

Cultural Daily

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Politicising Conceptualism: an Australian perspective

Robert Wood · Wednesday, July 29th, 2015

There are few poets working in Australia that adhere to conceptual methods in the same way as American avant-garde-ists like Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place. Although there are notable poems that use uncreative and other conceptual methods including by relatively well known people like Astrid Lorange and Michael Farrell, these poets are not primarily known for pieces like the re-typing of selected items from the Outback Steakhouse Menu or sampling from Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

One could be forgiven for assuming then that conceptualism does not have a firm basis down under. But this is altogether unravelled by the uncreative language acts that have not yet been framed as such as well as amateur acts that have yet to adequately pierce official verse culture. We might not have *Day* down under but we certainly have daily newspapers and it might simply be about thinking uncreatively that allows us to view Australia less as a site of potential and more as a site of actualisation. This continent is not an island or a shadow.

An Australian poetry, and poetics, that took seriously its own conceptualism though might be somewhat different than the dominant American mode and for this we could look to poets of colour and not Place than Goldsmith. However, such a proposal rests on a particular sociological conception of representation here rather than on a distinctly aesthetic idea of the place. To think through a native conceptualism that seems less like another imported paradigm indicative of an insecure cultural colony mimicking the metropole requires unpacking what is possible in Australia.

Australia is for the most part monolingual and as other critics have made clear overwhelmingly white in terms of its poetic community. To be certain this is challenged by the diversity of spoken word performance and Indigenous poetics that for the most part escape attention in the academy and published discourse. Australia though is small and possessed of a wilful determination to ensure poetry remains marginal in the popular public consciousness. And despite the determination and self-sufficiency of poetry as a sub-cultural status group here there is neither the idea of a perceived tradition akin to the United Kingdom or the critical mass and dynamism of the United States. Taken together then poetry labours in a way that depletes emotional energy. It renews itself through personal tensions that ensure it remains cemented to ego thus appealing to an intractable and possibly addictive micro-polis as well as through inventions in form. This is where conceptualism is important. If only now LANGUAGE poetry is being assimilated into the national discourse, there is considerable work that needs to be performed that could be best considered conceptual.

To do so though requires reading conceptualism askew. I would have said ‘slant’, but in trying to cultivate an Australian sensibility perhaps one should not invoke Emily Dickinson. Conceptualism here needs to re-integrate its politics so it can adequately embrace the paradox that it decreases American influence and yet readily accepts its innovations. This is not then about the eclecticism and the personal choice of the reader and what America they choose and hence a form of influence that is liberally liberating. It is about the realisation that what makes Australia unique in the world has a political implication.

Conceptualism in Australia needs to take seriously a critique of America, which I have written about in relation to Lorange’s work in an upcoming review from *Rabbit*, but also the utopian possibilities of a settler society ravaged by violence and benignly progressing towards an increasingly neo-liberal vision of the future. This is not a project advocating one re-type American texts and subvert them by biography, or indeed appropriate Indigenous culture here in a Jindyworobak project for the conceptual age. It is about responding to the aesthetics of engagement that considers the discourse of politics in daily life as it is experienced. There must be a realisation too, even far too late in this piece, that poetry is ill confined by the nation. I am though sceptical of transnationalism as a site of thinking, precisely because a politics that takes non-violence seriously would recognise that the State is the avenue through which the monopoly of violence is contested (to borrow from Max Weber).

What this might look like then is not so much a #workingonmynovel, but a #libspill. This is to say nothing of extending the lessons of conceptualism, and indeed post-conceptulism and pre-post-conceptualism, to experiences that are politically significant (even or especially including how politics matters on the ground). If gendering the project was one such avenue, and acknowledging that all texts are gendered and that authorial identity has been and is always gendered, re-discovering the national as a utopian possibility may be one way we can think through and against what has the potential to be another Imperial import. The work of poetics might still be to critique the critical discourse. The work of poetry might be to enact a project that takes its Australianness into its very surface.

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