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BLANK IMAGES

by Dick Higgins

Meaning in poetry can be taken as a category quite distinct from — though often parallel to — content. A work can have “true” content, can include materials to which we are sympathetic, have an image which ought to be haunting, be written in a poetic diction to which we are sympathetic—and still be utterly meaningless for us. This phenomenon is very common among members of artistic groups which share, perhaps, a political or a theoretical ideology. Some work “makes it” and some doesn’t, and this in spite of everything definable in normal terminology, as regards the content, both explicit, formal, emotive and what I call “dictive” (“Of or pertaining to diction,” in this case poetic diction). We usually simply shy away from this phenomenon, because it is hard to deal with. What is meaningful to one person may not be meaningful to the next. But on what can one base a few assumptions in this situation?

At the risk of being accused of historical relativism

(which is definitely not my viewpoint), I would like to assert that good work is often good in its time or its context, though less so when taken apart from these. Is this what we mean when we say that such-and-such, which we don’t particularly like, is still “important”? To be important is part of the essence of a work however, and it can’t be counterfeited. Similarly with meaning. (As an aside, I would mention that I think it is the same way with originality, that it’s an integral part of any meaningful art, but that to try for it, per se, is simply eccentric, off-base. Its justification lies in the sense of necessity that produced it—“this needed doing, gee, how come nobody did it before?” Perhaps originality and eccentric experiment lie in a relationship parallel to meaning and content, and are equally projections of something more profound in our mentality?)

The above parenthetical and wiggly line is the content of what I would like to say in this article, but what

is its meaning? In the late 1950's and almost through the 60's experimentation in the arts, as we all know, pretty much ran amok (as it had almost exactly fifty years before). Now we hear a lot of talk about consolidation, reevaluation, popularization, "filling in," "culture shock" and "culture revolution," all of which I would put down to the need of a corresponding "revolutionary" upgrading in our sophistication about subject matter. We often hear it said, "We've had a revolution of form, now how about a revolution of subject matter?" The commercials have stuffed us up with quite enough meaningless but radically dictive sexual and political kapok. Naturally. They always have. So I don't mean that. Pop art is as valueless as old ads.

I mean to point out merely that what is easy to analyze on the formal and theoretical level in the best work of this period implies, is consistent with and, in Marxian aesthetics for instance, indispensable in its connection to its meaning, quite apart from its content.

The formal orientation of the 1950's often meant that the structure of a piece seemed more important to the artist than the objective details of this-or-that being included (hence the accurate term, "non-objective art," better than the ambiguous term, "abstract art"). John Cage developed the procedures of making music with chance structures, occasionally used in their respective arts by Mozart, Haydn, Mallarmé, Duchamp and others. George Brecht wrote his brilliant essay *Chance-Imagery* (New York, 1965) in 1957 independently of Cage, developing in a scholarly and erudite way the philosophical justification of chance structures. Jackson Mac Low and myself (neither of us knowing the Brecht essay at that time) used chance structures for verbal works, in the theater and in poetry, Mac Low (oriented towards the ear, the word, performance, reading) starting around 1952, and myself starting in 1957 (but at that time more oriented towards visual music, Happenings, and other Intermedia).

In one respect, chance was a structural means, an alternative to the linear deadliness of Milton "Uncle Algebra" Babbitt and the Stockmäuschens of Darmstadt, the various "International Stylists" of the arts. On the other hand it seemed to be a potent ideology of its own, to imply its own mystique. And, incidentally, one early collaborator of Cage, Morton Feldman, took a different non-Cagean course, though he unfortunately demanded "spiritual values" in his work, leading to rarified metaphysics on the one hand which were equated with *pppp* dynamics on a one-to-one basis, did begin the probing of another, third style, composition by "taste," by placing ranges, parameters, within which notes would fall, here or there on the page or within the orchestra. He used to say, "When I compose, I am dead." And he meant that he tried not to get between himself and the place where his instinct, his "taste," tried to place the range of possibilities.

Unfortunately his prejudice towards metaphysics got in the way. However it was a very interesting parallel to the Abstract Expressionism of the painters of the time, and thinking about it lends breadth to a consideration of what the chance composers and poets did.

In Feldman's description, working purely with chance is interesting enough to the gamblers, but not, ultimately, to the croupier. Same with the artists using chance. The medium for artists isn't always the message. The point in writing a fugue isn't to write a fugue, and the point in using chance wasn't simply to play with forms. At first in writing these pieces one would experiment, be amazed at what "came out of the dice." One would take a purist approach, go to extremes in making "clean, structured" forms. After that there was one's work to do, the world of possibilities and the experience bank to change. For Cage, the pure chance pieces developed into the idea of indeterminacy, a concept he didn't even have to make a neologism for since most of the dictionary definitions are so neat, though defined for different purposes.

In my own case, I was disgusted by almost all the Happenings artists' visual-art prejudices and their involvement in a gallery environment of Make-and-Sell. They seemed so limited, with their emphasis on a particular time, situation and place for their work. And they wouldn't repeat themselves. Especially in Oldenburg's case this seemed simply dumb, since his work evoked rituals, and rituals are meaningless if not repeated at regular intervals. Art students are inculcated early with the notion that they must not repeat themselves (it would destroy the autograph value of their originals). In my case, I developed the notion of "transparency" — the work should acquire its meaning by what you can see through it and how this looks in relation to the work. One would take the "idea" for the work, and figure out its essence. Then try to make it into a "Blank structure," whose structure might imply a whole ideology. E.g., the large number of my pieces in which "The performers meet and elect a leader" is the first sentence. Many of them are in *foew&ombw-hnw* (New York, 1969). More are in the old mimeo booklets I used to mail out, unsolicited, such as *100 Plays, Constellations and Contributions, Six Concretions, The Musical Wig*, etc. The structure would then be filled in with meaningful content, the individual performances being determined by whatever was meaningful by (and to) the individual performers. At least I wanted my performers to be able to work not so much with "problems" as in Brechtian theater, as with whatever they found relevant to them. But so much for my own spur of the canyon.

Poetry is a very odd art. One knows how a piece of music can be different every time it is played. A sculpture can look different from different angles. Three directors will necessarily do diverging versions of

Brecht's *Mother Courage*, even within the Brechtian canon. Paintings change color when you move them from one room to another with a different lighting situation. But with a poem, it's a hard thing to change it. One can change one's mind about it, though that doesn't happen too often. With a sculpture in front of us, we can bob our heads up and down lyrically, but can we change our minds lyrically about a poem? At least with any ease?

Still, even in poetry we have blank structures. My "New poem in an old style" in *foew&ombwhnw* and also "Lecture No. 7 'On Employment'." So are some of Tomas Schmit's early pieces in *The Four Suits* (New York, 1966)—to cite a European example—where one fills in the forms from an array of given materials. But these blank structures are the purist approach, not the most typical, somehow. In literature, if meaning is what we want to achieve, the degree of control has to be incredibly tremendous over the thought potentials of a given form or matrix. Blank structures per se are probably more appropriate to performance works than to poetry. For instance, many poets have made works on decks of cards which are shuffled and reassembled. I did it with my *Some Quiet Chimneys* (1958). In prose, Robert Filliou did it brilliantly in his autobiography, *Je Disais à Marianne* (Cologne, 1967) and in his lecture, *Ample Food for Stupid Thought*. (New York, 1965). Jackson Mac Low has done it repeatedly. But apart from these highlights, there is a tendency to look over the cards, identify them as what they are, say "oh yes," and go on to some other work. It's as if their act of becoming more of an object—or at least a less neutral one than a book or a printed page—took precedence over their content potentials.

But if blank structures are less useful to literature than some other arts when they are used literally, it does not mean necessarily that there is no suitable cognate. In fact, there is. Blank images—sample fillings in of verbal or logical forms or patterns. If I say, "Come rosa in su la spina presto vien e presto va . . ." the rose is being used very concretely—as we normally do—to provide a useful metaphor. Same with "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may." But with Gertrude Stein's "A rose is a rose is a rose," we enter the world of the blank image. It didn't have to be a rose. It could have been a cat. And the insight into cats would have been fully as fresh as the insight into roses, because the point—the real meaning—is not to tell us here but to show us things actually being as they are (not standing for something else, which was the more usual mode in occidental literature till recently).

Now, looking back at the works using chance which I described a moment ago. I think it can be fairly asserted that the content there is blank, in the same sense that blank images are blank. For instance, there is John Cage's piece "4'33" for Piano. It includes no pianistic

sound, though it is in three movements. "Why Piano?" Because the piece refers to the musical experience. It could have been an organ or a clarinet. Why four minutes and thirty three seconds? Because it is, because Cage filled it in that way. Now that it is named, why not use an organ or a clarinet, and let it last for six minutes and forty six seconds? One could, of course (should one call it a variation?), but it seems out of spirit. Doesn't feel right. Why? Because then the clarinet or the organ would have to stand for—to symbolize—a piano, and the longer time unit would have to represent a shorter one. Things could no longer be taken simply for what they are.*

So it is with most chance pieces. Some of Christian Wolff's music of this time—the late 1950's—goes even further in its chance-derived precision, specifying micro-seconds, for instance. But in poetry the bizarre contradiction between specifying an almost unbelievable degree of precision and knowing that only those who were familiar with the score or involved actively with the performance would notice a failure or appreciate the accuracy of a given performance, in poetry this contradiction does not exist. We cannot speak of the accuracy of the realization of a poem, even when its syllabic structure is extremely clear and conspicuous. We can speak only of its consistency or of some similar qualities. Thus it was inevitable that a watershed work from these watershed years should assume colossal form—in both scale and meaning—and be, in fact, poetry pure and simple, unqualified by hyphenated prefixes such as "avant-garde"—or "experimental"—or "chance"—etc. The work I am referring to is Jackson Mac Low's *Stanzas for Iris Lezak* (1960-62: published New York, 1971).

In fact it was trying to figure out why *Stanzas for Iris Lezak* works so well, why it means so much, why it transcends the problems implicit by the chance structuring method that made it necessary for me to stop, try to assess what the real nature of the work was, what qualities in it were responsible for its impact that had not, perhaps been defined. The attempt to explain this impact is, in fact, the reason for this essay, the reason for my predicating the concept of blank structures, regardless of the applicability to a large body of work, and of blank images, irrespective of its relevance to a very large part of the most interesting non-concrete material coming out of Europe, to most "found" poetry, to the post-O'Hara New York School (Giorno, Perrault, Acconci, Wiener, Saroyan, etc.), to Bernadette Mayer, to the Charles Ives of poetry (Bern Porter), to anything, even myself.

Actually, I flubbed. All I defined was the formal context. If a person would otherwise be put off by the

*Could Cage's piece have meant the same had it been called "Not 4'33" and Not for Piano? Conceptually I would have preferred that, somehow.

form, my technical insight may be helpful, in the sense of helping one digest the content to get at the meaning. But I did no better at explaining the meaning than anyone else who predicates a theory. There is no formula for success in poetry, except that poems that try to "work," to be *tours de force*, seldom haunt, seldom can be remembered, seldom mean much, seldom succeed. The *Stanzas for Iris Lezak* succeed because they don't try too hard, they have other grounds for existence.

There's a little of everything in the *Stanzas*. They don't follow just one model. They refer to Mac Low's main works of the fifties—*Peaks and Lamas*, *Lawrence*, *The Marrying Maiden*, but also to his subsequent series (into which the *Stanzas* merge, towards the end), the *Asymmetries*. Some—few—are in a prose format, some have longer lines than others. Some use prose sources, both self-generated and found, such as a particularly striking one from Prime Minister Harold MacMillan, in response to an overreaction by N. S. Khrushchev, "I simply do not understand you today." As it works out, the pacing of the stanza becomes very sing-song, almost Kiplingesque, "East and west, nothing but armies, I simply do not understand you today," with enough break-up from the use of chance to lend a sour tone to the whole piece. Again, one of the very longest of all the stanzas is towards the end, a collage based on a "Child's Garden of Verses." Why Stevenson? Is Mac Low saying something about Stevenson's racial chauvinism? No, that isn't the meaning one gets—Mac Low has other poems to serve that purpose. The Stevenson poems appear to have been at hand, and he invites us in. "Here's what I'm having for supper—it might have been something else, but this is what it is. Join me?" The result is a very relaxing interplay of materials, they're just what they are and no more or less. The source is interesting from what they are and no more

or less. The source is interesting from a gourmet point of view—"where did you get that marvelous bread?"—but its new format controls it and is a more serious concern. Here we have not Feldman's tyranny of the gaming board, to which I alluded earlier, but a continuum with peaks, sparks, highlights on various scales. Something akin to classical Indian music, with its underlying assumption of serenity as the common denominator of the musical response. We're a long way here from catharsis, though Mac Low is comfortable reading classical Greek, has written in it and his most recent large work—still in progress—is *The Odes*, which is syllabic, minimizes the chance element and to judge from what I've seen and been read does not use blank structures or images in any major way. A curious thing though: *The Odes*, though written from different views, experiences and with very different styles, still seem to belong to the same field of possibilities as *Stanzas for Iris Lezak*—a continuum with peaks, sparks, highlights on various scales. As I said, something akin to classical Indian music . . . In other words, as I tried to point out before, all that I have defined till now is the formal methodology, no more a guarantee of why the *Stanzas* work than to say all collages are good collages, all Happenings good Happenings, all concrete poetry good concrete poetry, etc. The question of whether or not work is good is not directly interesting anyway, when our job is to say what things are and to help explain why they work.

We look at a thing, we read a thing, it tells us what it is. We then share this information to help others get into the work. I hope the idea of blank structures and images will help open some doors. Doors to meaning, not just to content.

Blank checks.

Newhall, California
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