“Post-Object Literature and art in the US? Materialities of the Dematerialized Work”

May 28, 2021, AFEA Congress in Lille, Workshop 10 Part III

Martin George

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- 1 The third and last part of the workshop “*Post-Object Literature and art in the US? Materialities of the Dematerialized Work*”, which was held over ZOOM on May 28, 2021, and organized by Vincent Broqua (Université Paris 8 Vincennes-Saint-Denis) and Monica Manolescu (Université de Strasbourg and Institut Universitaire de France), treated us to many morphing objects. The workshop's purpose was to take stock of that phenomenon of opening up the artwork through the lens of the art object's reputed disappearance, note the expansion of artistic territories, and marvel at achievements from simple strategies (erasure, de-structuring, re-using, re-framing, and performing). The art object in the media age, whose loss of status was once conceptually acted upon, here gains back something of its aura and, though the same, looks new. To quote John Barth's qualifying of Marshall McLuhan's axiom, “the medium is *part of the message*”¹, a part receiving attention, explains all the bending of the media, and cross-over artistic production, not tied to the classical, default forms².
- 2 Indeed, Françoise Sammarcelli gives a take on a book firmly in the postmodern vein: “[[And now? Does anyone see me now?]]”. Between fragmentation and rarefication, reading the (im-)materialities of the labyrinth in *Dreamlives of Debris* by Lance Olsen (2017)”. Part of the theoretical groundwork for that novel's postmodern experiments comes from John Barth: a vigorous devotion to experiment, to surpass what the latter called the forms' “used-upness”³. Olsen's invitations into the risky openness of the visual field, and an acknowledgment of the digital culture we now live in, have contemporary relevance. Olsen's cover art is a sepia photo of a cropped view of a human skeleton, a metaphor for revealing the bare bones of narrative art to question structures of reading, meanwhile zapping our consumerist attitudes with a hint of death. Inside, the book contains no illustrations, to invite the reader to consider the

spacing and quirky typological inventions as a lettrist visual experience. In reaction to the paucity of punctuation marks in modern languages, Olsen's marks convey the variety of articulations possible between statements, opening up the text pictorially. They include the double bracket, an indicator of immediacy, ("[[And now ...]]"), and the squares formed by successive colons to signal what is self-contained. A diversity of material comes into the text, slithering into the story computer-wormlike or slip-of-the-tonguelike, creating stark, violent contrasts. Some of the multiple external references from various registers, like theory, culture, or pop history, barge into the middle of sentences.

- 3 The ruptures and gaps in the page presentation of Olsen's book remind one of Jacques Derrida's *Truth in Painting*, where the aporia symbolized by empty spaces are given frames figured typographically⁴. Escaping the traditional path of established publishing houses, Mark Danielewski displays the same up-to-date knowingness of a Lance Olsen, and the same desire to walk the real world; thus, Brigitte Félix (Université Paris 8 Vincennes-Saint-Denis) in "Mor Eth Anr Ead Ing": book production by 'Workshop Z'" has us thinking about novels and their reception in transmediatic and collaborative terms. In Danielewski's narratives, composed in what he calls a "sign-iconic" regime (image blending with words), we see emerging a tension between narrative writing and its remediation. His *House of Leaves* (2000) set off a slew of poetic novels that foregrounded the process of materialization, in Johanna Drucker's sense of attending to the physical object that has definitely not disappeared⁵. It is worth giving Danielewski's full definition of the sign-iconic:

Rather than engage those textual faculties of the mind remediating the pictorial or those visual faculties remediating language, the signiconic simultaneously engages both in order to lessen the significance of both, and therefore achieve a third perception no longer dependent on sign and image for remediating a world in which the mind plays no part.⁶

- 4 Danielewski's *The Familiar* is an ongoing, ambitious project, spawned by his desire to remediate a world "in which the mind plays no part". Five of the planned twenty-seven, long volumes have been published so far, but the publisher has put the project on hold indefinitely due to its unsustainable production costs. With this series, Danielewski aimed to produce an infinitely binge-able literary equivalent to the relentless media machinery of TV shows. It is also an object in the world and of the wider world, created by the international writing team Atelier Z: a collective production of the books, with people of different disciplinary backgrounds participating, from all parts of the planet. It lives in the worlds of the literary (physical book), the ludic (video game logic), and the wearable (clothes and accessories, with quotes from his books, available in the "yarn + ink" section on his website), all while being largely outsourced in the minds of avid communities of readers (on the Internet and elsewhere) who are actively engaged in its interpretation.
- 5 At the opposite end of the spectrum from Danielewski's state-of-the-artness to the paleotechnic there is making art from castaway items. The primitive state of the physical archive has much at stake for the power of art, particularly in China. Liu Chang (University of Heidelberg), in "Representing American Musical Waste: On the Material Consequences of Music" focuses on work by the Chinese artist Li Daoliu which documents the ways in which China's youth appropriate American materials and traces the afterlives of musical garbage in China. Waste has become a central theme in contemporary Chinese art in relation to an emerging environmental justice movement.

Michael Thompson in *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* says that to characterize something as waste is symptomatic of a power struggle, and the specifics of the ecological footprint of the musical industry are detailed in another book, *Decomposed: The Political Ecology of Music* by Kyle Devine, which debunks the myth of digitalization as dematerialization. Environmental awareness and creative circumventions of censorship characterize the Chinese music-lovers known as the "Dakou generation". *Dakou* are discarded CDs that have become pieces of trash and were exported to China to be destroyed or their physical materials recycled, but, crucially, despite anti-piracy efforts (cuts punched on the CDs to mark their death as a commodity), bits and pieces of the music can be played, appropriated, and valued in a small community using them to listen to Western music. The *Dakou* legacy in China was theorized by music critic and musician Yan Jun, who saw in those repurposed pieces of musical trash an antidote to the "broken idealism" of the failed 1989 student protests.

- 6 Going along with such street-smart bricolage are efforts capturing a performance of fast-moving density and particular character. Celia Gale (Université Gustave-Eiffel), addresses that challenge in "The (im)material "anarchives" of performance". An archive provides lasting experience of texts previously framed as transparent, transient information, yet there is a complex relation between performance art and the preservation strategies of archiving, as evidenced by the many lives of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* and its photographic image by Alfred Stieglitz. The archive here becomes a performative site for the emergence of institutional norms and art-critical discourses, a force of both order and disorder for which the portmanteau "anarchive" seems a more suitable name. Whereas the likes of David Antin and Kenneth Goldsmith provide examples of documenting as the re-writing of a performance (which also pose the question of the performance of writing), pieces such as *Blinks* by Vito Acconci (1969) and *18 Happenings in Six Parts* by Allan Kaprow (1959) show that the archive may fill in the gaps in a performance, revealing what was not experienced during its creation. Symbolically, such experiments wish to tease or resist institutions and materialism. However, when their focus is on the body of the performer, they sometimes fall prey to their own protocol, as was the case in Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964). When an audience member cut Ono's bra during the performance, she was retrograded as an objectified body, in the tradition of the nude painting, and the piece fell under the repertoire of the male gaze.
- 7 Addressing writing's savvy alchemy, the workshop's last speaker, Léopold Reigner (Université de Rouen) presented "Tangible writing? Materiality and immateriality in Nabokov's writing method". Nabokov famously rejected writing as a representation of the world, preferring to see it as the structuring of a textual world. Writing for Nabokov deals with matter (the world's matter transformed into images, then into a verbal form). For example, the 1930s story, "The Visit to the Museum" contains a depiction of objects from two different dimensions: first in a French museum and then in a fictional Soviet Russia inside that museum, both equally "real" in that they are captured with the same accuracy and faithfulness to matter. That talk was an apt conclusion: what Nabokov foregrounds—the synesthetic fusion of sight and tactility, the blending of the "real" and of the "fictional" inside the physical structure of the text—reminds the reader that writing begins and ends with matter, and that the strategies of "post-object" literature should also always be framed as object-dependent.

NOTES

1. The phrase "The medium is the message" is the title of the first chapter of Marshall McLuhan's book *Understanding Media* (Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1994 [1964]).
 2. John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion", in *The Friday Book*, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1984 [1967]. My emphasis.
 3. *Ibid*, p.64.
 4. Jacques Derrida, "Parergon", in *The Truth in Painting*, tr. G. Bennington and I. McLeod, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987, p. 29-96. The chapter starts with the fragment "it's enough to say: abyss and satire of the abyss" followed by one of the book's many "empty frames".
 5. For Drucker's ideas on the subject of digital humanities, see "Digital Humanities: From Speculative to Skeptical, Media History Research Centre, Concordia University, Montréal, Québec, October 9, 2015" on Pennsound, https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Drucker/Drucker-Johanna_Complete-Lecture-Concordia_10-09-15_.mp3 [accessed 7/17/2021].
 6. Definition posted online: <https://thefamiliar.wordpress.com/category/imagetext/signiconic/> [accessed 7/17/2021].
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AUTHOR

MARTIN GEORGE

Martin George is a former student of the École Normale Supérieure Paris-Saclay and holds an agrégation in English. He is currently a PhD candidate at the LARCA (Research Laboratory on English and American Cultures) at Université de Paris. His research focuses on the New York-born poet John Giorno (1936-2019), the development of performance poetry in the United States and the connections between poetry and avant-garde art since 1960.