

# VANESSA PLACE

## AFTERWORD

The elephant is the elephant.

There is the parable of the five blind men and the elephant in which the elephant is variously described as leaf-like by the man holding an ear, snake-like by the man holding the trunk, twig-like by the man holding the tail, pillar-like by the man holding a leg and wall-like by the man thumping the belly. There are various versions of the varying parable (substitute belly/wall for back/throne, trunk/snake for tusk/pipe), though there is a common conclusion—that all are correct and yet each incomplete, that there is a truth and that this truth is beholden to the eye of the beholder, perforce limited, potentially dogmatic. However, this concurrence never seems to include the other truths of the elephant. One of which was articulated by Lacan when he noted that the elephant is, in fact, articulated. The word *elephant* permits all sorts of things to be done to and with elephants insofar as they are regarded as *elephants*, whether there is an elephant in the room or not. The *elephant* is thus “more real than the contingent elephant-individuals.”

Another two-ton truth is that the *elephant*, like the elephant, is also material, a thing more or less impenetrable. It is not, however, an umbrella. Of this much, the analyst and I are certain. This much, but no more. For in writing an afterword, I am in the enviable position of the man with the broom walking behind the elephant: like the analyst, what I see that needs sweeping is that which both is and is no longer part of the elephant. The refuse. That part which refuses to be elephant in the Bartlebian or Hegelian sense of knowing non-utility, that which the elephant both generates and rejects, the excremental remainder of the elephant. This is the difference between mimesis and metamorphosis: the former allows one to grasp what is not, properly speaking, *elephant* within the elephant and what may be yet *elephant* outside the elephant. The latter assumes *elephant* solely in the context of the elephant. Consider the phrase “artist’s shit.” Consider the mimetic effect of such excrescence, pace Piero Manzoni (*Merda d’Artista*), who literally put his shit in ninety 30-gram cans and sold it for its weight in gold. Consider its metamorphosis, given that what’s left of this shit is now worth more than its weight in gold, so that Manzoni could have been said to have shit gold bricks. Consider its lament, à la Erykah Badu,

who says: *Keep in mind that I'm an artist and I'm sensitive about my shit* (Tyrone). Consider how Kathy Acker could be part Quixote or Pip or some such shit.

Détournement, according to Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, refers to “a variation on a previous media work, in which the newly created one has a meaning that is antagonistic or antithetical to the original.” Détournement, according to Guy Debord, “is the flexible language of anti-ideology...It is language that cannot and need not be confirmed by any previous or supracritical reference. On the contrary, its own internal coherence and practical effectiveness are what validate the previous kernels of truth it has brought back into play.” Détournement, according to Patrick Greaney, is a many-gendered thing; in his “Insinuation: *Détournement* as Gendered Repetition,” Greaney quotes Debord misquoting Baudelaire, writing *Je voulais parler la belle langue de mon siècle* (“I wanted to speak the beautiful language of my century”) in place of him who wrote *si je voulais parler la belle langue de mon siècle* (“if I wanted to speak the beautiful language of my century”) as a shining e.g. of how activity overcomes and comes over passivity, or what can happen when poets “enter into enemy territory and repeat the locutions that they undermine. In this repetition, poets burrow into language, but they, too, are dug into, penetrated by the very language that they want to overcome or keep at a distance.” As I have noted elsewhere, citation is always castration: the author’s lack of authority made manifest by the phallus-presence of another authority. What better way to play the gendered part. Like this.

I have previously identified many forms of conceptualism, ranging from the pure to the baroque. These are matters of form. I have come to consider conceptualism, *qua* conceptualism, that is, as writing that does not self-interpret, is not self-reflexive, at least not on the page. In other words, writing in which the content does not dictate the content: what appears on the surface of the page is pure textual materiality, no more (and often much less) than what you see on the surface of the page. Conversely, in the way of positive and negative space, conceptualism is also writing in which the context is the primary locus of meaning-making. I have written elsewhere that all conceptualism is allegorical, that is to say, its textual surface (or content) may or may not contain a kind of significance, but this surface significance (or content) is deployed against or within an extra-textual narrative (or contextual content) that is the work’s larger (and infinitely mutable) meaning. The white cube is only a white cube, the thin spindly thing a thin spindly thing. The thin spindly thing, however, may well be the tail of the elephant, which leads to the elephant’s tale. As Schopenhauer noted, Kant would have been better off had he explicitly denied objective existence to the thing-in-itself. In other

words, it is better to begin conceptualization with that which lies within one's own perceived experience. In other words, *l'éléphant n'existe pas*.

Having crushed the elephant as such, do I consider all the work within this anthology to be conceptual writing? Yes and, more naturally, no. No because much of it dictates its reception, contains within its writing the way or ways in which it would be read. Yes because like all other methods and madness, genuine kin may not bear a family relationship, especially around the eyes. After all, the term "Abstract Expressionism" managed to include Pollack and de Kooning and Gorky besides, and conceptual art considers Rauschenberg and Klein equal practitioners. And in the spirit of authorial effacement, who am I to decide? After all, all I am is an editorial function, one among three, each of whom is grasping at some bit of materiality in a Kantian sense, which is to say, in the way that Foucault noted that Kant heralded "the retreat of cognition and of knowledge out of the space of representation." Even in the space where the many are represented, that is to say, presented again to some other end.

After all, in all this, there remains only one who matters—the one who encounters this text or that text in this or that textual context, and in this and that contextualizing context only one remains—the reader who is the thinker who is village explainer, given that this one is also the village. So in the course of this and that we are thrown back on our own resources and failures thereof, dunked in the midden-pool of our own communal making. Marjorie Perloff, quoting Stein, quoting Derrida, notes "the difference is spreading." And as the French mathematician said about Rancine's *Iphigénie*: *Qu'est-ce que cela prouve?*