

Charles Bernstein

Introduction to [*Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing and Visual Poetics*](#) by Johanna Drucker (New York: Granary Books, 1998)

During the 1960s and 1970s, The New York Public Library acquired an admirable collection of contemporary small press magazines, including many of the xerox, mimeo and side-stapled publications featured in the 1998 show, *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side: Adventures in Writing 1960-1980*. This was the heyday of a writing storage medium called microfiche, which the librarians embraced as a space-age space saver: no sooner had they committed these publications to fiche than they disposed of the cumbersome objects, as one would discard the husks around an ear of corn. However, it wasn't too long before the library found themselves recollecting, and prominently displaying, the material artifacts that they had earlier so abruptly deaccessioned.

What difference does it make? What's the fuss about these material imprints of language – isn't it the content that matters? Does the method of storage really make a difference?

The work of Johanna Drucker reflects a radical change in understanding the semantic contribution of the visual representation of language – not just for visual poetry or artists' books, not just for poetry, but for all forms of written language. To be sure, Drucker has focussed her attention on language works in which visual materiality is foregrounded. But the lessons she has to teach – historical, philosophical, and aesthetic – apply to all the technologies human beings have invented to store and explore language. *All language is visual when read*. In her work, Drucker reverses a common assumption even among writers, typographers, and visual poets that the visual dimension of writing is ornamental, decorative, extrasemantic – a matter of design, not signs that matter. “The single, conservative constant in my work,” she says, “is that I always intend for the language to have meaning. My interest is in extending the communicative potential of writing, not in eliminating or negating it.”

In these pages, Drucker presents herself as a visual artist, a literary writer, a scholar/historian, and an aesthetician. In each of these areas, Drucker has made substantial contributions. But it is her synthesis of these fields that is her most extraordinary achievement and that links her late twentieth century work in the United States to the work of two towering British scholar-book artists of the previous fin-de-siècles: William Blake of the late eighteenth century and William Morris of the late nineteenth. Like these men of letters, this modern-day person of books bends and stretches the nature of art practice well beyond its conventional generic constraints. She questions and transforms the gender codings of the intellectual, the polymath, the scholar, and the printer. Indeed, Drucker is more a satirist than a visionary or utopian, reveling in, rather more than reviling, the “carnival of grotesque human folly.” For all its extraordinary detail and formidable erudition, Drucker's work is rigorously anti-systematic, emblematically anti-authoritarian, and often giddily eccentric.

Figuring the Word is a work of poetics rather than criticism or theory in that these essays are the products of doing as much as thinking, of printing as much as writing, of designing as much as researching, of typography as much as composition, of

autobiography as much as theory. The mark of the practitioner-critic is everywhere present in these pieces: it is as notable in Drucker's insistence on discussing her process of making things as it is when she reveals her process of hiding things. Moreover, even as she has learned the history of her medium, she remains insistent that current practice, not precedent, is her guiding impulse: "The idea that there were precedents for such activity seemed a lot less important than that there was a future in it."

Figuring the Word is a wide-ranging collection of Drucker's essays from the early 1980s to the present. Written in a variety of styles and presented in a variety of formats, the book reflects many divergent aspects of her work and thinking, while at the same time demonstrating how cohesive her project has been. Drucker begins with a wonderfully digressive discussion of her work as a book artist in which she gives an account of what lead her not only to her book art, but also to her related scholarly investigations. She then provides a series of close readings of the work of a number of contemporary language artists, providing in other essays overviews of the historical precedents for this work. The book includes not only a perceptive essay about the use of language in the landscape but also a prescient essay about the use of language in the new electronic frontier of cyberspace. In several sections, Drucker narrates her personal history as a way to explore the affinity with the genre fiction and tabloid prose that underlies much of her writing. And throughout the collection, she interrogates the role and significance of gender, not only for her own work, but for the genres within which she works. Drucker insists that "the place for women is not *as the Other* but as the one who shows that *that Other has always been present*," a position that is, to a remarkable degree, analogous to her view about the material features of language.

Susan Bee and I first met Johanna Drucker in 1977 in a large tent in Bryant Park, on the grounds of the New York Public Library. That ground had been reduced to mud by hundreds of us participating in the Small Press Book Fair. Drucker was exhibiting her first few letterpress books, which immediately caught my attention as just the kind of work that I wanted to focus on in a new journal Bruce Andrews and I were just starting, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*. Indeed, I reviewed Drucker's *from A to Z* in the first issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, commenting on its uncanny fusing of constructivist constraints (she had set every piece of type from a set of 45 type drawers she had acquired), sumptuous physical detail (a vision of textual excess and density), and wry metanarrative commentary.

Drucker's works, including her unlikely and necessary creation of an awesome body of scholarship exploring the history of alphabets and the theory of the visual representation of language, have remained central to my own sense of writing in the years since. In a wider context, her work has become ever more relevant with the introduction of new writing reproduction and distribution technologies.

When we met, Drucker already knew what the folks in the library would celebrate two decades later: What matters in language is not just the edifices that we make to rise towards the heavens or bore deep below ground. The mud on the floor at Bryant park that day may have dirtied our shoes but it also kept us in mind of the material ground of our writing practices – of the significance of making by marking. That language only means if it also matters.