

## EVERY WHICH WAY BUT LOOSE<sup>1</sup>

Art media emerge from culture and from the activities of the producers of culture; they are not intrinsic projections of materials or technologies. Pigment and canvas (or cave walls) do not necessitate the invention of painting as an art medium, any more than the alphabet prescribes the emergence of writing as a medium of art.

As a poet interested in the material and social dimension (you might also say social material) of writing, I find many of the most exciting ideas suggested by the new explorers of hypertext well worked out in the radically paratactic explorations of both modernist and contemporary work that have been aversive to the “humanist” ideology dominant within the university and also in the mass media. To be reductive about it: on the level of mass culture, humanist values emphasize mimesis of human presence and conventional modes of “realistic” representation as a means of maximizing the audience for cultural products by maximizing consumer passivity. On the level of high culture, humanist ideology works to maintain control of those free-floating value sectors not determined by market dominance. In this sense, the radical art of the modernist and contemporary periods is both anti-mass consumer art—trying instead to create works that require the active participation and critical reflection of viewers and readers—and anti-high art, critiquing the ideological assumptions and cultural biases behind the valuation of the Great Books, the Core Curriculums, Cultural Literacy, and the like.

A continuing value of Blake’s work is the anxiety it has caused over issues like this, issues we are just now, it sometimes seems, confronting for the first time. Swinburne’s book on Blake was instrumental in gaining recognition of Blake’s significance and, as a result, preserving his work. Morris Eaves, in his essay on Blake in *Reimagining Textuality*, has another story to tell, one that in many ways brings to mind Harold Bloom’s thesis in *The Anxiety of Influence*. For Blake’s work is designed to be misread, but its singular value is manifest only when we come to recognize the misreading, albeit with yet another misreading. Eaves’s discussion of Blake points to our culture’s need to assimilate an artist’s work into a well established art medium: painter or poet but not, as Blake insisted, painter and poet. Swinburne the poet claimed Blake for poetry, inducting him into an insurgent literary tradition at the apparent expense of adequately acknowledging the graphical body of his work. The burden of Swinburne’s *Critical Essay* was to associate Blake with Whitman and Baudelaire, and implicitly with Swinburne’s own poetry—all aesthetically revolutionary projects marked by a refusal to be absorbed into the norms of the contemporary moral order. Blake’s verbo-visual excess is Swinburne’s exalted example of a visionary art unconstrained by the shackles of propriety (including the constraints of genre). Yet because Blake’s project involves redundancy and contradiction, both

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from “Every Which Way but Loose” (Bergmann Loizeaux and Fraistat 178-85).

within and between the layers of his work, much of the force of his aesthetic is evident even in monodimensional samplings. Nonetheless, the full complexity of his work can be experienced only cross-sectionally—not as a synthesis or flattening of levels but, on the contrary, in the clash of levels. Blake's work is not a singular whole, a totality, but a complex of incommensurable layers.

It's not that words exist prior to or independently from the world but rather that we know the world through the words that initiate us into it. Just as we know words through the world in which we learned them. Poets actualize these potentialities: the worldness of words, the wordness of the world. This is why poetry is not a matter of "understanding": one does not wish to stand under, and in that sense outside, but to move into, within; or perhaps move back and forth: under, inside, on top.

Translation implies a conversion from one set of terms to another. This is a process that is continuous within one's own language and its many layers as well as between different languages. The process is less atomic than contextual: not a matter of identifying individual words or even individual meanings but a matter of attuning oneself to systems of meaning, clusters of signs, contexts of utterances: to scale and shape as much as format and configuration; to sounds and sights as much as lexicon.

In his *Critical Essay*, Swinburne writes, "All that was accepted for art, all that was taken for poetry, [Blake] rejected as barren symbols, and would fain have broken up as mendacious idols" (3). Arakawa and Gins have resisted, with increasing scale, the ability of readers/viewers to absorb their work as painting or poetry—or indeed as art. While they may be described as architects of the "Reversible Destiny" projects, the point is not to make aesthetic objects to be appreciated but to construct "stations" that will transform perception. Caws details the temporal modeling of Arakawa and Gins's visual and architectural projects, showing how they are configured to warp and reform the space-time continuum. Language is embedded into these works not as something to be read, as on a page or even a screen, but as something to interact with in an unfolding/enfolding web. The constructed "landing sites" of *Reversible Destiny* challenge rote perceptual patterns and activate underutilized cognitive paths.

The idea that genres, if not the aesthetic itself, are a barrier to perceptual transformation connects the projects of Arakawa and Gins and Blake to a range of practitioners from Mallarmé and Williams to Duchamp and Cage, all of whose antifoundational investigations have a visual and verbal component. In retrospect, we might say that these artists do not so much abolish the aesthetic as extend and transform it, partly because the boundaries of the aesthetic—our willingness or ability to see something as a work of art—are surprisingly mobile. But if the aesthetic is not a static category, then it may be possible for the "same" object to be viewed, alternately, as aesthetic and not aesthetic. Indeed, aesthetic oscillation is potentially a rhythmic dynamic in a work; that is, a work may be configured in a way that pops out of the aesthetic and then is sucked back in, creating a "hyperaesthetic" environment, to extend an idea of Misko Suvakovic. Such a work would be as far from the heightened aestheticism of Mallarmé as from the post-aesthetic of Conceptualism. In the case of *Reversible Destiny*, the goal is neither to aestheticize the nonaesthetic nor to deaestheticize the aesthetic but rather to create a zone that is no longer subject to this oscillation.

We used to say the artist would drop away and there would just be the work. With *Reversible Destiny*, can we go further and say the work drops away and there is just the station, a nonplace or point blank of radical metamorphosis? Only when we experience this as an emplacement of textuality into concrete sensory-perceptual fields—turning ever further away from ideality in the pursuit of an ultimate concretion.

Art is made not of essences but of husks. Hazard will never be abolished by a declaration of independence from causality. But such a declaration, as of reversible destiny, may change how hazard is inscribed in our everyday lives.

Arakawa and Gins create not texts but pictures, not pictures but textures, not textures but models, not models but plans, not plans but landing sites, not landing sites but perceptual encounters, not perceptual encounters but live experience, not live experience but three-dimensional conundrums, not three-dimensional conundrums but philosophical buildings, not philosophical buildings but blank writing, not blank writing but virtual structures, not virtual structures but impossible necessities, not impossible necessities but pitchers, not pitchers but moldings, not moldings but pageants, not pageants but straddling heights, not straddling heights but conceptual rejoinders, not conceptual rejoinders but livid exponents, not livid exponents but cross-interventional convocations, not cross-interventional convocations but philosomatic trillings, not philosomatic trillings but blinking sensors, not blinking sensors but curtained encapsulations, not curtained encapsulations but plausibly deniable links, not plausibly deniable links but pillars, not pillars but mouthings, not mouthings but plasma, not plasma but branding lights, not branding lights but invented enclosures, not invented enclosures but sifting exposés, not sifting exposés but torque-topped initiations, not torque-topped initiations but philanderous moorings, not philanderous moorings but blurted secrets, not blurted secrets but curling capacities, not curling capacities but prismatic illocutions, not prismatic illocutions but pantomime, not pantomime but mourning, not mourning but placebos, not placebos but blistered ratiocination, not blistered ratiocination but inverting domination, not inverting domination but shifting fabrications, not shifting fabrications but tongue-tooled emanations, not tongue-tooled emanations but philogenerative groundings, not philogenerative groundings but blanket riveting, not blanket riveting but invested *détournement*, not invested *détournement* but...

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