

Peter Manson

Chicago Review

53-4 & 54-23 2008

REVIEWS

Hannah Weiner, *Hannah Weiner's Open House*. Edited by Patrick F. Durgin. Ypsilanti, MI: Kenning Editions, 2007. 178pp. \$14.95

The first, if not quite the earliest, text reproduced in this highly instructive selected works is an invitation from the Gain Ground gallery to one of Weiner's early performances ("HANNAH WEINER AT HER JOB," undated, though probably 1970 or '71):

Miss Weiner explains her show as follows:

"My life is my art. I am my object, a product of the process of self-awareness. I work part-time as a designer of ladies underwear to help support myself. I like my job, and the firm I work for. They make and sell a product without unnecessary competition. The people in the firm are friendly and fun to work with...

Art is live people. Self respect is a job if you need it. On 3 Wednesday evenings I will be at my studio, where I work. My boss, Simeon Schreiber, will be with me. There will be bikini underpants for sale, at the usual prices, and one made especially for this show by August Fabrics and A.H. Schreiber, to whom I am grateful!"

This is followed by a short CV, ending with the sentence, "This is her first one man show." It's possible to read Weiner's whole subsequent practice as one long, immense, and reasoned derailing of the kind of art career that could seek to present "Miss Weiner" like a debutante, the artist's own words quarantined by quotes, gender assumptions left unchallenged.

Hannah Weiner is probably most celebrated for her work of the 1970s, represented here by extracts from the *Clairvoyant Journal* (first published by Angel Hair Books in 1978). Weiner was diagnosed with "psychotic episodes indicative of schizophrenia," and in January 1970 she began to see "images and energy fields," which eventually settled into the form of words recounted in "MOSTLY ABOUT THE SENTENCE":

When the words first began to appear in August 1972, they appeared singly. The first word, WRONG, appeared about an inch long, neatly printed at a 45 degree angle to my pant leg. Later words appeared in two word phrases

some of which, as NO-ALONE, I did not understand. . . In April sometime I think I got down on my knees and begged or prayed, please let me see a complete sentence. On April 15th I did see one, printed in small letters along the edge of my kitchen table that had come to me from Lenny Neufeld via Jerry Rothenberg. It said, "YOU WONT BE ANY HAPPIER."

The *Clairvoyant Journal* records Weiner's daily life in the three voices her typewriter could legibly distinguish:

It turned out that the regular upper and lower case words described what I was doing, the CAPITALS gave me orders, and the underlines or italics made comments. This is not 100% true, but mostly so.

The result is one of the most exhilarating, exhausting, and unsettling texts ever written, words precipitating out of supersaturated solution to pop up above or below lines already too full to parse. Sometimes the impression of a life lived under orders can be funny, or sweetly self-serving, as here:

3/10

How can I describe anything when all these interruptions keep *arriving* and then tell me I dont describe it well WELL *forgive them* big ME COUNTDOWN got that for days and yesterday it didn't stop GO TO COUNTDOWN GO TO COUNTDOWN CALL DAVIDs get COUNT-DOWN finally GO TO COUNT-DOWN at the door so OK I <sup>he isn't home</sup> go see these maroon velvet pants I'm not BUY \$40 pants BLOOMINGDALES all over again I leave GO TO COUNTDOWN: refuge, get in a taxi, start for home, no peace, get out GO TO COUNTDOWN ok it's only money go back and buy the pants it's better than seeing GO TO COUNTDOWN for the rest of my life *peace* so they fit well

The implications, for Weiner personally and for any society that might hope to include her, are clearly terrifying, and one of the great achievements of *Hannah Weiner's Open House* is that we are allowed to glimpse the acute political consciousness with which Weiner worked through these implications. Although born in 1928, Weiner's awareness of the political dimensions of poetic form allied her with the much younger generation of Language poets who became her most responsive readers and publishers. (The beautiful typesetting of the 1978 *Clairvoyant Journal*, reproduced in facsimile in the present selection, is by Barrett Watten.)

"Before seeing words I always completed my sentence." Normative grammar, to Weiner, is literally a penal sentence that reader and writer can choose not to serve, or impose upon the other. This is most explicitly stated in the seven-sentence text "SINS DEADLY SOME":

The seventh sentence quotes Gandhi that pleasure without conscience is a sin but any act without conscience or consciousness is a sin and to close I have already committed seven sins seven sentences with meaning which I would prefer to destroy for a writer's goal of altering consciousness by means of disjunctive non-sequential techniques thus forwarding a consciousness which would eliminate sins however and whomever defined.

Weiner rhymes her sentences with the sentence served on the Native American activist Leonard Peltier, charged in 1975 with the murder of two FBI agents (and still in jail in 2008). This rhyming allows Weiner to draw upon her deep engagement with the politics of the American Indian Movement, which becomes an increasingly insistent, though puzzling and obsessive, strain in the later work.

By contrast, "RADCLIFFE AND GUATEMALAN WOMEN" is a shockingly direct juxtaposition of the feminism-lite marketing language of a brochure from Radcliffe, Weiner's alma mater, with the implications of that language, and that economics, written in state-sponsored rape and murder on another country:

We taught the children how to guard the road during the day  
A truly liberating education  
Soon afterward my father was killed...burned alive inside the embassy  
With an appreciation of the humanistic worlds  
My mother died three months later. The military chief raped her and tortured  
her like they did to my brother  
I am very proud of the history of Radcliffe  
They placed her under a tree and her body became infested with worms  
Radcliffe has done so well, in fact  
The troops stayed until the vultures and dogs ate her  
Most Radcliffe women today  
The only thing I can do is struggle, to practice that violence which I learned  
in the Bible.

The most characteristic statement in the whole book, at once madly literal, totally committed, and hilarious, is "RETURNING TO THE EDGE," which notes that while the (English) sentence moves from left to right, "Politics should move in the opposite direction":

The Shining Path is in Peru  
How can you actually proceed from socialism toward  
communism?  
Every word brings me closer to the edge  
Something like nouns are a comfort  
Illusions of change

The development of a skilled and intelligent  
 foreign policy  
 The assassination of the union's Secretary moves across  
 the page like any other sentence  
 The disappearance and assassination of four other union  
 activists goes all the way to the right hand margin  
 and back again twice  
 They have adopted original forms of protest  
 is fairly short  
 We united the left hand margin and the right hand margin  
 with words  
 We all of us do it      WE DO IT

Although the porous, fragmenting, shape-shifting, genderfucked ego of Weiner's later "clair-style" is a consequence of processes strictly beyond her conscious control, she notes (in "MOSTLY ABOUT THE SENTENCE") that quite similar processes were deliberately deployed in her earlier work. Most notably, *The Code Poems*, written and performed in the late 1960s, appropriate a readymade vocabulary from the International Code of Signals, devised in the nineteenth century as a visual signalling system for the use of ships at sea. Messages could be sent by means of signal flags, semaphore, or Morse Code, and in theory could transcend language barriers: the letters CJD signify "I was plundered by a pirate" in any of the seven languages for which a code-book was available. Weiner's poems run riot with the *double entendres* of a language so deliberately drained of connotation, and almost all are already scored for two or more voices:

MFD	Juliet:	Try to enter
KZU	Romeo:	I am in difficulties; direct me how to steer
OOX	Juliet:	You should swing and enter stern first
HBK	Romeo:	What is the nature of the bottom or what kind of bottom have you?
HAY	Juliet:	Double bottom
FHR	Romeo:	Stern way. Going astern
LK	Juliet:	Go astern easy. Easy astern
ODI	Romeo:	I am going full speed
HC	Juliet:	It is not safe to go so fast
KZY	Romeo:	It is difficult to extricate
BK	Juliet:	Is anything the matter
VLA	Romeo:	Cock broken or damaged
EHR	Juliet:	What do the cost of repairs amount to?
DF	Romeo:	With some assistance I shall be able to set things to rights ("ROMEO AND JULIET")

Weiner notes:

De-sexualizing the pronouns began in the 60's with The Code Poems line 'he, she, it or blank \_\_\_\_' and continued in the Clairvoyant Journal with reference to the words and myself as it. In Little Books / Indians and Spoke there is no play with the pronoun but neither do I ever use the masculine as the indefinite pronoun.

The Weiner who wrote these words, in the late 1970s, has come a long way from her first one-man show.

Weiner's early work evokes its time quite vividly (one particularly out-there early piece, "Trans-Space Communication" ends, appropriately enough, by asking for replies to be sent to Box 619, Woodstock, NY). Psychedelics and syncretic religion are as active in the mix as schizophrenia, so it's useful to have editor Patrick Durgin's online facsimile edition of Weiner's *Early and Clairvoyant Journals* at the UCSD Special Collections website as background reading. Texts like "Country Girl" document the sheer urgency of the situation Weiner faced in the early 1970s, already middle-aged and in poor physical health, as she tried to find any means at all of making her current experiences productive, or even tolerable:

Anyway now I am very confused about what food is good for me to eat—what will give me nourishment and yet not hurt muscle contractions, ulcer, arthritic knee. Too much fresh fruit is very bad for ulcer. Yang food bad for muscle spasm (wheat) cheese bad for outside of one side where the black lines are heaviest (energy can't flow). So I eat yogurt every morning and a little here and there of the rest.

I heard a voice say oh boy in a sort of chiding slightly nasty tone. So I said to the voice fuck off. You could speak in a nice tone, or don't talk to me. Then I realized it was my father's voice that had spoken. A voice you can't tell whether it is chiding or sympathetic. More confusion. More guilt.  
(“Country Girl”)

“Syncretism,” in fact, is Durgin's word for Weiner's unique solution, where the personal, the physical, and the psychic are all collapsed into, and precariously managed at, the level of the text. The identification is so complete that in the late work “SIXTEEN,” Weiner's anxieties around aging and menopause (“period / which I dont have any”) are also anxieties about the “periods” with which sentences, in Weiner's writing and Peltier's life, fail to end.

“Healing” is a recurrent and quite sad theme of Weiner's work:

In reference to healing, i.e. the diagnosis of illness which is or was one of my psychic powers, naming the individual is obviously essential. Even in this case, however, in Spoke, I sometimes destroyed the real name as

in “very paralysed left arm on the name’s left hand side” and “west coast name’s chest back pains intro healer” (Aug. 3). This is probably giving into writing’s political pressure to de-personalize or perhaps just admitting to myself that people don’t like healing diagnosis, especially free from a psychic. Unfortunately these unnamed people cannot use the information to protect themselves medically. Native Americans do not have the same hang-up, considering healing a respected quality.

Her sense of frustrated concern comes through very clearly in parts of the *Clairvoyant Journal*:

Phil’s you hear his voice say CARCINOMA cigarette 3 MORE YEARS and  
cancel when Bernadette calls see CANCER in air WHO It’s the month  
that might be cancer but not carcinoma you’re depressed it’s Friday WHO  
HAS cancer NESIUM *magne* GO SOON TO THE BOWERY  
BARRY CANT PRINT

Weiner’s last years (she died in 1997) seem to have been difficult, but it’s cheering to note that one of the very last pieces in the book is “written by paw the polar bear,” a being she accounts for in “astral visions” (available online through her author page at the Electronic Poetry Center):

the reason to discuss paw is that he is one of the teachers and gives me instruction continually and in the three years i’ve known him, or that he has appeared, he’s grown in intelligence and acuteness and accuracy and he also happens to be the funniest person that i know...the interesting thing that i have to say about the bear is that he’s an astral for an indian someone has invented for him- self an astral that speaks for him in the form of a bear in some indian legends a bear is a healer, not that paw has ever done any healing for me,\* but his instructions were bood, except at the beginning he really wasn’t doing too much after four weeks when the sun came out and it got really hot he walked out in full brown fur saying, “see you onthe plane ma”

\* but I have felt his real self sending me bliss

I’m glad paw found Hannah Weiner, sent her bliss and called her maw. I’ll end the review in his words, from “turpitudinous / written by paw the polar bear”:

ma please preponderoneranerousimous  
ma is this a good program to snoogle up with  
marm please epidermescrum i guess that cancels that  
page nevermoramousastrous  
no marm thats a consideration effectiveness

i didnt get a chance maw say simple brevousi-  
mous  
maw please dont listen if im terresillimous maw im  
learning im studying to be a great big novelermist  
maw i changed it i want to be a poetastermous  
ma you dont discuss tergemous  
there are six of us we had already planned a great  
big wedding maw terrillified grass all over you  
i presume

Peter Manson