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ENG 372: Theoretical Explorations in Innovative Poetics

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Adapting
Towards a Reinvestigation of Cubism: Adopting Stein for a New Generation of Poets

The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movement introduced us to Gertrude Stein's syntactical "becoming," revealing the subtlety of a syntactical cubism while highlighting Stein's relation to "language as such"—as a social, politically weighted entity. The subtlety of Stein's artistic positions with regard to Cubism should be reinvestigated by those upcoming visual poets who are attempting to take the Language movement as a given. It is precisely through this re-appropriation of Stein's views of Time and Space that the genes of Poetry may mutate into a new creature with new energy and momentum. Looking to the discoveries the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets made with regard to Stein, new poets may move beyond the critiques of how *Stein* uses time and space and utilizes Stein's principles in new work.

The new ways that the Language poets looked at the ways in which humans share language and perceive the world through it often found their roots in Wittgenstein. A slightly different and perhaps more complex view of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E theory can be seen when one looks through the filters provided by the poets' treatment of Stein. A self-proclaimed cubist, Stein focused on the crystalline nature of objects—the "thingness" that disallows a direct naming. Objects are crystalline in that they are always entropic—they are also crystalline in that when we name them, as when we view a crystal, we impose upon them a particular stasis that has nothing to do with their real nature (a more detailed description of crystallography can be found in Barrett Watten's *Total Syntax*). These issues of Time, reality, and semantics are focal points of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E theory, though the ways in which they surface in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry are often much paler than they might be.

At the forefront of the feminist politics latent in Language poetry are female reinvestigations of Stein's poetry as feminist texts. Susan Howe calls attention to a resistance to patriarchy through a redefinition (and thus reversibility) of history by analyzing Stein's syntax. Howe writes: "She reached in words for a new vision formed from the process of naming, as if a first woman were sounding, not describing, 'space of time filled with moving'" (*MED* 11). Stein moves away from typical language, and thus from the patriarchal social order that teaches us language and filters the world in a particular way. Howe continues: "Gertrude Stein also conducted a skillful and ironic investigation of patriarchal authority over literary history. Who polices questions of grammar, parts of speech, connection, and connotation? Whose order is shut inside the structure of a sentence?" (*MED* 11) Stein actually addresses these questions critically in *Composition as Explanation*. She writes that

There is singularly nothing that makes a difference a difference in beginning and in the middle and in ending except that each generation has something different at which they are all looking. By this I mean so simply that anybody knows it that composition is the difference which makes each and all of them then different from other generations and this is what makes everything different otherwise they are all alike and everybody knows it because everybody says it. (*Composition as Explanation* 21)

Stein writes that each generation is different from the last because of the special way that each considers its surroundings. According to Howe, a way of writing can lead to socio-historical change by breaking open, or calling attention to, the politics latent in language. Another way to look at Stein's generational change and "space of time filled with moving" is to consider the poem as if it were a living, evolving being. Explorers of new visual poetry can look to Stein for earlier experiments in scale and the theme of minor variation over Time:

It was all so nearly different and it is different, it is natural that if everything is used and there is a continuous present and a beginning again and again if it is all so alike it must be simply different and everything simply different was the natural way of creating it then. (*CAE* 26-27)

In the above passage from *Composition as Explanation* (21), Stein refers to "generations"—groups of people born within certain time frames—but her argument can be applied just as easily to each generation of the semantic unit in poetry such as Stein's. In Stein's poetry, each phrase is a slight mutation of or variation on the last, just as each human generation is

a slight mutation of the previous one (genetically). Just as each human generation chooses different things on which to focus, each phrase in a typical Stein poem “looks” at a different aspect of the thing it describes—the “simply” different which draws attention to the making of meaning inside minor variations of seeing. The quality of human generations that allows some things to escape consideration at some times is the same quality of Stein’s work which allows a thing to move, unnamed, within a broken net of verbs and pronouns. Things escape real definition while simultaneously gaining fuzzy, compound meaning. This compound meaning happens on a microscopic level. From afar, the word “human” describes a very long history of blurred bodies; if one comes closer to a particular space and time, one sees and understands individuals. The same phenomenon is present in Stein’s phrases: reading a long passage gives one a general understanding, but focusing on short spaces reveals subtle arguments (in her critical work) and previously unnoticed aspects of things (in works such as *Tender Buttons*). Stein’s long columns of slightly differentiated phrases, and block paragraphs of evolving arguments, force the reader into an unvaried space that mirrors the syntax of the semantic units themselves.

Stein’s “becoming” –a sort of continual change towards an undefined future, as happens in natural evolution—is often described by the Language poets. Stein’s position on nouns and naming involves a particular visualization of the dynamism of Space and Time. Where names usually pin down an aspect of a thing, verbs, pronouns, and connectors act as “shifters,” allowing the language recipient to understand multiple identities of a thing at once. This multiplicity is not assimilated, but rather allowed to exist as a multiplicity, when Stein writes such lines as:

Suppose, to suppose, suppose a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.

To suppose, we suppose that there arose here and there that here and there there arose an instance of knowing that there are here and there that there are there that they will prepare, that they do care to come again. And they to come again. (*An Elucidation*, as reprinted in *transition* 1927, p. 13)

Stein uses very few nouns here, and those things that are nouns are also Times. As the transition between “a rose” and “arose” suggests, Space and perspective are mutable with respect to Time, allowing the perceiver to amalgamate many versions of a thing before understanding the nature of a thing—a nature which is, even when “understood,” never assimilated as a flat or static entity. Hejinian explains in her astute “Two Stein Talks” (printed in *The Language of Inquiry*) that “things can be viewed ‘objectively,’ which is to say viewed as objects but also viewed in the process of coming into objecthood” (97). Although Hejinian uses Stein to illustrate sentential/linear meaning (the pet semantic unit of an entire generation of philosopher-poets), Stein’s argument can be viewed as an imaginative exploration into the Space and Time inherent *in* language that make language much more interesting than linear development allows. Stein’s language allows for *change over time*: the development of memory in relation to meaning and the combination of multiple views into a crystalline whole. This effort to depict the evolution of an object over Time is at the heart of cubism, but may be taken in an abstract form from Stein’s work and established as a root for a new wave of visual poetry. Barrett Watten describes this phenomenon of multiplicity and its relation to Time in his critique of Robert Smithson’s landscape sculptures (in *Total Syntax*). Watten writes:

A monumental stasis, compelling and inert, is for Smithson a hopeful development in art. This hope is connected to the recognition and exploration of states of entropy by artists as the art world falls apart into ‘endless amounts of points of view.’...The breaking apart of the spatial order undermines the authority of the present time.” (TS 69)

Watten, like Howe (above) hopes to change the politics of the immediate future by calling into question the ordering of Space and Time through language. His “endless points of view” are the trajectories of a utopia where every point of view is equally a vision of reality. New poetry, which more often than not takes democracy as a given (just as it takes Language poetry as a given), can construct these endless points of view not only syntactically—as Stein attempted to—but spatially and aurally—multiple voices, no lines (lines are always automatically boundaries, as is grammar), an extant pluralism never blended into a “melting pot” but allowed to exist in a differentiated, entropic, nearly boundless system of signs that border on nonsense.

Cubism involves two major shifts in thinking—shifts that the Language group never really made. Even in their efforts to create “non-linear” poetry (as occurs occasionally in Charles Bernstein’s *Dark City* and Bruce Andrews’ early works), the unit of measure was always the line—the line was the given even when works attempted to be “non”-linear. Rethinking cubism as a root system for a new visual poetry involves throwing out the idea of the line. Things can no longer be “non-linear” because to break into a new way of thinking about poetry the word “linear” must be completely eradicated. Cubism lets us imagine a world without lines by allowing so many lines to exist at once, that we can abstract the idea of the plane. Cubism’s multiplicity of perspective provides the observer with the illusion of motion, denying any direct or singular “progression” through a poem, painting, or other environment. The Language group, still working out of Beat and Black Mountain histories, continues to see the poem as a pathway that passes through and delineates Time and Space. The New Sentence and even critiques of it, such as Lyn Hejinian’s “Line,” focus on the linear semantic unit. Even more advanced criticism such as Charles Bernstein’s “Words and Pictures” and Bruce Andrews’ “Lines Linear How to Mean” look to “duration” and “delimiting” as the primary components of meaning in language. In a new visual poetry, such as work by Steve McCaffery and Mike Basinski (among others, especially as represented in the magazine *Essex*), no “progression” through Time and Space is marked out for the Reader—poems are not just multicursal but *multidimensional* labyrinths of meaning, nonsense, and material. The word “material” leads to the second major shift needed to break with the current views of poetry: the page is not a blank canvas or silence, not a score nor a painting, but a topological space that expands in multiple spatio-temporal “directions.” That the line no longer exists indicates that things drawn linearly are obsolete—the cube replaces the square as the unit of visual measure, separating new visual poetry from work by Apollinaire and nichol by destroying the ease of a meaning-depiction relationship. The cube in this case is not just two squares with four lines mapped onto a two-dimensional space, but the *principle between* the two-dimensional cube and the third dimension (namely, that an $n+1$ dimension can be mapped only inaccurately onto an n dimensional field). Rethinking cubism opens an enormous imaginative (and imaginary) space in which to use words, breaking out of the confines of progressive Time and linear Space.

The materiality of the page, the mirroring between differentiation within the page and differentiation of meaning, and the break from a two-dimensional plane to a three-dimensional one, extant in Stein’s theory, are aspects of poetry in use by contemporary visual poets. Findlay, Vicuña, Grenier, and McCaffery are more influential to these poets than Apollinaire, Pound, nichol, or Johnson—those poets whose poetry reflects a direct relationship between meaning and visual representations. The same abstract principle of un-naming, of allowing unassimilated multiplicity, is present in these forerunner’s works and those of Stein. Findlay and Vicuña’s works border on the meaningless—without extralingual boundaries, such as the entrance to Little Sparta or Vicuña’s ceremonial *precarios*-making performances, the spectator may not know to find meaning in objects that, though syntactic, are rarely lingual. In Grenier’s work, too, recognizeability of the poem *as such* is called into question, forcing the viewer to learn a new language much more complex than any of the Language poets’ in order to read the poems (works such as Charles Bernstein’s *Dark City* often force the reader to dance between lines to make meaning, but the meaning always comes together quite linearly), which sometimes consist of only a few words—and no lines—on a page. McCaffery’s work, perhaps the most influential to young poets, plays with a topology of the page similar to a smoothness found in Stein’s barely differentiated phrases. A reader of Stein finds herself in a constant shift of meaning, and must cling to the smallest fragments of differentiation in order to understand the wash of phrases. In McCaffery, the differentiation is much bigger (less microcosmic) but the constant shifts of focus in works such as *Carnival* force the reader into a tectonics of meaning. These examples are quite different from the works of Apollinaire, nichol, and Johnson, because although in *all* of the poets the visual aspect is important, in Apollinaire, nichol, and Johnson, it is *essential*. The calligraphic aspect of the work of these three poets subtracts from the dynamism of shifting meaning and visual playfulness in works such as McCaffery’s—the meaning-vision relationship is immediate and simplistic rather than pluralistic, shifting, and dangerous.

this is a work in progress.