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May 27, 2021, AFEA Congress in Lille, Workshop 10 Parts I and II

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- 1 "Post-Object Literature and art in the US? Materialities of the Dematerialized Work", a workshop which was held over ZOOM on May 27, 2021, and moderated by Vincent Broqua (Université Paris 8 Vincennes-Saint-Denis) and Monica Manolescu (Université de Strasbourg and Institut Universitaire de France) during the AFEA Congress in Lille had strong postmodern overtones, as is fitting for a "Post-America" Congress. What happens to the object in up-to-date artistic practices? The answer takes us to experimental art and the widening of participation in advanced artistic culture, twisting of definitions, breaking apart categories. Today, at times, in art, anything goes, and taste expects the excitingly unique.
- 2 Talks by Michel Delville and Livio Belloï, "US art between erasing and dematerializing", deals with the work that emphasizes aporia, in literature, art, and film. Introducing Jen Bervin's poems from her book *Nets*, created by erasing words from Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, Michel Deville mentions past modern works created by erasure: Robert Rauschenberg's "*Erased De Kooning*", Ray Johnson's *Radi-os* (an erasure book from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*), and Marcel Broodthaers work on Mallarmé's *A Throw of the dice will never abolish chance*¹, itself dealing with typographical play and empty spaces. Unlike Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* die-cut book-sculpture, Bervin shows us the original words from Shakespeare like a palimpsest underneath. Bervin's "net" from Sonnet #135 is typical of her meta-textual preoccupation: she shows only the word "Will", selecting it thirteen times; "Will" is of course the Bard, desire and legacy, and an auxiliary verb. There is irony in such physical treatment of words, and other examples came up: Robert Smithson's *A Heap of Language*, both as artwork (piled words forming a kind of pyramid) and manifesto. Most brilliantly, Jérémie Bennequin,

displays the eraser bits, the detritus, that results from his erasure of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*² (building a time pyramid).

- 3 Livio Belloi introduced American, avant-garde filmmakers, Paul Sharits and Bill Morrison. Both deconstruct old films and film physical experiments with the state of the celluloid material support. Sharit's *Bad Burns* (1982) shows the effects of a piece of film burning using a "prepared projector" like John Cage's quirky "prepared piano", objects stuck in the chords. An expert in selectivity, Bill Morrison, particularly in *Decasia* (2002), works with the found archival footage in various stages of degradation, projecting the "diseased" film to contemporary music.³ For example we see two figures from a forgotten film dancing, while the pock marks of the support seem to execute their own, melancholy dance macabre. Another filmmaker, the Mexican Naomi Uman, in *Removed* (1999.) whites the female figures out of a porn flick.
- 4 To delete is to create; to copy can be too, as Eliane Elmaleh (Université du Mans) underlines in "Appropriation/dematerialization in the American Postmodern Art of the 1980s", detailing a series of post-modern strategies influenced by Surrealists and Duchampians. The ghostly nature of life under proliferating media images means nothing can be experienced directly, the subject of much Pop art. The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard theorized it in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976). Among artists Douglas Crimp called the "pictures generation" appropriation techniques fluster expectations about originality, and interrogate our epistemology. Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince, the purest examples, wielding a light touch technically, swinging a sledgehammer socio-critically. Levine presents well-photographed versions of masterpieces creating a cannon: arguably, in *After Van Gogh*, *After Degas*, and *After Mondrian*, the only change from the original is the ghostly word "after". She is fancier conceptually in her *Fountain*, a copy of Duchamp's originally unoriginal urinal, but polished-bronze like a Brancusi. Prince realized how much talent was in the advertising art behind the copy-writing. Removing brand and message from the Marlboro cowboy, he reveals multiple manipulation levels, and presents stunning, inspiring photography. A provocative phrase by Joseph Beuys haunts the movement's ironical practices: "Every man is an artist".⁴
- 5 Each reader makes the text for David Antin. While the appropriationists do away with originality (but not esthetics), he sidelines poetic form as Hélène Aji (Paris-Nanterre) indicates in "About David Antin's *definitions* (1967) as *Improbable Imprints*". Known for his improvised talk pieces, the artistic unity for Antin is coherency of discourse, beautiful lucidity, and humor. Focusing on *Definitions*, an as-yet uncollected work (a rare edition, the 1967 *Caterpillar Press* version, shows how each copy could be addressed to a specific reader).⁵ Performance artist, Eleanor Antin, (David's wife) created the book, in spiral-notebook form. All sorts of ephemera are inside: drawings, insurance contracts, and other stuff of the moment. Indeed, Antin has said, "i'm⁶ such a poor avant-gardist/because i'm mainly concerned with the present".⁷ Eleanor Antin was on a similar wavelength to her husband when she states: "[...] I am a post-conceptual artist concerned with the nature of human reality, specifically with the transformational nature of the self"⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein on language, and his lecturing mode also influence Antin who engages with the limits imposed by language - negative capacity, and provisionality are keys for him.
- 6 The breaking-through of genres are in play for Yannicke Chupin (Cergy Paris Université). In "Lost Art in a Post-Media Art World: *The Polish Rider* by Anna Ostoya and

Ben Lerner", she defines a work that is a collage of art forms and life. "The Polish Rider" (1655) is in the Frick collection in New York, its real-Rembrandtness hotly debated. Also dealing with authenticity, it titles a 2016 story by Lerner in the *New Yorker* on losing in a Uber vehicle a nonexistent painting by the contemporary Polish artist Ostoya of the Breshnev and Hoenike kiss, which in turn Ostoya went on to paint after reading the story. Then the story in its augmented book form becomes a gallery art object. The narrative's desire to fit it into a wider, ongoing story exemplifies Lerner's tendency to regard today's novel as a curatorial form.

- 7 Two greatly provocative female artists are deeply concerned with pragmatist philosophy, the performance dimensions of their works, and the poetry of their lives, as Antonia Rigaud (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle - Paris 3) says in "Performance between subject and object in Gertrude Stein and Adrian Piper". That Stein moved to Paris in 1903 and Piper to Berlin in 2005 means that both have had to contend with split existences, and both have some penchant for objectivity. Piper studied with the pragmatist philosopher John Rawls at Harvard and Gertrude Stein with William James at Radcliffe. Both have the courage to let things happen in the moment and are accepting of failures. Adrian Piper typically links lucidity and experiment: "it seemed that the more clearly and abstractly I learned to think, the more clearly I was able to hear my gut telling me what I needed to do, and the more pressing it became to do it." Indeed, many of her ephemeral performance pieces (like going through the city disguised as a sexist making chauvinistic remarks) are designed to have unscripted consequences: a clear-cut purpose. Hard-to-pin-down Gertrude Stein welcomes accidents and influentially used repetition to wait for things to happen in the text.
- 8 Rather than spilling out of institutions, some artists never bother with them at all. Lytle Shaw (New York University), concentrates on the art thriving outside the system in "The Conceptual North Pole: Artifacts for a New History of Exploration", with evolving attitudes to outsider art, (autotelic work, untroubled by the art world). Artists like Raymond Pettibon, who takes joy in deflating hippie mysticism and posturing, and a maker of Punk-Rock esthetics, Swedish artist, Jockum Norström, who has a strange engagement with a national sexual-liberation narrative in Sweden, Henry Darger a recluse whose huge, colorful watercolor cycles about his sci-fi stories were found and recognized after his death, all created their own coherent marginal worlds. Their wild works and very existence constitute a reproach to institutions; now they are shown in museums and taught in art schools. Shaw terms their *Weltanschauung* "cosmologies", a model of reading the world, that resists sanitizing modes; all are post-apocalyptic in their obsessive visions; all invented influential, quirky styles. "Cosmological" to Shaw means a fantasy of an order emerging. Such inner coherency comes and goes: take, for example, French artist, Paul Philippoteaux's 1863 "The Gettysburg Cyclorama", after failed Civil-War reconstruction. It surrounds you, immersed in Southern heroism in a continuous space. Philippoteaux brings us into Pickett's last charge the way Darger brings his imagined planet, Norström his oversexed Sweden, and Pettibon his grungy, cynical margin. In 2018, African-American artist, Mark Bradford, reworked an abstract version of "The Gettysburg Cyclorama" at the Hirshhorn museum, in Washington D.C., revealing how that institutional, doughnut-shaped museum, round as it is, symbolically prevents the in-the-round experience.

The strategies of erasure, appropriation, art-life confusion, performance, and pure outsiderdom are all on their way to becoming postmodern classics, with plenty of room for development and variety – animating the creative class with years of passionate avatars. Whether society will follow is another question – even on the outside.

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NOTES

1. Original title: *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*.
2. Original title: *À la recherche du temps perdu*.
3. For more on Morrison cf. David Lipson, "An Interview with Documentary Filmmaker Bill Morrison", *InMedia*, 7.2.2019. <https://doi.org/10.4000/inmedia.1685>. Accessed 16/07/2021
4. Josef Beuys famous statement ("*Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler*") appears on the Tate Modern website, (<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/beuys-joseph-beuys-every-man-is-an-artist-ar00704>. Accessed 16/07/2021) with the following commentary: "Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deathline: to dismantle in order to build A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART. This most modern art discipline – Social Sculpture/Social Architecture – will only reach fruition when every living person becomes a creator, a sculptor, or architect of the social organism."
5. David Antin, *Definitions*, Caterpillar Press, New York, 1967.
6. Antin sometimes writes the first person subject pronoun with a lowercase i.
7. cf. David Antin. *What it means to be avant-garde*. New York: New Directions Books, 1993.
8. Eleanor Antin, "Notes on Transformation," *Flash Art* 44/45 (April 1974): 69.

AUTHOR

DAVID RECKFORD

For many years, David Reckford, also a painter and a poet, has taught literature and Art History courses in France. In June 2019, he completed a doctoral degree at Paris-Nanterre Université, with a dissertation entitled, "*Concentric Circles: The Esthetics and Poetics of the New York Poets*", also realizing a film based on his interview of the poet, Alice Notley, with filmmaker Laurent Zylberman. In September 2021, he joined CY Cergy Paris Université to teach American literature, translations, and media studies, and attach his work to the research unit there: *Héritages : Culture/s, Patrimoine/s, Création/s* (UMR 9022).