

PERLOFF, MARJORIE. Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991 ix + 244 pp. + index 67 b&w illus.

Marjorie Perloff is a distinguished commentator on the literature of this century, best known for her work on Futurism, one of the pre-First War international and inter-art avant garde movements. Radical Artifice takes on the avant garde since 1960, observed from the angle of the institutions of popular culture -- in particular television talk shows, and graphic advertisements. The project of the book is to respond to Charles Bernstein's decree: "There is no natural look or sound to a poem. Every element is intended, chosen. That is what makes a thing a poem" (qtd. 35). "Why, Perloff asks, "is the natural now regarded with such suspicion?" (35).

Her answer is that the television talk show has irremediably debased the natural by undermining the traditional poetic topoi of personal emotional experiences through their nightly exposure on Giraldo, Donahue, or Oprah, and the like in a context that excludes the natural understood in a Wordsworthian way as the authentic and spontaneous. Perloff (somewhat controversially) defines Modernism as articulating the antithesis of word and nature, and desiring "to establish a direct line between self and spirit" (35). Somewhat surprisingly to this scholar of literary Modernism, she finds these features in Ezra Pound, Charles Olson, and Alan Ginsberg (29-35).

Perloff's discussion takes as its point of departure Charles Bernstein's 1987 verse essay, [U]Artifice of Absorption (45) which calls for a turn away from "authenticity" toward "artifice" (45). Perloff describes the turn as a "paradigm shift" first marked by George Oppen's The Materials (1962)" (58). She investigates ways in which this shift works itself out in the practice of a list of mostly poets, mostly American, among them Charles Bernstein, John Ashberry, Johanna Drucker, Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, John Cage (composer), Marcel Broodthaers (a Belgian graphic artist), and Steve McCaffery (a Canadian).

Although Perloff makes some gestures toward the general postmodern turn away from epistemology with occasional references to Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Derrida, she really does not engage philosophical issues. What she offers is an intelligent and well-informed guide to the "International" aesthetic scene since 1960. For a reader like myself, who has only a casual acquaintance with the work of most of the artists discussed (and none at all of some) the book is a very useful introduction and guide.

Of course, Radical Artifice aims to be more than that. It seeks to explain one set of cultural products by an interaction with another set -- in this case in television and graphic advertisements (both on television and in print media). Perloff's argument seems to be underpinned by two tacit principles. The first is a deviation theory of art which holds that artworks are those cultural products which deviate from others in the same medium. Hence graphic art must differ from advertising copy, literature must differ from standard discourse, and so forth. The second principle is the Aristotelian one that the function of art is to represent the environment (including human culture) in a transformational way -- as opposed to the Platonic principle of representation as copy. I take these two principles to be inscribed in Perloff's title, Radical Artifice.

If artworks are defined by their deviation, alterity -- or perhaps even différance -- from other cultural artifacts, then as the general culture undergoes change through time -- represented in Perloff's case by the ubiquity of mass electronic and print media --, the arts must also change. This is the general theory of the avant garde: art is "radical" because it instantiates the new alterity in response to a novel general culture (often perceived to be simply the old avant garde art).. As Perloff puts it, "Such powerful images [as those found in magazine ads for cigarettes and automobiles] challenge poetic discourse to deconstruct rather than to duplicate them. They prompt what has become an ongoing, indeed a necessary dialectic between the simulacrum [the media image] and its other, a dialectic no longer between the image and the real, as early Modernist construed it, but

between the word and the image" (92).

Perloff thus has a very strong thesis to account for the character of post 1960s international art -- a new dialectic in which the antithesis of the image (by which she means both actual depictions, and poetic word pictures) and the real (by which she appears to mean nature -- human and inhuman) is replaced by a dialectic between the image and the word. While it is a little surprising to find such a strongly paleo-Marxist form to her argument, it does yield interesting results.

The way this new antithesis works out is that language is disposed by poets, graphic artists, and even composers (John Cage) in configurations that frustrate, negate, or simply ignore standard syntactical (or even orthographic) rules of combination. One example is Cage's "mesostic" compositions in which strings of letters are generated from a given text (perhaps a page from Joyce's Finnegans Wake) by arbitrary rules that select words and then arranges them in a vertical row in the middle of the page -- hence "mesostic" on the analogy of "acrostic." Another poet, Ron Silliman, composed a prose poem (Tanting) employing the Fibonacci series of numbers to generate recurrent paragraphs. (In the Fibonacci series each new number is the sum of the preceding two, hence: 1,1,2,3,5,8,13, etc.). Another instance is Louis Zukofsky, who in 1974 drew up an outline for 80 Flowers, which would be a collection of "8 line songs of 5-word lines: 40 words to each poem growing out of and condensing my previous books," and would refer to "only those flowers I have actually seen and whatever botany I can learn in 10 years" (146).

There are many more examples of such "artifice" -- all of them discussed with economy, grace, and insight by Perloff, and many of them less remote from the image - word antithesis postulated by her. However, these examples illustrate best, I think, the nature of the "artifice" Perloff finds in post 1960s literature. It involves a play of arbitrariness that some might consider capricious or even whimsical -- reminiscent of the hermetic games of the Quattrocento or late Medieval

Cabbalism. These word constructions are arbitrary in the strong sense that they are neither governed nor generated by Fregean referential functions, by Austinian communicative functions, nor even by a post-Saussurean "play of oppositions." The compositional frames instantiate an arbitrariness deliberately drained of linguisticity through the frustration of linguistic and logical form.

One might expect Perloff to argue that poetry has taken on these properties because it is now language itself that is the representandum, and in order to be represented (on the Aristotelian principle of transformational mimesis cited above) it must be transformed -- as it is by these arbitrary numerological techniques of composition. However, she maintains instead the view that poetry must take the world as its representandum. The special contemporary case in the United States is that the world is first or immediately known in the mass media: "given our media culture, the pretence that this mass culture does not exist, that life goes on as it always has for the sensitive individual -- a series of sunsets and love affairs and social disappointments [all "images" in her sense] -- just will not work. ... If American poets today are unlikely to write passionate love poems or odes to skylarks ... it is not because people don't fall in love .. but because the electronic network that governs communication provides us with the sense that others -- too many others -- are feeling the same way. ... Given such a 'events' ... the poet turns, not surprisingly, to a form of artifice that is bound to strike certain readers as hermetic and elitist" (202-3).

Perloff's survey of post 1960s poetry is better than this rather lame reiteration of the avant gardiste argument. It will inform and instruct anyone interested in the subject. However, as a former student of Marshall McLuhan I cannot refrain from objecting to the suppression of his name and work in this study. (He appears only as an adjective, and as cited by Cage.) It also needs to be said that the general ethos of the study is far less up-to-date than it supposes. Cleanth Brooks, for example, explained the need for his version of "artifice" -- irony -- by reference to "the depletion and corruption of the very language itself, by advertising and by the mass-produced arts of radio, the

moving picture, and pulp fiction. The modern poet has the task of rehabilitating a tired and drained language" ("Irony as a Principle of Structure" 1949). Brooks was echoing T.S. Eliot's characterization of the poet's duty to "purify the dialect of the tribe;" and he, in turn, was echoing Wordsworth's call for poets to write in "a selection of language really used by men." Of course, repetition does not invalidate a principle, and Perloff applies the Romantic principles of defamiliarization and renovation with verve, grace, and insight to a new and intractable, even rebarbative, set of texts and practices.