also made it clear we have come a long way. The grounds have shifted, and the present dynamics of poetry scenes, though they have their usual share of homosocial groupings, are not exclusively dominated by these, are they? Everybody's presentation throughout the day was so distinctly *their own*, and the range of body postures, delivery styles, forms and modes of decorum and address arrayed along a multivariate graph of possibilities, which seems to demonstrate that binarism is a crude and inadequate tool even for description these days. Fortunately. If some poetry boys exhibit pack behavior, so what?

Johanna Drucker   [5 of 7]

Potentiality: The Poetics of Play

While critics often categorize Oulipian aesthetics as highly controlled, they also draw on a model of experimentation that can lead to new kinds of poetic freedom and liberation. After modernism, there were two opposing modes of experimentation in the arts, one tending toward ever-increasing control, the other towards forms of de-control which can result in aleatory work that ultimately opens itself to pure chance. Though much experimental work of course occurs in between these poles—forms of deliberate alienation and delirium, or dissociative strategies that work within sense and nonsense, pattern and chaos—Oulipian and Cagean poetics are excellent examples of the two extremes of this experimental axis. One way to dismantle the seeming opposition of these terms would be to look at both of their allegiance to (and deviance from) the scientific notion of an experiment as a method of proof, rather than the more recent, artistic notion of the experimental as a form of free expression.

As Harry Mathews insists, the Oulipo is not a literary school. "It is not even concerned with the production of literary works. It is first and last a laboratory where, through experiment and erudition, possibilities of writing under arbitrary and severe restrictions are investigated. The use of these possibilities is the business of individual writers, Oulipian or not" (http://www.aHx.com/EBR/EBR5/mathews.htm). This way of thinking about a writing practice enters fascinating territory when one considers the argument between Jacques Roubaud and François Le Lionais, the

"ultra" who insisted that the only text of value was that which formulated the constraint, and all texts resulting therefrom ought to be "banished to the limbo of the 'applied Oulipo'" (Lescure 35). Roubaud argues that this position "neglects the deductive aspect of the method, and postulates that a constraint must 'prove' at least one text" (35). In the minds of the group's founders, Oulipian practices of constraint are thus modeled on the scientific and mathematical paradigms of hypothesis and experimentation, axiom and deduction. If science takes the material world as the object of its operations, and mathematics the realm of (pure) form, the Oulipians discovered that language is also a concrete object on which we can operate scientifically.

Oulipo is however not just influenced by modern paradigms of mathematics and science, but also by the ancient ones. In particular, the Oulipians looked to Lucretius, the great philosopher/proto-scientist and disciple of Democritus, from whom Perec, following Alfred Jarry, the founder of 'Pataphysics, borrowed the notion of the *clinamen*. For Lucretius, the clinamen is the random swerve necessary to countermand the straight fall of atoms in Democritus' model of the material world. Without this necessary deviation, Lucretius argued, no combination of elements could occur: all we would get is an endless rain of simple, unmixed substances. Furthermore, this natural philosopher argued, that which applies to the material world also applies to the linguistic and the literary. Following this approach, Perec argued that if science is one's model for literary production then there must be at least one deviation from every constraint in a work. In the very strict mathematical construction of his complex novel, *Life: A User's Manual*, Perec deliberately omits a chapter in order to break the symmetry, destabilizing the rigidity of his constraint, and opening it to play. As Perec says of the work, it must "creak" a bit. The clinamen has multiple functions; not only does it open the work by playfully bending its constraints, and in so doing also confounds the reader's expectations, but it also is arguably the instantiating gesture (even though it might come late in the text's production) of Oulipian aesthetics.

The confounding of readerly expectation then itself opens the door to another complex set of issues—the investigation of the relationship between constraint and intention. For though *clinematic* tactics might

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appear aleatory or chance-driven, they are in fact deliberate; deliberate, but not systematic. It is perhaps the subtleties of these relationships, between the deliberate and the systematic, and the constraint and the clinamen, that give rise to the on-going debates between constrained writers. Perhaps these concerns also echo the Oulipo's foundational decision to disavow the term "experimental" in favor of "potential" when christening their practice. As Jean Lescure recounts in his "Brief History of the Oulipo," for one month there was no Oulipo, only "a po oulipo, a potential Oulipo" (32) when, for a short few weeks in 1960, it was called the *Sèminaire de littèrature expèrimentale* (SeLitEx). As with its subsequent choice of *ouvroir* over *sèminaire* (workshop over seminar), the Oulipo's choice of *potentielle* over experimental as a designation of their practice expands the agency of the experiment. This surrender of the notion of the experimental in favor of the idea of potential necessitates a new critical terminology that can account for the new practical modality.

Two contrasting models of experimental-potential are those of Alexius Meinong and Gilles Deleuze, one an iconic contemporary philosopher, the other now quite obscure. (I owe my acquaintance with Meinong's work to artist-critic Gary Kibbins.) The philosophies of both these thinkers resist either/or arguments about experimentalism, offering instead ways to assess the role of the ludic, or play, in literature. Indeed, they unhitch the idea of the experimental from either pragmatic or productivist models, and from the oppositional stance long cultivated by modern artists; they refuse to align art with either work or the military, choosing instead an analogy with play. This idea of experiment as play also avoids both the necessity of perceiving the experimental as the opposite of narrative realism, and the demand that it yield useful political solutions, or even particularly intelligible objects that engage in some "contract" with the reader. The effect of this shift is to move poetics away from philosophy, where it has been mesmerized for much of the last generation, under the influence of Heidegger, Wittgenstein and French Theory. (Philosophy itself has of course been working through its own itinerary within poetics, with philosophers such as Deleuze leading the way.)

The general reception of artwork in Western culture still demands that it must have a purpose, that it must communicate and have *something to say*. In different ways, both Deleuze and Meinong offer models of art-

as-experimentation whose goal is not communication, but re-creation, that is, play. In his anti-hierarchic, generative, "localized" and nomadic theory, Deleuze more than any other contemporary philosopher offers new avenues for both conceptualizing and performing experimental practices. His own heterodox oeuvre ranges from a discussion of philosophers to poets, artists, and what might best be termed cultural concepts, such as difference, sense and cinema. Rather than judge, he exhorts us to "experiment, never interpret" (1987: 48).

Deleuze categorizes art, philosophy, and science as three distinct disciplines, each analyzing reality in fundamentally different ways. While philosophers generate concepts, artists create new qualitative combinations of sensation: "percepts," "blocks of space-time" and "affects," and the sciences invent "functives," quantitative theories based on fixed points of reference such as the speed of light, absolute zero or Planck's Constant (which are outside the hypothetical). None of these disciplines enjoy primacy over the others; each is a different mode or method of organizing the metaphysical flux, "separate melodic lines in constant interplay with one another" (1997: 125). Philosophy, science and art are equally and essentially creative and practical. But instead of asking "is it true?" or "what is it?" Deleuze claims that better questions would be "what does it do?" or "how does it work?"

Though Deleuze rejects genres and also all avant-gardes, he embraces the new in a way few post-modernists have had the nerve to. Experimentation produces the "new, remarkable, and interesting," which replaces "the appearance of 'truth' and is more demanding than it [the truth] is" (1983: 111). Experimental artists should not solve problems, as do those whose concern is the truth, but continually formulate new problems. (As noted by Deleuze, one definition of *verisimilitude* is the "appearance of truth;" the release from this notion of truth bound to representation, in realism no less than in other modes, frees the experimentalist politically.) Echoing Nietzsche, Deleuze says the experimenter must be so free from existing patterns of thought and morality that she will have "no principles" (1987: 55). The experimentalist is active. His experimentation is non-dialectical and not reactive: one does not advance into the new through discursive critique and the refutation of existing concepts or methods because the

dialectical process of critique is designed to eliminate flawed ideas. Deleuze avoids evaluation based on judgment.

Perhaps one of the best ways to grasp how Deleuze's ideas might work in practice is to consider the work of his now forgotten predecessor, Alexius Meinong. A turn-of-the century Austrian philosopher, phenomenologist and experimental psychologist, Meinong was noted for his theory of objects and his contribution to deontic logic, which stemmed from his belief in nonexistent objects, as evidenced by our capacity to conceptualize a thing that does not exist, such as a golden mountain. Meinong resisted the "prejudice in favor of the existent" by proposing the greater use of *assumptions*. The experimental value of the assumption is best illustrated by comparison with the judgment, part of a larger set of terms that includes ideas, judgments and surmises. Unlike the act of assumption, to make a judgment is to be convinced that an object has a particular property or attribute; for example, that it is, or it is not good. To judge is to believe in, or be convinced of, something definite: it is to be possessed of conviction. Its counterpart, the assumption, compels one to take a defined position, but without conviction. For Meinong, making an assumption not only does not necessitate conviction, it may not even entail belief. The assumption is a useful conceptual category for differentiating art as well as play from other forms of discourse. Assumptions are experimental in nature, allowing a momentary bracketing of conviction in order to see where an experimental momentum might lead. With the assumption, one "takes on" an objective. Assumptions cannot be wrong in an orthodox sense—at worst, they may be unproductive.

For Meinong the assumption was an essential concept for explaining practices like art and children's play. Unlike the scientist, who proposes an experiment in order to test a hypothesis, the child pretends that something is the case in order to test an experience, and she might do so without expecting any convincing answer. In Meinong, the attitude of assuming is not influenced in the slightest by the presence of a contrary conviction. Assumptions are "imaginary beliefs" which allow us to occupy the position of someone other than ourselves. They are stances that loosen the hold of the Western idea of the (authorial/intentional) self or subject, and the ideal of Truth. As critic Gary Kibbins observes, in the generation of an artwork any combination of assumptions and judgments

is possible, and the viewer can then in turn either assume or judge for himself what he finds there (Kibbins, 82). This view is however radically different from most Western theories of reception.

According to conventional theories of reception, conviction is rarely absent for long; in Western modes of thought, whatever else they do, assumptions are there to serve judgments. The assumption does its job, and conviction is restored. The goal of the assumption is to improve the quality of our judgments. Whether the work's form of expression is organized principally around the judgment or the assumption, there is typically judgment-in-the-last-instance. As Meinong points out, in the Western mind-set, there undoubtedly exists a bias in favor of conviction. But if assumptions are seen as the active force in experimental work, perhaps they work to create resistance to the power of judgment. Perhaps the experimental works to enhance and extend the power of assuming itself to the place of the reader? As Kibbins points out, the purpose of using the assumption as a form of expression is, in this case, not to promote higher quality judgments, but higher quality assumptions. The viewer or reader is "asked to pretend better, in order to explore other possibilities for living and thinking" (82). This model neither assumes mastery on the part of the writer or artist, not does it assign a singular place to the reader.

The positions are open, and both writer and reader contribute to the final analysis of the objective. Using the ludic to pry lose the fixed relation between experimental and non-experimental work allows the writer to hold a position outside either negation or affirmation. This move is freeing for experimental work, a final release from the scientific burden of proof. It escapes Occam's razor, the scientific maxim that the simplest or most economic theory to explain a phenomenon is the most valid one—or when multiple competing theories have equal predictive powers, we are instructed to select those that introduce the fewest assumptions and postulate the fewest hypothetical entities. Experimental writing, with all its variants, Cagean, Oulipian and beyond, is more often elaborative, or combinatoric, and it countermands the idea that the fewest assumptions are best, or the least play, and the fewest swerves from order. Elaborations help us to pretend better and to escape from both the horrific adversarial reductions of modernity as well as its crippling paranoia and totalizing tendencies.

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Matias Viegener   [2 of 2]

Presidential Address

When I was first recruited as a member of the Oulipo by Raymond Queneau in 1971, it was as a slave. I was the first and only slave in its history. The Oulipo was ten years old and the golden rule back then was "Hush." Oulipians were working in secret and in silence, locked inside their *ouvroir* (which was, in the old times, the room in which [women] gathered to do needlework—or make quilts, if you prefer). Since I was a slave and not entitled to talk, it was easy for me to respect the rule.

The two founders, Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais, did not want publicity. In the first place, because they did not know what they were going to find, and secondly because they did not know how the team of people they had gathered (mostly young admirers of Queneau's works but also some mathematicians and scholars) would work out, and also because Queneau did not want to relive the noisy and uncomfortable