

Re-Reading Breakthrough Fictioneers Roger Luckhurst

Breakthrough Fictioneers was the third in a series of anthologies put together by Richard Kostelanetz amidst the energetic cross-fertilisations between art, poetry, dance, installation, sculpture, theatre, music and performance in the New York scene of the early 1970's. This was an intermedial moment, which Kostelanetz defined as 'the marrying of non-adjacent arts' in his *Art Autobiography*. There, he spoke about inventing 'visible poetry' in a distracted moment whilst watching Antonioni's *Blow Up* in 1967, linking it to experiments he had seen at the ICA in London and the 'concrete' issue of *Chicago Review*. 'Visual Literature' he would later declare to be 'language structures whose principal means of coherence are visual, rather than semantic or syntactical; or images, with or without words, that function like a poem or a fiction or an essay.' Inviting contributions from the New York scene, he published *Imaged Words and Worded Images* (1970) and *Future's Fictions* (1971). *Breakthrough Fictioneers* followed, pulling together artists like Vito Acconci, John Baldessari and Dan Graham, but also experimental postmodernist fiction-writers like John Barth, Donald Barthelme and Raymond Federman, and even a passing appearance of the British science fiction writer, J G Ballard, then producing his provocative 'condensed novels' and found texts that would form part of the notorious *Atrocity Exhibition*. These anthologies are themselves condensations of a moment of opening, of possibility. *Future's Fictions* began with a series of manifesto statements by Kostelanetz, from which we might usefully extract:

VI The primary subject of the best printed literature has always been capabilities indigenous to the medium—effects that come from special language or the turning of pages.

IX Fiction created for sequential printed pages is likely to emulate the form of the dominant communications vehicle of the age—in our time, newspaper, film, television; yet the best art necessarily eschews the already familiar contents of these media.

XII A passion for the medium itself and visions of its possible uses are now the primary reasons for creating fictions; everything else is inevitably secondary.

XV Formal advances in a particular art often come from adopting the ideas and procedures developed in another art; and sometimes out of this process of cross-fertilisation blossoms not just a new step in the art but something else—a true hybrid.

XIX ...though the novel may be 'dead', fiction isn't.

XXIV Modern art at its best deals not in the manipulation of conventions but in their genuine neglect, because familiar forms are the common counters of commerce; one test of genuine innovation in art, even today, is its resistance to an immediate sale.¹

¹ Richard Kostelanetz, 'Statements on Fiction', *Future's Fictions*, pp. 3-5. Yet the fourth anthology produced by Kostelanetz in the 1970's was called *Essaying Essays: Alternative Forms of Exposition* (1975), in which the editor demanded of his contributors a 'perceptible innovation in either style and/or structure.' 'By realizing other ways of doing what [essays] have traditionally done, they are essays twice over, confronting not only their particular subjects, but, by implication, alternative possibilities for the form itself.' He then went on to publish *Visual Literature Criticism* (1979), another anthology of experimental critical works on the 'visible writing' scene. Of course, Kostelanetz had started out as a writer, an academic, an expositor, a profession that has its own strict formulae and rules of engagement. He was liberated into art, he said, by breaking all the rules of his training. How could a conventional academic like me, asked to respond to this experimental anthology, not be forced to confront the essay form? Yet how to do it without falling into empty pastiche, which would only fail to acknowledge that forty years have passed and the art scene, the technology of print, and the possibilities of aesthetic experiment and resistance have been utterly transformed since Kostelanetz had exploded these forms? Around the same time, mainly in the mid-1970's, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida wrote a number of texts that were either written in double columns (Glas) or had a continuous band of marginalia down the side ('Tympanum' in *The Margins of Philosophy*) or a long footnote running along the bottom of the page ('Living on: Borderlines'), or which used odd framing devices to break up the page in a book precisely concerning the question of the frame in the artwork

(*The Truth in Painting*). Derrida's textual device was to challenge univocality, the singular patriarchal voice of traditional philosophy, delivered with deadening authority by the master to the grateful student. Instead his texts worked by undercutting the single thesis, pluralising the text with visual devices and by allowing n+1 voices to thread through the discourse. Visually divided, the separate texts constantly demanded, impossibly, you read them together, looking for where one chimed with the other, or where one undercut the other. They did not seem to be dialectical; it was more that these texts constantly ran interference on each other. In *Glas* and in 'Living On', philosophy would run side by side with literature, probing, asking the question of priority, whether one could contain the other, whether a certain kind of Modernist literature by Jean Genet or Maurice Blanchot might not subvert the sober expository claims of philosophy. Could this divided page be a model for re-reading Kostelanetz, now, in 2012? At once to embrace the spirit of aesthetic revolution but also to acknowledge its limits, here, now, in a totally different dispensation?

What is striking is the perception of continuity from pre-war Modernism and the continuing commitment to the permanent revolution of newness in art, something that Kostelanetz continues to affirm: The High Modern, always; the Post Modern, never. The points of reference here are John Cage and Merce Cunningham, the Black Mountain Review, the happenings that took place in the vast loft studio of Robert Rauschenberg, the readings and events in the new galleries South of Houston Street. They promoted an absolute synergy of art forms, a combustion that spilled art out of galleries, took words off the page, and carried dance onto the roofs of Manhattan (some of Trisha Brown's dance performances were recently restaged at the *Pioneers of the Downtown Scene: New York in the 1970's* at the Barbican in London in 2011). Traffic went in all kinds of direction. In 1964, Vito Acconci was a writer, graduate of the famous Iowa Writer's Workshop, but when he saw Jasper Johns' readymade stencil paintings, he had a revelation: 'I could never write fiction again.

I wanted words to be material, the way Johns let numbers and letters be material.' With the poet Bernadette Mayer, he set up a magazine called 0-9 in honour of Johns, and their experiments with concretised word-art soon spoke to conceptual artists like Dan Graham, Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt, or poets like Adrian Piper. As Gwen Allen notes in her study of the New York magazines of the 1960's and 1970's, *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* (2011), revolutionary synergies in art were driven by technological innovations. Mimeographing had been around for a while, but new-fangled Xeroxing and photo-stating transformed distribution possibilities and cut out the costs of printers. Samizdat literature; literature without the unwieldy machinery and conservative instincts of the publishing industry. Barely literature; literature below the radar, subliminal, under the threshold. Bashed-up beats, broken lines, words cracked open. Something that could capture the immediacy of the moment, the fleeting and eternal, just as Baudelaire demanded of the painter of modern life. A literature of the street (and Kostelanetz did actually produce concrete poems in the shape of the streets and blocks that he haunted in New York). Isn't this exactly what the great Modernist

theorist Walter Benjamin demanded in the opening section *One-Way Street*? 'True literary activity cannot aspire to take place within a literary framework – this is, rather, the habitual expression of its sterility.' Instead, Benjamin said, 'Literary work must nurture the inconspicuous forms'—leaflets, pamphlets, street posters, ads, fliers for non-events. Then all that talk about the death of the novel, the afterlife of fiction: that was pure Modernism too. John Barth had written 'The Literature of Exhaustion' in 1967 and Beckett's prose reductions were pre-eminent models of the posthumous life of literature (Beckett received the Nobel Prize in 1969). Modernist painting had crawled out of the act of murder in Malevich's blank canvases to have an extremely active afterlife: wasn't fiction set to do this skeleton dance too, in the wake of the Wake? Kostelanetz always committed to this resolute newness, seeking new forms for concrete poetry or visible writing throughout the 1970's, raiding the language of pre-war Modernism to describe his innovations, as in the 'constructivist fictions' he produced after 1977. Yet something of the critic still survived in his make-up: Kostelanetz set up his own Assembling Press in 1970, published anthologies with proper ISBNs and copyright attributions, and seemed very self-consciously concerned to create a legacy of critical work in which to fix the passage of these 'ephemeral' acts.²

² Kostelanetz even quotes the critic Hugh Kenner in the opening comments of his *Visual Literature Criticism* anthology. Kenner was one of the professors responsible for the paradoxical act of canonising Modernism in the academy in the 1950's, stabilising Modernism in university institutions. Doesn't it pull Kostelanetz and his project into the sphere of those debates about the inevitable failure of the avant-garde? We all dutifully read our copies of Peter Burger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* in the 1980's and 1990's (there were countless formulaic essays written for critical theory classes on this set text—I wrote one too). Burger argued that the innovative refusals and negations of the Modernist avant-garde had always been pulled back into the very art history it had tried to reject. Duchamp's *Fountain*, his 'found' urinal, reproduced by Sherrie Levine plated in gold leaf: the comment on the ultimate commodification of the uncommodifiable Modernist gesture of contempt. After Burger, we could only ever talk about the historical avant-garde, therefore, as something definitively over with, finished, and that any attempts to revive it were out of time, forms of pastiche with all political thrust evacuated. Burger suggested that the last proper Modernist avant-garde was the Situationist International, which formally dissolved itself in 1972, the same year as *Breakthrough Fictioneers*. [There is another irony to note about that year. Kostelanetz's *Introduction to Breakthrough Fictioneers* is dated 14 May 1972. It is a re-statement of experimental Modernism, quoting Moholy-Nagy and James Joyce as the presiding geniuses. 'The revolution fundamental to artistic modernism is, and must be, permanent,' he proclaims. Yet one of the founding texts of Postmodernist theory, Charles Jencks' *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* (1977) famously proclaims that Modernism ended on 15 July 1972, about 3.32 in the afternoon, with the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe Modernist housing estate in Saint Louis. This was the end of the utopian Modernist project, bound up in Le Corbusier's visionary proclamations in *Towards a New Architecture*, at least according to Jencks's polemic. Is, then, Kostelanetz's commitment to Modernism redundant, out of time, beyond its sell-by date in a matter of weeks after the manifesto was signed? Yet Burger's thesis is reductive and simplistic, to say nothing of the vacuous proclamations of the Postmodernists (rather the concrete poetry of the Modernists than the teapots and *Face* magazines that seemed to fill the dispiriting galleries of the V&A's *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion, 1970-1990* show that finished in January 2012). Shouldn't the moment of 'revolution' blast out of the empty, homogeneous time of modernity anyway, announce a time out of time that is continually proclaimed by the avant-garde, which continually fails to escape the temporal order, which continually provokes new experiment, which therefore understands the avant-garde as premised on the necessity of failure as the impetus

to permanent revolution? Here, these fugitive texts of Kostelanetz, teetering on collapse, legitimately seek to renew avant-gardism. But what is the fate of the avant-garde now, in 2012, under the regime of capitalist realism, where the ecological niches of aesthetic resistance have been so successfully colonised and commodified by White Cubes and Frieze art fairs (a festival that progressively colonises and capitalises its own fringes)? In *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse*, Evan Calder Williams suggests that the disaster has already happened, but that we have had no revelation of it, no apocalypse, not now. We live in ruins we simply do not recognise. If the postmoderns wanted to lull us to sleep with slick celebrations of the end of the struggle, does experiment still have the power to wake us from the capitalist dreamworld? Re-reading Kostelanetz forces the question of the efficacy of the Modernist gesture in the post-apocalyptic contemporary.