Transatlantica

Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

2 | 2013

Jeux et enjeux du texte

"Nothing in the Grand Scheme of Things"

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Michel Houdiard, Paris, 2013

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Édition électronique

URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/6546>

DOI : 10.4000/transatlantica.6546

ISSN : 1765-2766

Éditeur

Association française d'Etudes Américaines (AFEA)

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 31 décembre 2013

Référence électronique

Susan Barbour, « "Nothing in the Grand Scheme of Things" »

Vincent Broqua, *À partir de rien : Esthétique, poétique, politique de l'infime*, *Transatlantica* [En ligne], 2 | 2013, mis en ligne le 05 mai 2014, consulté le 01 février 2023. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/6546> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.6546>

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 1 février 2023.

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"Nothing in the Grand Scheme of Things"

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RÉFÉRENCE

BROQUA, Vincent, *À partir de rien : Esthétique, poétique, politique de l'infime*, Michel Houdiard, Paris, 2013, 161 pages, ISBN 978-2-35692-092-8, 18 €

- 1 Does language shape the way we think? The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity has been much disputed, but I still wonder whether reflection on grammatical nuances might breed a critical awareness of nuance itself. That is certainly the case with Vincent Broqua's new book, *À partir de rien: Esthétique, poétique, politique de l'infime*, which frames its study with a sly cross-lingual comparison. *Rien*, in the first denotation, signifies *quelque chose* and, in subsequent ones, *pas quelque chose*. In English, "nothing" contains the same antinomy—only in the opposite direction: it is at first defined as "absence" then afterward as "something insignificant". It is precisely this movement from nothing to something that Broqua explores in the works he brings to our attention. Here, *rien* is not a quietest appeal to silence, to mystery; or even to the *je ne sais quoi*; it is instead the discovery of the nearly insignificant detail in ordinary experience. Broqua's something-within-nothing is perhaps best grasped in the phrase common to both languages wherein we make light of a favor or a foible in saying, "Oh, it's nothing". By which we mean, of course, that it is *nothing in the grand scheme of things*.

For it is precisely the grand scheme of things that the six artists and writers he introduces devote themselves to questioning.

- 2 The literary avant-garde has a long history of bending genres and appropriating movements from the other arts. John Cage and Marcel Duchamp, for example, have been key influences for experimental writers. It is fitting, then, that Broqua chooses to start his discussion with composer Steve Reich and artist On Kawara—thereby removing his discussion from the confines of a single discipline. Yet they could also be considered a sound poet and a concrete poet: both work with language—be it speech recordings (in Reich's early work) or painted lettering—and both are closely engaged with its political nuances as well as its material forms. Reich composed his poignant early compositions by simply playing two identical tapes in two identical tape players which, to everyone's surprise (even his originally), gradually grew out of synch, effectively proving that there's no such thing as standard. Reich sourced his material from political rallies and scenes of police brutality surrounding the civil rights movement. And so the point is also that the content is quickly lost. Kawara, on the other hand, is best known for his *Today Series* in which he carefully paints the date, in the language of the country in which it is painted, every day—an ongoing project that began in 1966. Each painting takes eight or nine hours to complete and so is literally a representation of his working life. In order to give his work broader reaching context he carefully boxes up the front page of the newspaper for the corresponding day, linking private and public life. These two chapters are not only full of wonderful *aperçus* of artists who are effectively poets, but they set us up brilliantly to look at four figures in the poetry world who likewise share an interest in the historicized, material forms of textuality—be it speech events and radio (in the case of Antin and Goldsmith) or orthography and ethnophilology (in the case of Bergvall and Waldrop).
- 3 To the uninitiated, David Antin's improvised "talk poems" seem to be rambling lectures or long introductions to a poem that never happens. In these verbal performances, which now span several decades, it's the thinking process—not any polished idea—that he showcases. In works like "figures of speech and figures of thought" he explores how individual perceptions of reality clash in the figures of speech we use to make ourselves understood. Broqua highlights how Antin's literality and anti-theatricality in these performances demonstrate the extent to which acoustic aspects of speech and hesitation shape thinking and meaning. A considerable part of his analysis is devoted to the thorny question of transcribing the "talk poems" (something Antin occasionally does in order to memorize and rework the poems he performs) and to the difference between literal and figurative meaning. In Antin's formula, text is "nothing more or less than a notation" for a speech performance. But Broqua suggests that the gap between writing and speaking are related to the process of discovering figurative meaning in the literal. If the novelty of the "talk poems" has worn off, then Broqua shows that the contemplation of their contradictions in writing is still rewarding.
- 4 With Kenneth Goldsmith's work, Broqua shifts to talk about verbatim transcription. Here transcription isn't an afterfact but the main event. The act of copying not only makes the ordinary strange (and so uncanny), but it renders the text's meaning simultaneously empty and full. Focusing on *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, Broqua details how Goldsmith's presentations of the first responses to 9-11, Columbine, and Michael Jackson's death amount to something beyond historical artifact: it is an anthology of the kind of anti-elegy that occurs over media and telecommunications

immediately following a death. If the previous artists asserted a minimal subjectivity through curation, labor, or hesitation, then Goldsmith asserts his through humorous performance and outlandish attire. It is these very contradictions that attune us to what is out-of-place within the discourses he transcribes. As Broqua points out, to read Goldsmith means to become surprised by the language of what's already been said and heard but taken for granted.

- 5 Caroline Bergvall's background is French-Norwegian but she chooses to work in English. Broqua summarizes her oeuvre, which spans from poetic texts to performances to art installations, as something that both creates and is made of "traffic": of letters that migrate within a word or of diaspora that results in a proliferation of language meanings. Her poem "Untitled: Roberta Flack can clean your soul—out!" transcribes the listening experience of the song by making a kind of literal score that includes the names of the instruments that play during Flack's pauses. The effect, Broqua points out, is not only to introduce an intensive linear literality, but also a critical one: any instinctive emotional response to the song lyrics is here dissected by the inclusion of musical punctuation. Perhaps her most influential work, "Say Parsley", is an installation that illuminates social markers in language. Her framing of slight difference, such as whether a person in the UK pronounces the letter "h" at the beginning of words for example, attunes visitors to the existence of shibboleths and the power of language to stigmatize its speakers.
- 6 Broqua ends with a discussion of Waldrop who, like Bergvall, is both a foreigner to the English language and overtly political in her writings. A native German speaker, she also successfully translated French poetry into English. Like Bergvall, Waldrop seems to have an eye and an ear for the verbal artifacts of power struggles. In *A Key into the Language of America* (named after Roger Williams' 1643 book of the same title) she reintroduces Amerindien words into lines of American English. One might wonder what a work with such an emphasis on craft is doing in a book that is otherwise about conceptual art, but Waldrop's concept still fits, even if obliquely: the nothing that inspires her poetics is cultural effacement. As Broqua tells us, "*Rien ne semble indiquer aujourd'hui que cette langue désigne en réalité deux langues, au moins, radicalement différentes dans leur forme et leur histoire, et qui sont liées par une confrontation que Roger Williams tentait d'éviter.*" (135) Broqua therefore ends his discussion with the most radical and unsettling form of nothing: historical amnesia.
- 7 I am often suspicious of multi-author books that risk reducing each individual aesthetic in the interest of instantiating an overarching one. There are of course exceptions (the great books of Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin come to mind) where themes of indeterminacy and singularity circumvent the dangers of essentializing. Broqua's book similarly succeeds in giving sympathetic readings: his thesis in fact necessitates that nuance and particularity of each author win out. But such studies still need to reach beyond their themes in order to argue theoretical or historical implications. Broqua comes nearest to doing this when he writes the paragraph on Barthes and "political minimalism" toward the end, a tempting but glancing phrase on which Barthes himself does not really elaborate. I found myself wanting to engage Broqua further on this issue—on the difference from Minimalism of the 1960s, on what other forms it might take, on whether he would challenge Barthes' characterization of it, how it operates, how it's been received, and the traditions or critical arguments it intervenes on.

- 8 But while I wished the argument would extend its rigor and depth in places, it was only because the ideas presented were so fascinating. As a critical introduction that seeks to give sensitive readings of difficult works to new readers, it is a great success. *À partir de rien* will be an invaluable guide to French audiences who are coming to these artists and writers for the first time. And for readers already acquainted with these works, Broqua's succinct presentation and gift at word-play make this book a delightful encounter. The lasting impression of his readings incites the very activity they discuss: an attunement to nuance and endangered detail, a call to look past the grand scheme of things in order to discover something in nothing.
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