the individual out of their own narrative and their own writing history. Through using Tzara's methods the language itself becomes material, to be shaken up and physically handled, before being constructed into the poem.

By treating language as material, Dadaists could move easily between the visual and verbal arts, and processes and products of collagist activities were an ideal vehicle for bringing together different forms of their work. They 'designed' pages with words, made prints with linocuts and carved words into wood. In the 'sound' poem 'Karawane' written in 1917 (Richter 1978, p. 8), a poem in which the sound of the words rather than their meaning is the primary organizing feature, Hugo Ball uses letters arranged into groups that look like words, apparently in a variety of languages, but which are not words at all (Figure 1.1). This absence of meaning once more emphasizes the materiality of text and its visual surface, an idea reinforced by giving each line a different typeface. Elements of discontinuity disrupt the reading process, denying any illusion of a coherent text arranged according to syntactical or semantic logic. The reader can no longer imagine the text simply refers to some pre-existing reality, and attention is focused on its visual and sonic qualities. The poem, and it is written in lines with each one aligned to a left-hand margin, is therefore both a collage of typefaces, one that can be read as a kind of parody of a poem, but also becomes a collage of words which, because they lack reference, must be read as visual objects, and form a picture of a poem. 'Karawane' does, however, contain many of the elements of rhythm, rhyme and repetition which support the reading of the text as a poem, and the performance of similar work had already been the subject of the experimental 'Poeme Simultane', written and performed by Richard Huelsenbeck, Marcel Janko and Tristan Tzara in 1916 (Richter 1978, p. 30). This poem, which on the page resembles a dramatic script and a musical score as well as a poem, was performed simultaneously by three voices. The time of



KARAWANE
jolifanto bambla ô falli bambla
grossiga m'pfa habla horem
égiga goramen
higo bloiko russula huju
hollaka hollala
anlogo bung
blago bung
blago bung
bosso fataka
ü üü ü
schampa wulla wussa ólobo
hej tatta gôrem
eschige zunbada
wulubu ssubudu uluw ssubudu
tumba ba- umf
kusagauma
ba - umf

(1917)
Hugo Ball

Figure 1.1 'Karawane', Hugo Ball (1917)

the poem, following the lineation and the rhythm, collapses into the moment of the three voices, no one having precedence, as a kind of collage of sound. Further typographical experiments (Richter 1978, p. 130) demonstrate an ongoing interest by Dadaists in the disruption of the linearity of textual presentation and the use of the page as a visual field.

In 'The Cut-Up method of Brion Gysin', some 40 years after Tzara, William Burroughs describes the 'cut-up', a method he developed for the reordering of language within texts by cutting the page into a number of sections and then rejoining them in a different sequence. The result is a text which fails to follow the norms of syntax, and sentences are left incomplete or different parts of sentences fail to join up, although themes seem to strangely echo and connect over distance as phrases from the same sentence or paragraph are consigned to different places on the page. Burroughs is explicit about the benefits of the cut-up:

> The cut-up method brings to writers the collage, which has been used by painters for fifty years. And used by the moving and still camera. In fact all street shots, from movie or still cameras, are by the unpredictable factors of passersby and juxtaposition, cut-ups . . . The best writing seems to be done almost by accident but writers until the cut-up method was made explicit – all writing is in fact cut-ups; I will return to this point – had no way to produce the accident of spontaneity. You cannot will spontaneity. But you can introduce the unpredictable spontaneous factor with a pair of scissors.
>
> (Burroughs and Gysin 1979, p. 29)

Like Dada and surrealist acts of repositioning found objects within different contexts, and later processes of the Situationists in subverting or changing the contexts of objects or events, cut-ups are a specifically procedural and political activity. Through a process of defamiliarization, cut-ups make the reader re-examine the constituent parts of a text, breaking down established paradigmatic and syntagmatic relationships. According to Burroughs, cutting up and recombining texts releases hidden meanings locked into the familiar structures of the text, meanings which are normalized and naturalized to the point of invisibility. For Burroughs, constructing texts in this way is democratic, and 'cut-ups are for everyone' (Burroughs and Gysin 1979, p. 31). The process promises to allow writer and reader to break free from the influence of tradition and the literary canon, from the standard syntax of the language system as a way of presenting knowledge about the world, and to exist in the 'now'.

Many of these ideas of collage and cut-up were to emerge in a variety of other contexts. These include the poetry connected to Black

Mountain College and the idea of a poem constructed in an inclusive 'open field', the New York School and particularly O'Hara's combination of events in his 'Lunch Poems'(1979), and in the constructivist poetics of the 'language' poets. Burroughs also had enthusiastic readers in the United Kingdom, and the poet and critic Eric Mottram, a key figure in the British Poetry Revival of the 1960s who had written extensively on Burroughs, specifically refers to 'the various effects of cubist and Dadaist dislocations and reassemblages which constitute a resource in innovative literature from the 1920s onwards' and to the way Ezra Pound 'began to consider the possibilities of new spatial organization in poetry' (Mottram 1975, p. 271). Mottram refers to William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein as cubist writers who produce poetry and prose which 'sees the in and the through/ the four sides' (1975, p. 289). If the perception of a work of art from a single point of view is a process which emphasizes time, and in a poem the reader moves from line to line, accumulating information, then Stein, Williams and others, Mottram claims, disrupt this linear process to produce a 'total sound of the poem', which can be perceived all at once and in different ways (1975, p. 289). Time, the duration of the engagement with the artwork, now has to take into account the spatial distribution of perspective and viewpoint.

The method of writing Mottram described as follows:

> Composition by field combines the forms of lyrics, rhythms, speeches of different kinds, conversation, images, ideograms, paratactical formations and collages of information in various forms.
> (Mottram 1975, p. 4)

Importantly for Mottram, composition by field is more than a poetic process, but also a stance towards the world (1975, p. 10), implying a certain ethical and political approach. Drawing on the work of Williams and Olson, Mottram outlines a poetics which seeks to be inclusive, to see the poet as an object within the field of the poem, not its centre. The poem becomes a representation of the distribution of objects within a landscape, located by a mapping process. In pictorial terms the poet figure in an open-field poem is part of the landscape, rather than a figure that stands out from the 'ground' of the painting; they too must negotiate the objects in the 'space' of the poem, and can adopt a variety of perspectives in relation to those objects. The

Situationist drift or 'dérive' adopts a similar perspective; it is the view from the ground and not the view from above. For the 'Situationists', a group of artists and political activists from the 1950s and 1960s, the dérive was the way in which they sought to defamiliarize the cities they lived and worked in, and encourage citizens to look beyond the design of the urban environment through subverting its determining functions of guiding the population in particular routes, and, by giving themselves up to the Drift, to experience, in the words of Sadie Plant, the way: 'certain areas, streets, or buildings resonate with states of mind, inclinations, and desires, and to seek out reasons for movement other than those for which an environment was designed' (Plant 1992, p. 59). It is a collage, but rather than being able to rearrange the order of objects within the city, they change the way they experience those objects. Guy-Ernest Debord, spokesperson of the Situationist Internationale, expands further:

> In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. Chance is a less important factor in this activity than one might think: from a dérive point of view cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.
>
> (Debord 1958)

While moving through space might promise to provide an undetermined choice of direction and velocity, Debord suggests that the activities of city planners and a state ideology overlay that space with sequences of patterned behaviours. The dérive is not a process that is seeking to introduce choice, but one that is seeking out the 'alternative' routes, equally meaningful, but outside the assumed patterns of behaviour. Collagist activities can suggest both undirected play and planned processes of subversion.

The relationship between the coincidental nature of collage, the way things happen to be next to each other, and a more planned process that seeks to understand the implications of fragmentation, runs through works from the earlier part of the twentieth century. These include T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land', Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, and later work influenced from the last quarter of the century such as that written by the language poets. Both Pound and Eliot use fragments of information from a variety of sources and, although the content is historical, their methodology seems closer to the process of collage, in the way they combine information from a number of sources and use a range of voices and perspectives. Fragmentary though they are, both works still assume a lost and discoverable historical unity existing beyond the poem. Pound's 'I cannot make it cohere' at the end of *The Cantos* (Pound 1975, p. 796) and Eliot's use of footnotes at the end of 'The Waste Land' both indicate the desire for the existence of an external totality of which their fragmentary poems are a representation; a totality that, if discovered, could give back to society a purpose and an ethical coherence. This is a unity or totality that post-modern and post-structural theory would appear to deny in its identification and, in some cases, celebration, of the partial and inconclusive, the playful rather than the purposive, the multiple rather than the binary and surfaces rather than depths. At its most superficial post-modernism suggests that history, rather than being something that can help to explain our current condition, becomes a collection of styles that can be plundered in order to decorate the present. Rather than an aesthetic developing over time in the development of a tradition, all possible styles are spread out and simultaneously present, allowing a contemporary response to be constructed (see Woods 1999b for example). In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson suggests that post-modernism has arrived when modernism 'no longer has archaic features and obstacles to overcome and [post-modernism] has triumphantly planted its own autonomous logic' (Jameson 1991, p. 366). As a consequence of this logic 'Memory, temporality; the very thrill of the modern . . . are all casualties in this process . . . [and] even classical bourgeois culture of the belle époque is liquidated' (Jameson 1991, p. 366). Time and space lose both their ontological and their 'natural' status and become the 'consequence and projected afterimages of a certain state or structure of production and appropriation, of the social organization of productivity' (Jameson 1991, p. 367).

The resulting fragmentation and decontextualization of historical narratives leads Jameson to suggest that there is a 'compartmentalization of reality' (1991, p. 373) that conceals the truth while providing the facts. His answer lies not in reconfiguring genealogies, a kind of rewriting of history, to get at the 'real' truth, but in a spatial and collagist process of looking across different media and different narratives and their recombination. He refers to an 'aesthetic of information in which the generic incompatibilities detected in post-modern fiction now comes into a different kind of force in postmodern reality' (Jameson 1991, p. 375) and consequently a language usage ever more divorced from reality. In artistic terms this results in work in which language is reduced to 'an experience of pure material signifiers', and a 'breakdown in the signifying chain' within a continuous present in which the subject is unable to map either their own history as they are lost in a 'present . . . [which] . . . engulfs the subject with indescribable vividness' (Jameson 1991, pp. 26–7). Jameson's example, and he quotes the poem in full, is the poem 'China' by the language poet Bob Perelman (1991, p. 416).

Jameson is both appalled and fascinated by the cultural products of post-modernism, and in his essay 'Language as History/History as Language', Derek Attridge describes the way Jameson (and Terry Eagleton in his book *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 1983) implicate Saussure's emphasis on the synchronic, rather than the diachronic aspects of language and language usage, as one reason for the way in which a spatial awareness has superseded a historical consciousness. If diachrony describes a language as an 'entity constantly changing over time' and synchrony as a 'language as a system existing at a given moment' (Attridge, Bennington and Young 1987, p. 183), then an emphasis on the latter privileges the spatial over the historical. The histories of particular words, and authentic meanings that can be traced back and identified through patterns of language usage to an 'origin', become relativized, and replaced by meanings within particular contexts. The language poets set out to explore this relationship, and the way that the meanings of words are contextually derived from their place in the language system rather than from their correspondence with a 'real' or 'concrete' world. Marjorie Perloff in her essay entitled 'Language Poetry in the Early Eighties' sums up the project as follows: 'the attempt is not to articulate the curve of a particular experience but to create a formal linguistic construct that itself shapes our perception of the world around us' (Perloff 1985, p. 230). The poem becomes an object made up of language, and the language poets drew on the idea of language as material, of the concrete and plastic potential of words in space. It is the construction of the poem itself that is the event, not some occasion or emotion that passes through the poem to the reader, and the poet becomes construction worker, bringing in data from different sources. The relationships between words within the poem, often extracted from a variety of media and sources, are mapped across the page rather than following one another, a page that becomes the 'construction site' of the poem.

The language writers worked with an arbitrary, multiple and contingent relationship between signifier and signified; the word and its referent. This does not, as Jameson suggests, mean that they deny the referential nature of language in order to turn it into a 'rubble of signification'. In the introduction to *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, a collection of statements on poetics taken from the magazine *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, the editors Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein say:

> The idea that writing should (or could) be stripped of reference is as bothersome and confusing as the assumption that the primary function of words is to refer, one to one, to an already constructed world of things.
>
> (Andrews and Bernstein 1984, p. ix)

They go on to refer to the 'multiple powers and scope of reference (denotative, connotative, associational' (Andrews and Bernstein 1984, pp. ix–x). The language writers operate within that tension between word without referent and word with direct referent and what they seem to do best is to bring the question of the relationship between language and the world to the fore as the primary question for poets. Therefore, rather than a notion of experience put into words or ideas expressed through language, the poet, in the process of constructing the poem, constructs the experience and constructs the idea. There are multiple references, which are specific to the context of the language that makes up the poem and the context of the reader at the point of reading the poem. The polysemous nature of individual words is stressed through the disruption of 'normal' syntax in the construction of the poem, forcing the reader to cast around for the varieties of references that might be present.

In *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, spatial metaphors are often used in describing the form of the poem and its materials and its process of production. The 'multiple scope' of the word is itself a spatial, three-dimensional concept involving an idea of time and history as well as one of surface. Through a process of displacement from the norm of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships, the word, phrase, sentence and poem seek out a range of different references from past and present, and from the local to the global. The poetry is unreadable if the reader is seeking that 'one-to-one' relationship between the words in the poem and an 'already constructed world of things'. The poem can only be given meaning or reference by the activity of the reader and from the context within which that reader is located, and s/he has to cast around for connections in different temporal and spatial dimensions.

The experimental nature of the work of the language poets challenges methods of reading as well as writing. In his essay 'Text and Context', Bruce Andrews refers to 'Unreadability – that which requires new readers and teaches new readings' (Andrews and Bernstein 1984, p. 31). He makes a connection between 'referential signification' and 'depth' where the referential nature of the signifier, according to Andrews, brings security, provides a commodity that the reader can take away with them, and continues to talk about 'the comfort of a semantic presence', 'semantic elixirs' and 'imagist tonics'. He contrasts this vertical reading, a diving into the security of the past, with 'horizontal readings':

> The vertical axis downwards (as a ladder tempting us) need not structure the reading – for it does not structure the text . . . Horizontal organizing principles, without an insistent (that is to say imposed) depth. Secret meaning is not a hidden layer but a hidden organization of the surface. . . . Meaning is not produced by the sign but by the contexts we bring to the potentials of language (the) hollowing out of lower depths of labyrinthine caves of signification, goes on within the gaps.
>
> (Andrews and Bernstein 1984, p. 33)

The intersections between the vertical and the horizontal, the historical and synchronous, between a place which can always be explained by reference to somewhere else and the self-referential space of the surface, produces poetry which refuses a passive reading: 'READING: not the glazed gaze of the consumer, but the careful attention of a producer, or co-producer . . . Language is not a monologic communication but a spatial interaction' (Andrews and Bernstein 1984, p. 36).

Through this characterization of history or time as the vertical 'y' axis and space or geography as the horizontal 'x' axis, the vertical axis becomes related to the paradigmatic, a philological process relating meaning to the history of usage of the word, and the horizontal axis the syntagmatic, relating the word to its role within the language system. Other poets associated with L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing make similar references to space and spatialization. Ron Silliman says 'Reference is a compass', Nick Piombino refers to his 'poetic geography' and Bernadette Mayer to 'Construct[ing] a poem as though the words were three dimensional objects (like bricks) in space' (Andrews and Bernstein 1984, pp. 16, 71, 81). In 'Chronic Meanings', Bob Perelman creates a poem made out of 25 four-line stanzas. Each line has five words and ends in a full stop, creating a parody of a sentence. It begins:

> The single matter is fact.
> Five words can say only.
> Black sky at night, reasonably.
> I am, the irrational residue.
>
> (Hoover 1994, p. 501)

Each line says something about the form and the concept of the poem and its method of construction. The opening line refers to the materiality of the poem; it is not a 'single matter', reducible to a single fact, nor is it a pragmatic 'matter of fact', although it sounds like one. The second line reflects the poem's limitations, the third an example of the kind of line those limitations might produce. The final line locates the 'I' within the poem as simply an 'irrational residue', something which is both left over and of little value and which both cannot be explained and which does not explain the poem. The idea of 'residue' within the poem also suggests that rather than being seen to contain too little information to make sense, it contains too much.

There are tantalizingly incomplete phrases scattered through the poem: ‘She put her cards on.’, ‘I think I had better.’, ‘The weather isn’t all it’s.’ (Hoover 1994, pp. 502–4). The obvious ending to the sentence is left hanging somewhere over in the right-hand margin. There are other lines that appear to be complete phrases; ‘Society has broken into bands.’, ‘In no sense do I.’, ‘So shut the fucking thing.’, but are often made to appear incomplete by the context in which they are placed by preceding or following lines. The lines also appear to refer to a number of different events woven through the poem, none of which arrive at any conclusion. There are domestic references, to the home and to shopping, and there are references to economics and to the process of writing the poem.

The form of Perelman’s poem has no precedent in speech or in writing, although the words themselves are ones in common use and the syntax, incomplete though it is, familiar. The poem is heavily structured or patterned, but the patterning appears to obfuscate rather than elucidate, to force the poet into only half explaining himself, leaving the reader to close the gaps. Why would the poet choose this structure, this particular patterning, for the poem? There are a number of possible reasons. In *Writing Talks*, Perelman refers to the use of a five-word line in ‘Primer’ as:

> trying to contrast rhythms of units of meaning with units of sound . . . You’re not counting syllables, you’re not counting stress. You’re counting meaning units . . . I want you to hear the grammar, and that a phrase could end here or it could go on and connect and therefore change itself.
>
> (Perelman 1985, p. 81)

The function of the form is not to impose a ‘timing’ on any reading of the poem, but to set up a tension or a contrast between sound and meaning. Perelman’s is a spatial practice which consists of putting incomplete sentences one after the other and sending the reader into the creative space at the end of each line, a space in which there exists a number of possibilities for the completion of the line. The reader has to actively engage both in the process of completing the half-completed lines, which often seem to be made up of bits of conversation, and ‘found’ material, from films, books or magazines.

Some further explanation of the form of the poem can be gleaned from Ron Silliman's commentary on Gertrude Stein's 'Custard' in *The New Sentence*:

> The syllogistic move above the sentence level to an exterior reference is possible, but the nature of the book reverses the direction of this movement. Rather than making the shift in an automatic and gestalt sort of way, the reader is forced to deduce it from the partial views and associations posited in each sentence.
>
> (Silliman 1989, p. 84)

The new sentence therefore 'focuses attention at the level of language in front of the reader' (Silliman 1989, p. 88), echoing Perelman's phrase 'I want you to hear the grammar' from the quotation above. Silliman refers to three levels of reference for the individual sentence; within its own diction, with preceding and succeeding sentences, and with the paragraph as a whole (Silliman 1989, p. 84). By self-consciously beginning each line with a capital letter and ending it with a full stop, Perelman gives the poem a stop-start momentum, the full stops pulling readers up with a jerk and both returning them to the sentence they've just read as well as the sentences before and after it. Yet the reader is not given sufficient information to develop any kind of occasion or location, let alone closure, but is thrown back on the language itself as well as being projected into the space of possibility beyond the right-hand margin. To use Andrews's terminology, a reader engages in both vertical readings, in the process of picking out the referential signification of each word and sentence, and horizontal readings across the grammatical surface of the poem. The surface is, of course, grammatically incomplete; a reader is never allowed to settle anywhere other than in the poem; that which is exterior to the poem, to which the words appear to sometimes refer, only appears in occasional flashes. The locale and occasion of the poem are the poem itself, into which the poet brings fragments and bits of speech, instructions, observations and information. It is not that the poem has no history; it has multiple histories within apparently endless possibilities.

In 1987 the language poet Lyn Hejinian published the book-length sequence *My Life*, an autobiographical prose poem. The poem contains fragments of narrative split into sections, each one with a prefatory line in italic type in a space cut out of the text. Like the Perelman poem (and like much 'open field' poetry), the poem combines direct observation (phenomenological) with received information and commentary without necessarily distinguishing between them. The poem also contains many of the elements of narrative, although its flow is constantly disrupted, folding the reader back on that which has gone before and forcing them to cast about for clues to that which is to come. There is more than one perspective on the events being related; that of the child and that of the poet at the time of writing:

> My mother had climbed into the garbage can in order to stamp down the accumulated trash, but the can was knocked off balance, and when she fell she broke her arm. She could only give a little shrug. The family had little money but plenty of food. At the circus only the elephants were greater than anything I could have imagined. The egg of Columbus, landscape and grammar. She wanted one where the playground was dirt, with grass, shaded by a tree, from which would hang a rubber tire as a swing, and when she found it she sent me. These creatures are compound and nothing they do should surprise us. I don't mind, or I won't mind, where the verb 'to care' might multiply.
>
> (Hoover 1994, p. 387)

Hejinian is using ideas of surface (space) and depth (time) in two ways. One is the sense of bringing childhood memories to the surface and putting them alongside the contemporary event of constructing the poem in a collage of past and present; the other in the sense of creating a poetic surface of sound. The tone of the passages is even, and in the majority of the sentences the syntax is standard. While a number of satisfactory readings of the piece can be made, none of them is final, and there are always elements, often tiny, which disrupt the progress of the narrative. What is the 'one' that she wants? Is it a school? Or a house? Are the creatures the elephants, or is she referring to language? The answer is both and neither, resulting in a variety of potential readings. In an essay, 'The Rejection of Closure', she says:

> The progress of a line or sentence, or a series of lines or sentences, has spatial properties as well as temporal properties. The spatial density is both vertical and horizontal. The meaning of a word in its place derives both from the word's lateral reach, its contact with its neighbours in a statement, and from its reach through and out of the text into the other world, the matrix of its contemporary and historical reference. The very idea of reference is spatial: over here is word, over there is thing at which word is shooting amiable love arrows.
>
> (Hoover 1994, p. 654)

It is an attractive metaphor, with the word playing cupid to its referent. The relationship between word and referent becomes full of possibility and the poem's action is within that gap between the two. Reference, as I have claimed throughout this chapter, is also historical, a movement back into the histories of personal, cultural and social language usage. Sometimes Hejinian appears to close the spatial and historical gap, to produce a sentence that can be unproblematically related to some past event, only to throw it all up in the air with the next sentence. At other times the reader is not allowed the luxury of even a single sentence before being derailed. In another part of *My Life* she says, 'But a word is a bottomless pit', echoing Andrews's metaphor of 'a vertical dimension acting only as an echo, a nostalgic reverb' (Andrews and Bernstein 1984, p. 35).

The concern of the language writers is language, the forms it takes and its relationship to everyday experience. They use spatial metaphors (ideas of depth, marginal, horizontal, etc.) to describe the relationship between language and the world, the signifier and its signified, and the relationship, or the lack of it, between the poem and an external other. For the writer it is words and their syntactical relationships that are the building blocks of the poem, and they will refer to the 'architecture' of a poem. The language writers work within what is, or was at its outset, a specifically political agenda, and operate within the gaps, between the word and its referent, between the subject that is constructed by the poem and the subject that constructs the poem. Ideas about space and its construction are part of the processes of the poetry.

A spatial aesthetics will work on a number of different levels. It will be concerned with, and draw upon, ideas of physical space and representations of space, and transfer ideas from the concrete to the abstract and the conceptual via the use of spatial metaphors. Artists and writers have used spatial practices in the spaces between, and the cracks around, bureaucratic regulation, working in the space of the multiple possibilities of the relationship between symbol and object and signifier and signified. Their reasons are often political, and the modernist painters and writers at the beginning of the twentieth century used Cubist and collagist techniques to simultaneously express bewilderment at the loss of moral and ethical certainties, as well as to create ‘free’ space in which new ideas could be developed and explored through the combination of ideas and objects otherwise held apart. Simultaneous bewilderment and euphoria is present at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, in a ‘post-modern’ world in which globalization provides a variety of possibilities for increased mobility and the reconstitution of determined histories, as well as the end of history in an homogenized and commodified present. The processes of homogenization produces a world which should be comfortable, where we can travel without leaving our own culture, and, as English speakers, can even reasonably expect that someone can speak our language. The opposite is true, and the flat desert of MacDonaldization and the commmodification of heritage and local difference has produced a world every bit as alienating and frightening as that characterized by ‘difference’, and one in which techniques of collage, of multiple perspectives, the dérive, the open field and the deconstructive activities of the language poets are still both necessary and relevant.

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