

BOOK ARTS AND LITERARY WORK: UGLY DUCKLING PRESSE

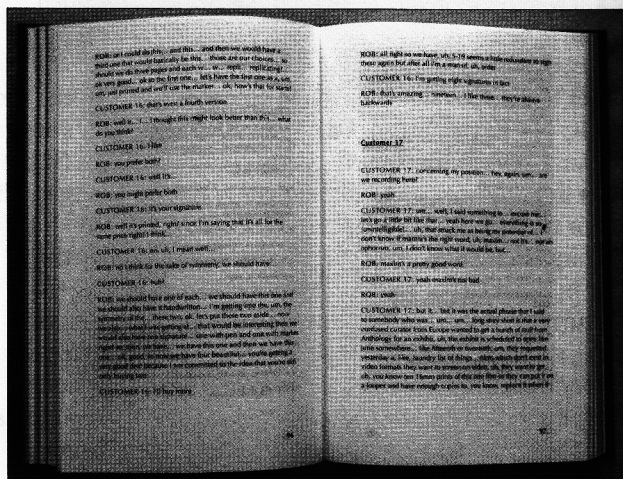
Johanna Drucker

Nathaniel Farrell, *Lost Horizon*
Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Press, 2019

Rochelle Feinstein, *Pls. Reply*
Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Press, 2019

Rob Fitterman, *Rob's Word Shop*
Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Press, 2019

Jena Osman, *Motion Studies*
Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Press, 2019



Word Shop, Rob Fitterman
Ugly Duckling Presse, 2019

Artists' books and the small press literary world often seem far apart. In spite of crossover interests—in the book as an object and innovative approaches to image and language within contemporary aesthetics—the communities of producers/readers in these realms often know very little about each other's highly developed work. Even worse, they often don't know how to find out what is going on in these different realms. This review provides a brief introduction to four recent publications from Ugly Duckling Presse, one of the foremost contemporary independent literary publishers.

Ugly Duckling is a really good example of a publisher involved with cutting edge literary work who also cares a great deal about books as expressive objects. Even when these are produced in relatively inexpensive editions, like the works reviewed here, their books are carefully thought through to communicate as objects. Other literary presses of this ilk also exist—Siglio, Cuneiform, Litmus, among others come immediately to mind.

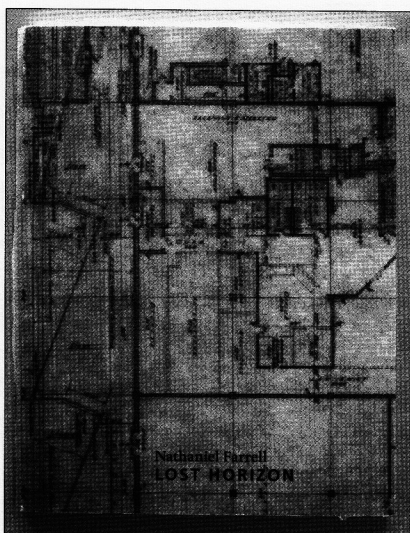
Reading through this selection of new Ugly Duckling titles provides a good sampler of the ways literary writers are engaged with language. By "literary" I mean writers whose attention to the traditions and modes of language use is central to their conceptual approach to composition. They are not writing about themes, topics, or experience, but writing from awareness of how language produces thought as form—historically, culturally, socially, and artistically. The range of influences that shape the self-conscious approach to the material of language in contemporary literature is as thick as those that shape visual culture. The works draw on long traditions of innovation—conceptual writing, the language movement, New York School, formal and vernacular modernism, chance poetics, questions about the lyric, and the distinctive 19th-century romantic breaks with classical verse. That self-consciousness becomes evident in the worked-ness of texts. This does not mean they have to be difficult, but rather, aware of how the structuring

activity of writing is itself an idea. How is language thinking in culture now, here, and how can writing call our attention to the way language works?

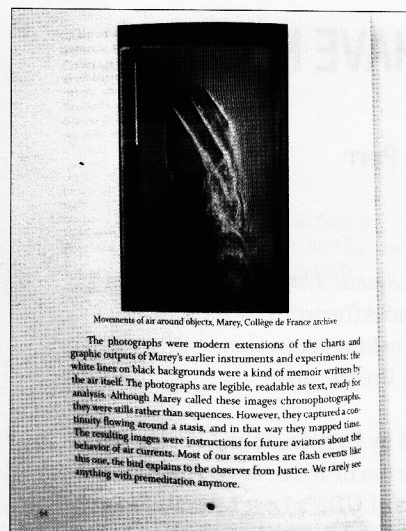
In general (and such a reductive statement will be vulnerable to all kinds of objections), the genres of textual production include appropriated text (historical material or classic literature), the individual journalistic voice, and personal poetry. These feel limited (and often conventional) when put into contrast with the theoretically informed and conceptually challenging work coming from Ugly Duckling. Too much emphasis in artists' books texts is on a naïve earnestness about saying something on the one hand and a casual just take what you find on the other. By contrast, the work in the books about to be described is all produced through reflection on language as material process and performance of thought within culture. The basic principle is not hard to grasp—the way something is said, its made-ness, matters to the way it provokes critical thinking.

Four titles, random compass coordinates, provide an orientation to the literary tendencies that Ugly Duckling is bringing into print. Here's a brief description of them and why they are of interest. They all deserve more attention than they will get here, but at least this will shine a quick spotlight on their textual practices and intellectual projects. Each is a very carefully produced object as well as a piece of literary publishing.

The soft boards of Rob's *Word Shop* are covered with bright blue cloth, the foredge is tinted to match. The color complements the warm cream color of the text block. This is a witty work of conceptual art, recording eleven days of activity during which poet Rob Fitterman ran a storefront to sell words. He called the site a "shop" and not a "store" because the project involved custom writing the words for any individual who entered the shop and commissioned him. Sharpie? Pencil? Small, large, printed? Fifty cents a letter and a dollar a word. The exchanges are completely banal, they record the mechanical process of exchange in which a person says what the word is



Lost Horizon, Nathaniel Farrell
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Motion Studies, Jena Osman
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that they want and Fitterman sorts out how that word will be rendered. The flat mechanics of this transaction are transcribed from video recordings and the sheer tedium of these business transactions is what calls the words involved into focus. That a word can be sold, commodified, turned into a singular object of commercial production and exchange is both absurd and logical. But the outcome of this conceptual project is that the flow of communicative exchange in which language functions is broken, and instead, we get the component elements reified and rendered. The transcription, and the records of transactions (dates, times, receipts) are what produce the text. This is conceptual writing.

Pls. Reply, reprints selected critical essays (mostly about art and painting) by painter Rochelle Feinstein spanning slightly more than twenty years, beginning in 1988. The book is as red as Fitterman's is blue, and the solid mass of color introduces the images of her paintings, color abstractions interspersed throughout. The essays also touch on matters of art and commerce, the 1980s attention to commodification as subject and theme in visual arts practice. The language and topics have a historical quality to them, which is their value, since they remind us that once we could be surprised by the observations that Barbara Kruger used advertising techniques and that Western European white men dominated the art world. This historical distance is precisely what lets the language appear to us. Engaged with debates that shift over time, these traces of the social history of criticism remain. The language becomes conspicuous, a record in itself.

Nathaniel Farrell's *Lost Horizon*, with its schematic blueprint cover of the plan of a shopping mall, is a poetry book in the small press tradition. The image on the cover sets the tone for the equally schematic texts. The poetry shoots across the page, fragmented and figurative, sketching the American cultural landscape in short dense strokes. The referential power of words is so strong that each phrase resonates, takes us into the living tissue of associations. Nothing instrumental or vehicular, just stroke after stroke of text provoking the reader.

Jena Osman's *Motion Studies*, is in some ways the richest of the four works, a multi-layered, heavily researched text that takes its inspiration from the histories of science and technology in the 19th century and distills from them fundamental concepts about inscription, writing, drawing, and the production of representation. The "motion" is the shifting sphere of intellectual frameworks through which cultural practices come to represent experience to us. What appears as evidence is made, produced in technologies whose traces provide the appearance of things. Like language these traces (she describes Eugène Marey's device for turning the flow of blood into a graph, for instance) are taken as surrogates for the thing itself. Osman is attentive to the movement of representation across and through cultural networks of images, diagrams, scientific texts and terminologies. Her framing (and references to surveillance and illusion technologies) keeps us present in the present, and the skill of distillation and extraction are exemplary demonstrations of how the worked-ness of thought can be pulled into language. This is not appropriated language, not chunks of antique text put wholesale onto a page. Quite the opposite, the historical concepts and the specificity of their own inscription in language is processed through subtle but vivid critical refraction.

The processing is everything in these works, each self-consciously positioned to show its specific historicity and relation to the material character of language. That attention is what makes these literary works, not just texts. They are all works that know how to use language and why the choices made are embodied in the text.

The challenge for artists' books has always been to function on equal stature with work in the other arts. One way for that to occur is to engage with contemporary literature, not just for its themes and topics, but for its principles of composition and production.