

The old art assumes that printed words are printed on an ideal space.

The new art knows that books exist as objects in an exterior reality, subject to concrete conditions of perception, existence, exchange, consumption, use, etc.²³

Michalis Pichler
THE NEW ART OF READING BOOKS

IN 1972, A PUBLISHER called In-Out Productions, located at Reguliersgracht 103, in Amsterdam, released *SONNET(S)*, attributing authorship to Ulises Carrión. The first piece in the book was titled BORROWED SONNET. It was a rather cheesy poem that was then repeated over and over again throughout the publication with seemingly endless and often barely visible variations. Each iteration of the sonnet was printed on the recto pages, facing a vacant verso page, so that the turning of the page created a break between one piece and the next. Even though no mention of Rossetti was to be found in the publication, the reference was clear, making it a truly post-naïve work.

Initially written on a typewriter, the publication comprised forty-six mimeographed sheets, DIN A4, black/white, with two clear mylar foils stacked on the front and the back. Just as in Archaic Greek sculpture the white block of marble with its rectangular surfaces is always very present, the administrative aesthetics of a sheet (or a stack) of white DIN A4-sized paper (the equivalent default of US letter-sized), is like the degree zero of certain literature and art that emerged around the linguistic turn.

SONNET(S) seemed to me unpretentious and playful. It sat perfectly at the crossroads of some concerns in my own practice, namely “greatest hits” (that is, a certain kind of appropriation), the imaginary border between visual art and literature, and *Materialitätlichkeit*.¹

I HAD NOT BEEN aware of Carrión’s work—let alone *SONNET(S)*—until, on a visit to the Center for Artists’ Publications in Weserburg Bremen in late 2008, curator

1 *Materialitätlichkeit* vaguely translates to *material tenderness*. See also Pichler, “Publishing Publishing Manifestos,” in *Publishing Manifestos*, 12–19, 15; and Alessandro Ludovico, “100 Differences and Similarities Between Paper and Pixel,” *Publishing Manifestos*, 211–213.

Betina Brach handed me a pile of stapled pages, saying, with a smile, “you may be interested in this.” Soon after, I purchased an antiquarian copy online, and the next weeks were spent reading and re-reading Carrion’s *SONNET(S)*, as well as his theoretical writings, which had just been republished by Herós-Limé in Geneva. As time passed, the blank pages at the end of *Quant Aux Livres* kept filling up with potential titles for *SOME MORE SONNET(S)*—variations not included in Carrion’s book and begging for execution. *SONNET(S)* was a “greatest hit,” and a work modeled after it was going to be a “greatest ‘greatest hit’ hit.”

It had to be another 44, most of them printed recto on DIN A4, of course. Laying the book out painstakingly to sit the poems on the pages exactly as they were in *SONNET(S)*, the writing medium had to change: instead of a typewriter I used MS Word. *POEM(S)*, also known as *SOME MORE SONNET(S)*, begins with an exercise in “declensions” (as in grammar) of the default formatting functions of Word, and tests the limits of the page as two-dimensional space: the texts get sliced in half, doubled, mirrored, reversed, rotated in various ways, play out a fair amount of art-historical inside jokes, and explore site-specificity within publications as well as how information is reproduced or moved from one place to another. Plus miscellanea.

THE WAY LANGUAGE WAS (to be) treated here was at once conceptual and material, in a way Robert Smithson describes when he says that “Writing should generate ideas into matter, and not the other way round,” and “My sense of language is that it is matter and not ideas.”

When we consciously consider language as material and how text is embodied on a page (or screen) or in a book, not just as an abstraction in a metaphysical void, we can begin to discuss poetics in terms of *Materialitätlichkeit*. The *materialization of ideas* turns the supposed *dematerialization of art* (or literature) on its feet. The materialization of ideas on pages, consciously treated, insists that text is not indifferent or immune to its typographic realization and questions the

contingency of how a text is placed or viewed on a page (or screen). The medium that embodies text is not neutral, invisible, or transparent, and neither is language.

MATERIALIZÄKTLICHKEIT OVERLAPS, TO A large degree, with site-specificity: sites within publication(s) are not neutral. I am talking about a site-specificity that takes into consideration the dialectics between the recto and verso of a page, the dialectics between facing pages, and possibly the location on (or of) a specific page within a publication.

A much-needed vocabulary of site-specificity on a page, within a book, and within a publishing situation would allow us to describe how one or more letters, words, sentences, and paragraphs are situated in a constellation, on or in a word, line, paragraph, page, spread, screen, book, or social situation of publishing and distribution.

When Gato Negro wanted to reprint *POEM(S)* a.k.a. *SOME MORE SONNET(S)* in 2019 and decided not to make a facsimile edition, this allowed for a space of play within their signature style, to consider the “specific site of publication and to explore the playing field between identity and difference between the particular materializations,” and to engage in *reproduction-as-production*.²

Likewise, the translations of *POEM(S)* into Greek³ (where a poem by Cavafy is borrowed and varied) and into German⁴ (where a poem by Rilke is used as starter material) have made it necessary to engage in *translation-as-production*.

MY CONCERN WITH THE obsolete and with appropriating highly pre-coded material began in 2002 in New York City, when I was producing filtered editions of (mostly daily) local newspapers, such as *Newsday*, the *Daily News*, the *NY Post*,

² Nick Thurston, quoted in Annette Gilbert, *Im toten Winkel der Literatur*, 162. In the same volume, Gilbert discusses site specificity and context sensitivity, and questions the contingency of text; see pages 111–116, 321–329, 334.

³ Pichler, *ΠΟΗΜΑ(ΤΑ)* (Athens: Agra Publications, 2020)

⁴ Pichler, *GEDICHT(E)* (Berlin: «greatest hits», forthcoming)

FACING SONNET(S)

Sometimes thou seem'st not as thyself alone,
But as the meaning of all things that are;
A breathless wonder, shadowing forth afar
Some heavenly solstice hushed and halcyon;
Whose unstirred lips are music's visible tone;
Whose eyes the sun-gate of the soul unbar,
Being of its furthest fires oracular:—
The evident heart of all life sown and mown.

Even such Love is; and is not thy name Love?
Yea, by thy hand the Love-god rends apart
All gathering clouds of Night's ambiguous art;
Flings them far down, and sets thine eyes above;
And simply, as some gage of flower or glove,
Stakes with a smile the world against thy heart.

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the *NY Times*, and the *Village Voice* (still then a weekly printed paper). These reworked papers constituted newspaper flag profiles, like *The New York Times Flag Profile*: a reworked version of the September 11, 2002 *New York Times*, containing nothing but the depictions of stars and stripes from that day's edition with everything else left blank. They were placed with strict page concordance and came with an index that meticulously listed the context of each article or advertisement. The newspaper fragments were inserted into the paper, as opposed to tacked onto it, constituting recto-verso collages that preceded later site-specific works of mine inspired by Carrion. Printed in an edition of 1000 on a rotary offset press at a printing plant in Long Island City, *The New York Times Flag Profile* also marked the beginning of a publishing practice.

It WAS NOT UNTIL 2008, though, that the term “*greatest hit*” came up, and eventually it became the name of a (self-)publishing imprint, founded to unite under one roof a series of works that fit the following definition: “if a book paraphrases one explicit historical or contemporary predecessor in title, style, and/or content, this technique is what I would call a ‘*greatest hit*.’”⁵

The predecessors (other than local daily newspapers and a transcript of a biotech company’s stock market presentation) would come to include Stéphane Mallarmé, Marcel Broodthaers, Max Stirner, Gertrude Stein, Walter Benjamin, Seth Siegelau, Ed Ruscha, Mel Bochner, and—soon enough—Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Uliisses Carrion. Their works or texts would come to serve as both reference points and as raw material for new projects. These new works would not just be vaguely alluding to their points of reference, but openly cannibalize them. It goes without saying that this sort of cannibalism can all but kill the cannibalized. For one thing, it leaves the source reference recognizable, but even more than that, somewhere in the abyss of the internet, or in the catacombs of antiquarian bookstores, or entombed in an art or university library, one or more dispersed copies of the

predecessor will have survived, and are awaiting their role in a “*double reading*”: a reading of the fragment perceived in relation to its text of origin, and a reading of the same fragment incorporated into a new, different totality.”⁶

If the source material for a “*greatest hit*” is a “*greatest hit*,” the resulting post-naive work can be considered a “*greatest ‘greatest hit’ hit*.” The latter then has two explicit reference points and engages with them in a trialectics, encouraging a palimpsestic *triple reading*.

FOR A LONG TIME Uliisses Carrion’s work was not being read much, if at all.

In mid-2009, I faxed Carrion’s *SONNET(S)*, and *SOME MORE SONNET(S)* to the Drawing Center, New York, where they were all displayed in the group show *FAKX*. Unfortunately, none of Carrion’s *SONNET(S)* made it into the catalogue.

Later that year, I had a reading at the Stichting Perdu in Amsterdam. While there, I visited Reguliersgracht 103, and had a chat with the current residents, who had no idea that this was once home to Carrion’s publishing house In-Out Productions, and incubator to Other Books and So, notorious nowadays within certain circles. In fact, none of the artists, poets, scholars, and booksellers I met in Amsterdam were familiar with the name or work of Uliisses Carrion, Jan Voss (of Boekie Woekie) being the one notable exception.

Also in 2009, some MoMA people were bold enough to mount an exhibition, entitled *IN & OUT of Amsterdam: Travels in Conceptual Art 1960–1976*, omitting Carrion altogether. That was appropriation, too, but certainly not post-naive.

But the times are changing. Carrion has become a role model for the *poet-artist* (operating on both sides of the imaginary border between visual art and literature, like some of the people who show at the *Conceptual Poetics Day*), for the *independent artist* (operating independently from the commercial gallery system, like some of the people who show at *Miss Read*), and also for artists working in community building and

5 Pichler, *Statements on Appropriation*.

6 Groupe µ, quoted in Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, 13.

artist-run institutions.

But how did Carrion's work survive the critical period, the first few decades after his death? Mostly through other artists: first just a few from his own generation, especially Martha Hellion and Guy Schraenen whose Archive Center for Small Press & Communication formed the base of the aforementioned research center in Bremen, and then through the appreciation of a few artists from younger generations. Now he has become an artist's artist in the wider sense; he has "made it." His texts are being anthologized, and republications seem to proliferate (by Heros Limité, C/Arte, Alias Editorial, Boabooks, UDP, to name just a few publishers of his work).

POCKET-SIZED, TYPESET DIGITALLY, OMITTING the blank verso pages throughout the book, and with other adaptations (in letter spacing, line breaks, and reproduction method, to name a few), the 2020 edition of Carrion's *SONNET(S)* reminds me a bit of Hellenistic copies of classical Greek sculptures produced in Roman times. They are not very faithful; they are an actualization, a making use and keeping alive, within the economy of means of their own times. It was mainly Hellenistic copies of classical sculptures that helped to launch an appreciation of antiquity. Unlike the sculptures of Lysipp, which have survived *only* as Roman copies, some physical copies of Carrion's several books have survived as they were originally published. This republication—in the Lost Literature Series, moreover—may motivate readers to engage in excavation. In any case, it is a great lesson in reading.

DETOURNING RILKE, THE IMPERATIVE might go, "Du musst dein Lesen ändern."⁷ Or, in other words, as Carrion already knew, the new art of making books implies a new art of *reading* books.

⁷ "Du musst dein Leben ändern"—"You must change your life" is Rilke's most famous line of poetry; in German, with the replacement of one letter, it becomes "You must change your reading."

PAGINATED SONNET

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But as the meaning of all things that are;
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