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Structural Researches

by Dick Higgins

Our astrologer friends tell us the world is now moving into the Aquarian age, and that the central image of Aquarius is of a carrier of water emptying his pitcher into a stream, that this symbolizes the return of energy to its source. Of course we needn't be interested in astrology to recognize this as a possible metaphor for our time, when many of the distinctions that characterized our compartmentalized, word-oriented approach to the world seem to be breaking down. Semanticists and physicists, artists and psychiatrists, anthropologists and sociologists all seem to be telling us that these distinctions have more reality inside our minds than in the external world.

In fact we seem to be drawing closer to the acceptance of all things as being constantly in a state of flux, and we begin to see the relationship of anything to its function as the prime determinant of its nature. We have come to see that if we find a way to use an object that was built as a butcher's block as a table, it becomes essentially a table. Or we notice that if a man who was

formerly a highly skilled photoengraver finds he must take a job as a truckman, he becomes for all practical purposes a truckman. Sometimes this frightens us. For example, the miners in the German Ruhr refuse to be retrained now that the coal mines are closing down there as a sort of (at least temporary) progress. They are used to thinking of themselves as miners, and they find it difficult to accept new functions and roles for themselves which necessity dictates they find. Then, by opposing necessity, they produce a great social crisis for themselves. But necessity will win out, of course, and we will continue to experience this flux at every turn.

In the arts we have traditionally distinguished between form and content, or, more modernly, between structure and meaning.* A writer would regard his structure as the grammatical and

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* These terms were brought to my attention by Jindřich Chaloupecký, the Czechoslovakian philosopher/critic.

mechanical aspects of his style, while his meaning would be what he wants to say. We can add the further concept of rhetoric, as the interrelationship between the two, with the formal tradition-

George Brecht and Robert Filliou's *Games at the Cedilla*, or *The Cedilla Takes Off* are the most advanced art games and researches. They are so beautiful you may laugh your head right off. Bound in wiggly cloth only, \$5.95.

ally the more dominant end. The study as it was once practiced in classical education of rhetoric, per se, meant the matching of classical models, and while this study is seldom practiced today, fortunately, similar practices still dominate our conventional arts. A novel is expected to gain its identity from its identifiability with the tradition of the novel, and this creates a pressure on the writer to conform to the classical models rather than allow his work to determine its own form (and possibly lose its identifiability in developing its unique identity). The writer sets out to write a novel and, to this extent, makes himself alienated from what might be the more direct needs for his work.

We can, continuing with literature for a few moments, observe that in the nineteenth century and up until the period of the two World Wars the novel was a highly pertinent form of communication. Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* and Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* were both instruments of social reform in their time, as were the even more engag   novels of Gorky, Sinclair or perhaps Hasek. However in the philosophical novels of a Yukio Mishima, a Tomas Mann or a Hermann Hesse, the strain of matching the form begins to be apparent since the characters begin to be less artistic images with wholly human characteristics (sometimes incompletely drawn in) functioning within an author's treatment of the world; they become more objects and puppets developing philosophical or social views which the writer holds. I do not think it is pertinent to raise here the questions posed by psychological novels such as those of Proust, Camus or Kafka, or by earlier avant-garde novels such as Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*. These still seem to work primarily within the concept of the novel as an extended prose work involving the working out of a narrative by characters, so that the necessity of embodying the real message within the format of an alien structure makes them somehow unreal, or, as I will describe shortly, rhetorically undialectical.

Even our attitudes towards character and narrative have changed. Most of us have become very much aware of the extent to which our personalities change with our contexts and our functions, so that the study of the minutiae of our psychologies

is no longer very meaningful to us. In the novel these minutiae are at the very basis of the interest, traditionally. But the people of our time find it difficult to get very involved over them. We may have names that apply to us, but we are conscious of enacting so many roles in the course of our lives and of being so many things to so many people that to filter out a sequence or anti-sequence on the basis of fixed psychological particulars and the necessity to state or imply an overall narrative consideration seems somehow a highly artificial approach in our times.

Inevitably we have therefore built up a body of works in recent years that are only novels if we call, indiscriminately, any long prose work written for humanistic or aesthetic insight a "novel," and if we ignore all the connotations of the word. There are too many special jargons already, so I will not add to the confusion by proposing a name for these works of prose that reflect our new mentality, but since I need a handle for this discussion, I will use the clumsy term "cumulative prose statement," express my hope that nobody makes an ideology of it, and define it as covering works whose impact is allusive and aesthetic (rather than explicit argument, which would cover most essays) and that characteristic examples are Daniel Spoerri's *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* and George Brecht and Robert Filliou's *Games at the Cedilla, or the Cedilla Takes Off*, both published by Something Else Press.

Spoerri's "Topo" as the afficianados call it is based on his examination of the objects on his breakfast table at an arbitrary moment in his life—after a brief disagreement with his girlfriend one moment in 1961 (hence the "Chance" in the full title). The location of each object on the table is given (hence the "Topography" in the title) in order to provide a visual basis for the discussion. But from there Spoerri takes off, describing the physical, objective history of each object, how he acquired it, what it means to him, what he did with it, etc. This is the first level of the text, but Spoerri does not stop there. Footnotes are appended, discussing what subsequently became of each object, or how, for example, he first met the person who gave it to him.

But neither does he stop here, though he has taken it now into a second level of reality and, perhaps, of experience. Instead he invites his friends to recollect what they can in connection with the objects and those people associated with them. The translator, Emmett Williams, a close friend and collaborator of Spoerri as well as a major poet in his own right, adds very large amounts of new flesh to the body, which somehow manages to seem as slender as ever. Roland Topor, the popular French cartoonist, adds illustrations of each object, some of which are not at all like the shapes of the originals (as he and/or Spoerri duely note in the text). Invitations go on to other friends to add their contributions, and even from the publisher to the readers to send their own appropriate impressions and recollections of the places

and people and items involved for future editions. The end result is an extremely open-ended structure which cannot ever be complete so long as Spoerri is living to select from the things that grab our attention and which we suggest to him as contributions—and perhaps not even then. And through this flux the people march—not characters but people, with names, with aspects seen by other people rather than selective opinions developed for narrative purposes, seen now doing this or that, but somehow independent and unexploited. It is as if we came to a marvelous party where we knew nobody—only one or another real thing was revealed about each person in the course of a conversation, something that might or might not be believed—and we hoped the party would go on forever, because we might never meet those people again. Well, this is the kind of party that can. That's part of its impact. Most serious novels, once finished, are placed on one's lap as part of the digestive process, while we try to figure out what we've read. Here we knew all along what we were reading, and, on completion, simply start the book again. And although it reads easily, like a novel, its meaning remains as different as its impact: the more it accumulates, the more it tends to develop as a realistic portrait of a man's experience in our times. This absolutely could not have been done within a conventional novel form or rhetoric. The transcriptions from drunken conversations perhaps might appear equally delightful in some narrative, but they would lack the open-ended feeling, the scholarly tone of the portions most closely tied up with the study of the table and the objects on it (a delightfully Burtonian *Anatomie* of the world in a nutshell).

Apart from accumulation—that would be enough, really—there are few obvious points in common between the Spoerri *Topo* and the Filliou and Brecht *Games at the Cedilla*, but those that exist are salient to our discussion. *Games*, like the *Topo*, is, however, an accumulation of apparently private materials and reflections, from which universals are drawn, and, as in the *Topo*, what seemed to be private turns out not to be so in the final analysis. *Games* tells us only a couple of really explicit facts about Filliou, Brecht and the two girls at the Cedilla, Donna and Marianne (Robert and Marianne Filliou also have a daughter, Marcelle, who appears only briefly). Even some of these are possibly doubtful. Does one believe, for example, that George Brecht was born in Halfway, Oregon? But these are working materials, and here the book becomes increasingly an assemblage of proposed aesthetic projects, scenarios, things realized or unrealizable, inventions and disinventions, letters describing things that did and didn't happen, tickling games of all kinds, details taken from notebooks and, in short, all sorts of scientifically-structured investigations into the bases of the aesthetic experience and the means people have of sharing their experiences, from the most abstract idea-art or concept-art, playlets and collages to drawings

and cartoons. All the questions of minima and what art does and should do are raised, but not explicitly as in an essay, but aphoristically and anecdotally in a thousand ways and from at least that many directions. The subject matter of the book is not "La Cédille qui Sourit," a little shop at Villefranche on the French Riviera, where Brecht and Filliou sell small works of art by themselves and others along with beads and trinkets and "anything that does or does not have a cedilla in its name," nor is it the life that the four *cédistes* live, but, as I mentioned, the meanings and uses of the aesthetic experience, and that is more than a bit abstruse for the conventional novel. Yet their presentation stays unified, by its relation to its concern above all. If it had been done as an anthology, for example, with all the games in one place, the scenarios in another, the "appendices" at the end, etc., its artistic impact would have been atomized and diffused. But because its structure is like the poetic effect one would get by interspersing the steps of two Euclidean proofs, then sitting back and enjoying the result,—here, equally abstract materials are made into aesthetically exciting aggregates. In fact, with the exception of one rather interesting proposal for the reform of marriage as an institution, the social and political materials are either impractical or undesirable, and presented for contemplation, irony and insight rather than for feasibility. So that here, as with the *Topo*, we are left with a very satisfactory art experience, one which leaves us enlivened and stimulated, rather than overwhelmed, bedazzled, cathartized, numbed, stunted and de-energized, as we are by the brilliant performance in a form that defies our mentality and our necessities.

We shall return to literature shortly, but rather than suggest that such works as I have described exist in any cultural vacuum, I would like to mention that cumulative meanings are used in many other arts. For example, Arman even uses the word "accumulations" to describe his collages that contain large numbers of any given object, that Spoerri himself is best known as a visual artist who makes accumulations of meals, that musical composers such as Steve Reich (collecting, for example, three people saying the same word) and Philip Corner (using accumulations of the imagery, primarily acoustical, of popular entertainments in his piece of that name) have based many works on this principle. Alison Knowles' *The Bean Book* and Cyrelle Forman's anthology of silence are additional literary works using the principle, and one of composer John Cage's major forthcoming books, *Notations*, is based on an archive he assembled and accumulated of as many composers of all kinds as possible.

Artists associated with various disciplines and societies have been mentioned, and so I would like to suggest that the points of structure in common must come not from any one society or art medium's unique development, but from an overall shift

under the impact of the times. Once it seemed that a novel which didn't act like we expected it to was somehow contrived. We became horribly conscious of the "formalism" (as we called any structural departure whose necessity confused us) of avant-garde work. And much of it was, of course, just that. But now I think we should reject any work—as emotionally, I think we have learned to do, though we have not yet verbalized the logic behind this yet—whose form and rhetoric do not seem to at least answer to the necessities of the subject matter. I would call this "dialectical rhetoric," since it is based on sensitive interplay between the two. And I would like to assert that work which allows either the pole of novelty or of tradition in its formal considerations to dominate the actual form his work will ultimately assume is utterly unrealistic and irrelevant. Structural innovation cannot in my opinion derive from *a priori* considerations, oriented towards tradition or novelty, but is absolutely



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without exception a concomitant of any work that is open to the new rhetoric of a dialectic between structure and meaning and which is at all sensitive to its own needs in its realization.

Furthermore I think we should now make a few more observations on our mentality so that we can proceed to another kind of literature that exemplifies the new rhetoric and the new mentality: concrete poetry. We seem to have become used to distinguishing among small things without a necessity to stereotype them by asking them to conform to our definitions rather than, instead, making our definitions more adaptable. We turn on the radio and we hear popular music using elements developed from both folk music and rock and roll, two very different traditions, and further enriched by elements from Indian classical tradition, black blues from the Mississippi Delta, Indonesian *ostinati*, and the most avant-garde European electronic traditions.

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Our fathers would have made a tradition of some of these things, would have made "Mixed Media" in which each element remained distinguishable from the others, and the aggregate would primarily belong to one or another of them. But we seem to have developed an appetite for "Intermedia," whose real essence lies plumb square on some specific point (depending on the musicians' particular taste just where) in between. This could and does strike those who belong to what I call "the Algebraic mentality" as being neither fish nor fowl, and it seems to disturb them. But for those of us who are closer to the new "Geometric mentality," we not only are not disturbed but delighted to see that there are, in the arts at least, fish that have really learned how to fly. The elements come from many places to produce a new hybrid that seems to be thriving lustily. The means we have used to make new forms of corn and new breeding cattle seem to have made a really exciting popular music, just as it did the last time a hybrid arose, in the mix of European and African music in the great days of the blues.

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experience leading towards its possible inclusion in the next steps one decides to take seems to me characteristic of Geometry, from Euclid to matrix theory, as well as a key point in the new mentality, which I therefore call Geometric. On the subjective level it is characterized by simultaneous acceptance of oneself only through one's relationship to external phenomena, and by a new emphasis on taking nearly anything someone else says more seriously than anything one says oneself and, in the profoundest sense, of having been said by one's other self. In works it leads away from a feeling of obligation to make a point, even a poetic one—"How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." It leads towards an emphasis on having the words form their own aggregates and meanings, that they have their own lives and that one is collaborating with them and the rest of the world in the making of a poem.

This is very different from the Algebraic mentality, which is linear and monodimensionally sequential in the extreme, and subject to closed definitions (and in art to closed and deeply traditional forms): even the unknowns must be defined in advance in Algebra, and only their numerical, quantitative aspects are left for the artist to analyze in working out his equations. The algebraic mentality is pretty much the same as McLuhan's print-oriented man, whom he explains as the end result of the books and newspapers. But he seems to be becoming a rather rare bird, this Algebraic man. When he exists he finds it difficult to speak either with his own scientists and technologists, who, Aquarius-like, found the common ground of Set Theory between the twin shores of Algebra and Geometry long ago and seem to enjoy walking with their ankles wet in the valley of matrices in between; or with his children who learn a mathematics that is non-verbal in nature and therefore less dependent on categories and definitions; or with the real artists of his time, who are the only ones he will ever know at first hand, no matter how deeply he is interested in the arts and however he may feel about them. Perhaps, above these essentially social pressures, he reaches a point of exhaustion. He is, after all, subject to the same barrage of informations and media that produce the characteristically geometric mind in the first place. He can take no more. He must do *something*: he can blame it all on the radicals or the fascists, the hippies or the mess in Washington. But most likely he too changes (is this the meaning of Ionesco's *The Rhinoceros*? Which is surely a good example of what I earlier called a "brilliant performance.")

To finish with this point, there is perhaps a common ground, in set theory, a set theory of the arts, implied by that of, for example, Fortran IV computer programming, where we say: $A = A + 1$. In Algebraic logic, this is unthinkable, an obvious example of argument from shifting grounds. In computer work it means, "what was A is now to be increased by one." It indicates a mathematical usage, to the point of convention, of what

I described at the very beginning as the general sense of flux, of things changing their real essence according to their usages. But in the program, each time A is increased, either by being sent back to repeat a process (repetition was a pretty dirty word in art till recently) or by constantly being made to confront itself, it changes. This allows for all kinds of juxtapositions and interchanges of elements of any repeatable modulus in an argument—or in a poem.

This, intuitively or not, the poets who have given us the term concrete poetry seem to have recognized. They were and are cognizant not only of the Geometric aspect of the new mentality, but of the one we seem to be moving towards which, somehow, it's hard to name "synthetic," so let's call it simply the "happy mentality" out of love for the world we're moving ever deeper into.

Concrete poetry may or may not enter the Intermedium between poetry and the visual arts, calligraphically or typographically or photographically. It has even, recently, developed a sound poetry parallel which may or may not be considered another head of the hydra. But even those who hold to, as do the Stuttgart group around Max Bense or the Noigandres Group in São Paulo, the most rigorous limitation of what constitutes concrete poetry can neither agree to any fixed definition, nor has either ever offered a definition even on the "this is what it is not" level that did not exclude some works which they agreed were concrete poetry. Emmett Williams, paraphrasing his friend Spoerri's aphorism "art is what artists do," said once that "concrete poetry is what concrete poets do, and anyone who says he's a concrete poet most likely knows what he's saying." But my conjecture is that the poets were concentrating too much on the Algebraic world in trying to make their definition, and ignoring themselves. Since most conglomerations of work belong to movements, they tried to describe concrete poetry as a movement, rather than something which would, in all innocence and ignorance, constantly be popping up in villages, cities and communities, wherever the new mentality took hold. This is much more than a movement: it's a core format that speaks to a common feeling of necessity of how the world can understand itself, and that exemplifies the new mentality. So that the movement (which isn't a movement) could not possibly define itself, in the Western manner of the post-Augustan period, according to the commodity which its admitted members produced and according to the search for an Algebraic definition for a format (which isn't really one): but if we instead say that concrete poetry is a general term describing open-ended verse that belongs to the Geometric (near-to-McLuhan's "visual") mentality in its logic minimally, and that allows for any intermedium close to literature in its form of expression, we will have come much closer to describing the body of material that the concrete poets would probably agree they wanted dealt in on their hand. This

would also provide the basis of noticing many hidden joys in works of the past which our moralistic defensiveness had previously blinded the poets to, apart from those which their historical sense had led them in self-compellment to accept as unwanted precedents. But further, we will see the achievement of having isolated in the arts a body of work that really embodies a mental change, far more than some self-critic's self-created movement could. For example, what collagist creates structures of permutation on the sophisticated level of Gerhard Rühm's permutations or those of Emmett Williams himself? Concrete poetry is more like happenings than like cubism or some other art movement: it has a necessity outside of itself, and a real reflection in the external world. Or shall we say simply that it has a concrete reflection?

That would maybe be closer to the happy mentality. But the happy mentality is the one in which the conflicts are resolved, the disagreements shown to have their means of working the many questions out. The vanity of the artists who each want to have been the first to have done this or that is shown to have no function. To quote a truly Algebraic man, "The best music to be written in C-major has yet to be written" (Arnold Schoenberg), and it is enough for the poets to have opened the way to literatures based on intentions and achievements rather than movements and priorities: why should they deny the best that they have done? Anything worth following up is sure to be not only equalled but surpassed, and the artist who is surpassed has played his part by showing the direction the stampede might like to move in. For a happy mentality, isn't that enough?

In other words, Algebraic historicism and hangovers are still very much with us. But noticeably less so. Our Algebraic aspects diminish, and generations appear (they seem to last about three years each now) that already are verging on the happy mentality. What they will do when they come of age in the arts is impos-

sible to anticipate. Some of us may have been there first. We must be Geometrical and not resent this, nor simply accept it, but anticipate it as the inevitable result of being in harmony.

Simultaneously we make these poems which are given handles and the handles are all stamped "concrete." There may be many different notions implied by concrete poetry, but there isn't much point in disagreeing because one man's work has too many A's in it or another's has too many 45° angles. There are better grounds for disagreement than mechanics.

New York, December 23, 1967

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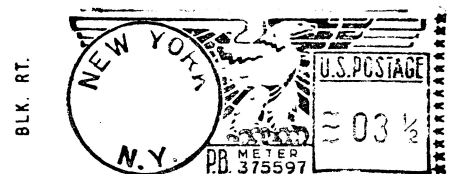
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