

I'LL DROWN MY BOOK

Conceptual Writing by Women

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Acknowledgements required to be printed on this page. Note: These are repeated in the "Acknowledgements" section, alongside addition publication acknowledgements.

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I'll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing By Women
FIRST EDITION

ISBN 13: 978-1-934254-33-2

ISBN 1-934254-33-9

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011945202

Text design by Janice Lee; additional design by Les Figs Press.

Copy editing: Harold Abramowitz, Heatherlie Allison, Diana Arterian, Amina Cain, Jennifer Calkins, Teresa Carmody, David Emanuel, Chris Hershey-Van Horn, Jennifer Karmin, Coco Owen, Mathew Timmons, and Emma Williams.

Special thanks to Les Figs Press interns Heatherlie Allison, Chris Hershey-Van Horn, Emily Kiernan, and Emma Williams. Thank you to Veronica Amaya, Mary Evangelista, Laida Lertxundi, Christina C. Nguyen, Tanya Rubbak, and Sari Thayer. See: <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1359907001/ill-drown-my-book-conceptual-writing-by-women>.

Finally, a very big thank you to everyone who supported this project through Kickstarter. This book is possible because of you.

Les Figs Press titles are available through:
Les Figs Press: <http://www.lesfiges.com>
Small Press Distribution: <http://www.spdbooks.org>



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Los Angeles, CA 90007
www.lesfiges.com

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LAYNIE BROWNE

A CONCEPTUAL ASSEMBLAGE AN INTRODUCTION

To work mine end upon their senses that
This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
And deeper than did ever plummet sound
I'll drown my book.

- *Shakespeare, The Tempest, Act V Scene I, Prospero*

Looking for a title for this collection I turned first to the work of Bernadette Mayer, and found in her collection, *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters*, the title “I’ll Drown My Book.” The process of opening Mayer to find Shakespeare reframed seems particularly fitting in the sense that conceptual writing often involves a recasting of the familiar and the found. In Mayer’s hands, the phrase “I’ll Drown My Book” becomes an unthinkable yet necessary act. This combination of unthinkable, or illogical, and necessary, or obligatory, also speaks to ways that the writers in this collection seek to unhinge and re-examine previous assumptions about writing. Thinking and performance are not separate from process and presentation of works. If a book breathes it can also drown, and in the act of drowning is a willful attempt to create a book which can awake the unexpected—not for the sake of surprise, but because the undertaking was necessary for the writer in order to uproot, dismantle, reforge, remap or find new vantages and entrances to well trodden or well guarded territory.

My contemporaries for the most part have often been distinguished by their lack of camps, categories, or movements. This lack of naming has been useful and has enabled an appreciation of a wide range of practices and approaches to writing. So, why an anthology of conceptual writing by women? The term “conceptual” is being coined anew by writers and it is unthinkable that women should be written out of the project. This book began for me with the problem of the under-representation of women, particularly in key moments when movements begin to take shape and crystallize and are documented by gatherings, public events and anthologies. And while perhaps few would argue that women are not writing and publishing in this area, it is often at the stage of anthologizing that numbers start to shift so that women are not adequately represented. Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young note in their essay “Numbers Trouble”

that: “Overall, in our admittedly arbitrary selection of mixed-gender anthologies that in some way identify themselves as experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative, we found that between 1960 and 1999 women make up an average of 22% of the writers.” Similarly, in the new website for VIDA (Women in Literary Arts), Amy King examines the gender distribution of several major book awards and prominent best-of-lists for 2009 and finds represented 592 men and 295 women. Her historical tally is equally discouraging: 929 men and 454 women. These statistics are alarming because this lack of representation of women is in some sense invisible until we come to moments where codification starts to happen. To many then, this writing women out of the canon is invisible until after the fact. Bernadette Mayer writes: “Since women are often disenfranchised, depending on what country you live in, daughters are often thrown away. Hard to believe isn’t it? But then a lot of stuff about females is.”

Why the term “conceptual” now? Why not come up with a new term, one which is actually new? And yet the term “conceptual,” because of its long association with visual art, merits a wider gaze than it has been given in relation to writing. In other words, it is not a term which can belong to a select few, or be defined too narrowly, at least not at this point in time. This term “conceptual writing” warrants a period of discovery and describes, as illustrated in this book, a wide proliferation of forms and approaches. This anthology is hopefully the beginning of opening such a passage of debate and conversation. The fact is, that the term “conceptual writing,” for better and for worse, has thus far often been employed to describe a set of writing practices which seem, nonsensically, to preclude particular content. Not coincidentally, this content is often chosen by women. In this collection of work by women a reader may find that process and restraint driven writing is often expressive and intellectual, and that the assumption of a dualistic paradigm which claims that conceptual writing creates only ego-less works is actually another false construction. While looking at the work of women in this collection, it is evident that in conceptual writing methodologies do not dictate or predict the writing that follows, nor is methodology the only indicator of conceptual writing.

Thankfully, Vanessa Place and Rob Fitterman have written *Notes on Conceptualisms*, which, in a series of aphoristic statements and inquiries, suggests provocative possibilities for conceptual writing. In the foreword to the book Fitterman writes, “Conceptual Writing in fact, might be best defined not by the strategies used but by the expectations of the readership or *thinkership*.” In a recent interview Lisa Robertson writes: “Poetry is not bound by movements, periodicities and canons. Poetry is a continuity fueled by political passion.” The writers in this collection

are not bound by a singular aesthetic intent, but rather by practices which, when considered side by side, form a mosaic of possibilities which resonate as a whole, perhaps because of a commitment to common concerns which span many practices, languages and cultures. To summarize these concerns in a comprehensive way is not practical, but I would venture to say that in all of these works collective thinking is primary, reader participation is requisite, the “I” when present is often an assemblage of voices, and process is often primary and integrative. The unknown and investigative are also common impulses. This writing does not attempt to create neatly drawn solutions, commentary or speakers, but rather to experiment not for the sake of experimentation but with the desire to reveal something previously obscured. This work may revolt from the notion that writing must follow certain strictures, and reclaims the possibility of writing as a unique field of freedom (which allows the reader to experience how, paradoxically, formal restraints in writing often yield freedom). Writers may attempt to strike out or illuminate what has come before through various means, and either approach suggests a re-examination of the possible. M. NourbeSe Philip writes in her book *Zong!* of the devastating story of the slave ship, “There is no telling this story; it must be told.” Thus her work is a re-entering of history, making use of legal documents to retell or “untell.” Rachel Zolf writes in her multi-lingual work on the Israel/Palestine conflict, “Loss has made a tenuous we.” This “tenuous we” is an apt description of this assemblage, or the notion of conceptual writing, which is still evolving.

In terms of the organization of the book, though each piece may employ various techniques and approaches, we have attempted to place works in the category which is most dominantly displayed in the piece. We have chosen terms for classification with the intent to encourage inquiry rather than to stipulate. A note on omissions: it has been our editorial intent to make room for many lesser known and younger writers by not including many antecedents who have made tremendous contributions to conceptual writing but have also been central in previous movements. This is not to say that their work is not conceptual. It is not possible to name all of the writers whose work has been essential to the development of conceptual writing, but a few who come immediately to mind are: Anne-Marie Albiach, Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, Nicole Brossard, Danielle Collobert, Lyn Hejinian, Carla Harryman, Alice Notley, Leslie Scalapino and Monique Wittig. Additionally, some writers we asked for work declined to submit because they did not consider their work conceptual. We asked all contributors to write a brief statement defining conceptual writing in relation to their own writing processes. These statements are as various as our contributors and often reveal much about how writers have been influenced by conceptual thinking in various fields.

I call this book an assemblage because its contributors are not all of like mind, content, process or opinion as to where their own work stands. This assemblage is focused mostly on work which is being written *now* and in which there is a timelessness and timeliness, like Bernadette Mayer's early experiments or her current project represented here in her *Helen of Troy* excerpt, which propose new ways of seeing a form such as epic or a character such as Helen. Mayer writes in her selection in this anthology: "Meeting these Helens is seeing a part of history that wouldn't exist, wouldn't have to exist either, if I weren't doing this; there are lots of people and things, including books, that are already there but being alive is different maybe." "Being alive," from a writerly perspective, necessitates that within this open assemblage or field argument may abound. This suspended or "drowned" book-in-print is merely a snapshot. This anthology is not intended to cement, but instead to collect, to document and to pry open the term "Conceptual" for a deeper examination. We do not seek to split and separate, but to provoke a greater, more expansive and rigorous "thinkership."

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CAROLINE BERGVALL

THE CONCEPTUAL TWIST A FOREWORD

There is a phrase by Kathy Acker that emphasizes a strict causal connection between her existential dilemma as a female writer and the poetic methodology that emerges from it. She writes: “I was unspeakable so I ran into the language of others.” This sentence summarizes both her feminist stance and her writing methodology. Acker famously proposed a literary mode which only exists through other texts. It twists itself through other texts. The writer conceives of writing as a collated and plagiarized multiplicity. Cultural pillaging provides a poetic trajectory that negates the original authorial voice. The uniqueness of the work is its lack of uniqueness, its negativity. It exists as a mode of textual appropriation, a process of shadowing and transference. This poetic strategy falls in line with broad notions of conceptual practice. Something like Walter Benjamin meets Sherrie Levine. Simultaneously, it is conceived as a salutary way to escape an abject subjectivity: “I was unspeakable.” Textual plagiarism provides here a way out of a societal status quo that must silence or symptomatize the female, minoritarian or differential writer. The literary pauperism of Acker’s late 20th century stance turns the longstanding translative and pragmatic aspects of literary borrowing into a question of philosophical and juridical property plots. Thieving denaturizes what it steals. Her writing quickly hits against the legally framed enclosures of the copyrighted text and the writer, taken at her words, finds herself in court.

What is being played out in the opening quote is a process of Rimbaldian dedoubling, of appropriative performance, an assimilation of voices that is close to Irigaray’s tactical notion of female mimicry. One is not one self. One has not one self. One’s speech is that of others. Intrinsic separation and alienation are offset by processes of accumulation and collation, performative masking and unmasking. The authorial voice multiplies its effects by explicitly acting as an empty intermediary, a ventriloquist, a mockingbird. But this bird distorts and misuses. It imagines the one-to-one as a friction, not an equation. Or as a phasmic trick, such as that seen among extreme chameleons, some insects and birds, or soldiers, who briefly take on the appearance of their environments. Once detected in the landscape, the whole tableau collapses with surprise, the image disassembles, the forest opens up, the animal goes live. Escher’s interlocked labyrinthine lizards. Kara Walker’s

violent papercut silhouettes, “Narratives of a Negress,” play against the entertaining shadow games of the form. Kathy Acker’s chameleonic turn is indicative of an approach to writing that paradoxically, one could say contradictorily, establishes an explicit continuity between detached textual procedure and authorial motivation, between constricted social positioning and the not-I multiplicity of her writerly voice. It is conceptual as a matter of process and survival.

Conceptual Art as it appeared initially in the US and elsewhere, from the mid 1960s on, was a mode of working that, true to avantgardist modes, was critical of the commodified art object and of the art institutions themselves. The art machine needed further untooling. The aesthetic credos of originality and progress needed stripping right down. Nothing Duchampian mathematics could not assist with. Language and philosophical referencing, Wittgenstein notably, were brought in as work tools to disengage the art-making process and to create what Hans Haacke later called “productions of the consciousness industry.” Axioms replaced the line. Ideas aimed to replace form (a full circle on the platonic simulacrum that did not escape the Art & Language group). Yet when it came to the logical next step, the all important business of stripping the artist’s social identity, or even denuding artistic persona itself, investigating the artist’s “authorial function” as it were, this proved largely beyond the frame. It simply reiterated on a circularity: anartist is anartist is anartist. On Kawara did play the game out, exploring the distribution of his name as an extended part of the work’s aura. Collaborative groups such as Art & Language, the earlier proto-conceptual Mass Observation, the French Nouveau Roman writers, the OULIPO and later the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets engaged with some of the programmatic aspects of the authorial function by resorting to collective, collated, intertextual forms and multiple narrative angles.

By and large, the artist persona found itself neither intercepted nor sabotaged by conceptual methodologies. And the narrow representation, which remains one of the mythological (in a Barthesian sense) determinants of art groups, remained unaddressed. Seen coarsely, Conceptual Art turned quickly into a small coterie of largely given, largely male, largely white art stars. The readiness with which its stratagems and indeed the artworks themselves were actually absorbed into the art system they were meaning to alter increased the unease at a time when art was all about street fighting. Here we had a question of framing, a methodological proposition, rather than a political art-life proposition. As a case in point, the term itself was briefly revived by the fanfare and ego circus of the Young British Art scene of the 1990s. Being now also essentially stripped of its investigative and critical incentive, it flatly came to represent a hodgepodge term for any non-traditional and non-expressive, performative aesthetics.

Yet, from its remainder, from its unlikely “truffles,” as Gordon Matta-Clark might have designated the unexplored sewer level of conceptual art, have emerged many crucial applications. For instance, conceptual methods paired with psychoanalytic and specifically feminine investigations have provided an ideal combination to seek out the somatic, cognitive and symbolic bases for language and gender development (Mary Kelly, Susan Hiller, Bracha Ettinger, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha,...). Sociological collages, survey mappings, environmental studies by identity-conscious and politicized artists have given a twist to the “sociology at home” maxim from the British literary grouping Mass Observation of the 1930s (Adrian Piper, Martha Rosler, Ellen Gallagher, Agnes Denes, Ruth McLennan,...). Structural constraints of sounded language have released new listening techniques from art’s overfunctioning speaking machine (Alvin Lucier, Bernard Heidsieck, Amanda Stewart, Christof Migone,...). Others have each in turn examined, mimicked and re-enacted the iconic representations of power structures (Xu Bing, Jeremy Deller, Marcel Broodthaers, Hans Haacke, Andrea Fraser,...). Thus largely abandoned as a capitalized denominator, conceptual art has found its terms and limitations broadened, cross-fertilized and internationalized into an instrumental adjective denoting primarily a critical and investigative approach of language, materials, methodologies and socio-cultural situations.

The conceptual poetics collated in this collection are filled with the meandering troubles of the term itself, as much as by the suspicion many female writers have harbored for its historical umbrella and initial propensity for exclusionary models. Language manipulation and textuality being after all the native domain of writing, it makes sense to discuss conceptual writing not only in relation to its intellectual cross-pollination with contemporary language-based arts, as outlined above, but first and foremost in continuity of some literary antecedents, for whom the symbolic territory occupied by literary language had become a fraught and intensely contentious issue (schematically from de Sade to Beckett, from Nouveau Roman, Language Poetry, via Situationism, Fluxus, aspects of Lettrism, ...). Indeed, the main point of commonality is that the pieces included here all share an acute awareness of the literarity of literature, of the paratextuality of the book, of the technologies of writing, of the examination of the poetic function. There are some methodological commonalities too: An emphasis on mediation, on translation, on stylistic flexibility, even opportunism; there is a frequent reliance on research, on explicit sourcing, on palimpsestic structures, on machinic handling, on mixed media, on structural games. The deployed methodologies stage and recreate some of the many laws proposed by literary productivity, by institutional framing, by knowledge archive, by identity formation and by language acquisition. The flattening of stylistic

impulse, in the narrow sense of authorial parole, and the examination of syntactic logic, narrative construction, authorial voice, intertextual polyglossia are used to investigate the creation of textual sense and release new signficatory forms. To all this, one would be remiss to ignore the hidden or explicit influence of literary games, lists, rebuses, cryptography, puns and anagrams, homophonic translations, mixed code texts and constraints on verbal architectures.

One question irks, underlines, pushes at many of the pieces. It echoes the dissident emptiness expressed by Acker. How does one acknowledge social invisibilities within questions of authorial openness? How does one put a text together that depersonalizes, that disengages from personalized modes, yet manages to engage with processes of personification and identification? If literature is perceived as a mediating apparatus, a symbolic representation that highlights features of social engineering as much as of individual motivation, how does one create textual works where the authorial hold over the text is somehow distanced, perhaps neutralized, yet where the structural impact of experience, of living, of loving, of knowing, of reading are in fact recognized. Evidenced rather than evinced. How does one make conceptually-led work that does not do away, ignore, silence or mute some of the messy complications of socio-cultural belonging, but rather collects from the structure itself? The balancing act remains difficult. From research to composition through to realization and distribution, it involves radical rethinks about the codes of literature's production line. The writer finds herself necessarily, structurally destabilized by the denuding undertaking. Or she might become captive to the seductions of the stripping machine.

In my opinion, there are two principal ways, two main avenues, represented by this collection, through which conceptual poetics or, adapting Rancière, "critical poetics," largely avoid falling for production fetishism.

Firstly, there is the road of engaged disengagement. A willingness to constantly, relentlessly examine the means of one's own intentionality, positioning, assumptions, expectations. Acker exclaiming: "I sell copyright." Secondly, there is the route of engaged disengagement. A willingness to accept the laughable obsessiveness of one's intent in the face of the all-corrupting consumption machine (in economic, gluttonous and medical terms). The skillful play, the trick of showing one's hand. It is dead serious playfulness, interdependence, networked provocation, and conscious games. Games as source of perception and knowledge, as a shake-up of one's expectations, frequently locative. Responsiveness rather than competitiveness. Bliss is the gaping shirt, writes Barthes.

Games assume that one is usually, but not always, more than one. And they assume a familiarity with the rules to be played. Of course playing language and playing it against itself has provided the past

century with its most important treasure troves of symptoms and revolts. Already in the 16th century a doctor had understood the value of games as a structural *mise en abyme* as well as a narrative logic. In his *Gargantua*, Rabelais lists some 217 games, from parlor games to cards to sports as well as fortune-telling devices, that are played after dinner by the young novice. Bakhtin reminds us that the first German translator of the work took the idea of translating a list, a non-exhaustive conceptual text by definition, at its word and added some 376 German games and dances to the original one. The English Thomas Urquhart added many English games in his own seminal translation. In these distended translations, it is the parasitical endlessness of associative stimuli that is arresting, the virtuoso display of a task unfaithfully executed. It is executed along the lines of structure, rather than verbal correspondence. Here a game is cheated, bent and extended while being played by the rules. The translation exercise becomes more diffuse and opaque. The calque is no longer an illusory one-to-one, but a one-to-one intercepted and recirculated via a different register (regional games, not languages). Deviation and redirection displace the expectations of translation. It is the list factor that is being translated, not the textual list. The list value is what increases in the traffic.

This anthology never underestimates the meaning of bluffing, of thieving, of surprise, of winning streaks, of the playing hand, of calling quits, of lost cards, of changed rules, of hiatus, and everything else that collapses the conceptual constrictions in on themselves and moves the text away from a morbid submission to the mechanics of rule. That is to say: the methodological flair for conceptual principles, the conceptual principles laced with practical research, the practical research undone by rebellious stamina, the rebellious stamina bullied on by engaged poetics, the engaged poetics traversed by multitudes.