

Daniela Daniele

## **Felix Bernstein, Burn Book and Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry. Preface by Trisha Low.**

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Daniela Daniele

## Felix Bernstein, *Burn Book* and Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry. Preface by Trisha Low.

1 Felix Bernstein's "queer" style does not define a specific sexual orientation but hints at the hybrid, Internet aesthetic that informs his poetry and critical writings. His first book of poetry, *Burn Book*, in many ways, exemplifies the poetics announced in *Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry*, so that the two books mirror each other in their circulation of a composite, "hipster" style unwilling to "become the new master discourse" (2016 89) that identifies the generation of "post-conceptual" poets that the author partakes of, along with Ryan Trecartin, Eva Ionesco, Cory Arcangel, Lonely Christopher, Cecilia Corrigan, and Andrew Durbin. All of them embrace a gender fluidity and the new confessionalism absorbed in internet chats and in the autobiographical process of creating and updating their Facebook profiles. Bernstein adopts the Woolfian metaphor of "the death of the moth"<sup>1</sup> to describe the fatal attraction of the 2.0 generation to the ephemeral lights of the social networks, that promise an instant visibility, despite the many risks of overexposure of youth and the dangers of being quickly consumed and discarded by predatory voyeurism. Nevertheless, in Felix Bernstein's works, the new confessionalism developed in digital communication seems crucial to inaugurate a new poetics, well aware that the obsessive act of daily restyling of one's own self-image on line does not coincide with the interior process of building an identity, the way in which psychoanalysts and theorists of the unconscious conceived it in modern times.

The youth described and parodied by Felix Bernstein is consciously fame-struck and celebrity-obsessed, and often agrees to limit its existential space to a performative act that mimics the broader domain of the spectacle. In his doubly critical and creative incarnations, Felix ironically portrays his poetic alter-ego Leopold Brant as a master of artifice and pretension, who turns his fragilities into a competent management of his public persona and is ready to design, at this advanced stage of videoculture, a convincing public image that candidly admits the importance to "make strategic friendships, put certain people forward, pretend to like the statuses of idiots who write constantly on Facebook...press the like button... pretend to be in control—as the stager and the staged" (24). As a result, his life on-line is wittily presented as a locus of critique and self-critique of mobile personalities who perceive themselves as performative creations in progress rather than as individuals per se.

It is quite clear how Bernstein's morphic perception of digital subjectivities lyrically reformulates the post-gender model established by Judith Butler in her discussion of queer subjectivities. Likewise, he makes the digital and the performative modes overlap in his self-portrait as a gay Internet artist. The compulsive protagonism of his digital persona is certainly Warholian in spirit, sustained as it is by an era of open access that makes simulation prevail on any form of authentic representation. At the same time, youth's digital fascination with surfaces does not exempt them from becoming more vulnerable and consumable as eternal objects of desire, in a media context that, compared to Baudrillard's society of simulacra, starts showing visible signs of decay, and makes the young poet&critic prophetically announce that the "online presence is morally bankrupt" (113). Thus, in his videos, Felix Bernstein playfully impersonates the look-alike of a dilapidated Justin Bieber and of a querulous Lady Gaga, as queer icons of a rotten democracy, whose commodified scenarios are in full display in the showbiz. His movies, like the dandyish, "colorful deformations" of Danny Snelson's "post-performances," compose an internet Avant-archive of trivia, (2015 71) in which the author appears decidedly immune from the "hermeneutics of suspicion" (28) that kept many a modernist writer rigorously removed from the machinery of popular culture. On the contrary, Bernstein's masquerades demonstrate the mass appeal of Gaga's queer aesthetic, and ironically locates his literary persona among all her campy paraphernalia. In this fake and slightly

decadent fashion, his own queer body becomes the vehicle of a cultural critique and the ironic expression of a repressed political unconscious.

4 As grotesque renditions of this noisy digital scene, his YouTube diaries parodically distort the ephemeral aura of the pop stars that most teenagers obsess about, as if to capture the delusions of each “peeping zap of desire” (2016, 15). As a result, Felix’s incarnations of fake Internet idols intentionally degenerates in the clumsy mise-en-scenes of a Vaudeville gone rotten. In other words, his appropriation of the props and fanciful attires of video stars ends up questioning the public sphere and nourishing an aesthetic aspiration to a “New Sincerity” (2015, 112). The latter materialize in an intermedial reconfiguration of literature sustained by the affective intensity and “flaming” effects engendered by the libidinal energy released by the billions of internet contacts, chatting exchanges and Facebook encounters occurring in the “voyeuristic pornographic sensorium” (2016, 78) of the web.

5 If an “online presence” nowadays represents for many internet users the main condition for any attempted relationships and self-narration, Bernstein advocates the rise of a new critical community of “post-conceptual” writers, who are also viewers engaged in “ghost friendship with other loners” (2016, 113) willing to “meet into each other” (62). His deep interest in digitalized subjectivities is, therefore, not a merely cerebral pose but springs from the affective experience of criticizing and being criticized on the web. Despite the manipulative potentials of the many aliases and nicknames that circulate in the social media, in Bernstein’s poetic and critical treatment, the intensity of internet activity at moments turns that artificial and competitive arena into a humane meeting-ground for honest confrontations and self-presentations.

6 The strong performative stance that Bernstein consciously choses in his critical and creative work certainly represents a step beyond his cultural heritage of radical experimentalism. Being raised in the Marxist Avant-garde illusion that the “redemptive subcultural status” (2016, 25) of a subversive minority would save the world, Felix Bernstein humorously exposes the daily contradictions and silenced abuses of the subversive bohemia (“A feminist raped me” 26). And, demonstrates that his commitment to Internet art is far less an ideological matter, being sincerely animated by political interests that are also and always existential. In his *Burn Book*, Adorno’s enthusiasm for the rebellious notions of “transgression and intention” (71) are therefore replaced with the unexplored potentials of a “post-conceptual” scene grown in cyberculture, that is in a prose-poetic, Dionysian field of creative rebirth in which lyricism and literary theory proceed side by side and literary invention may flourish untamed along with cultural critique.

In his dialogic confrontations with web culture and the multiple layers of the New York underground (from Andy Warhol to Eileen Myles), Felix Bernstein negotiates a hystrionic personality in which queer theory and deconstruction may playfully merge with his boyish memories of *Pee Wee’s Big Adventure*. In this Postmodern agglutination, complexity and commodities generate new composite literary formations that Donald Barthelme detected in the Pop era and that, even in Felix’s sister Emma’s photographic vision,<sup>2</sup> let art and fashion merge, for the delight of many a sophisticated viewer who hardly misses one of Gaga’s latest videos and appreciates the visionary symbolism of her clothes (“Her costumes consume/ my vision,” writes Leopold Brant in a posthumous homage to Lana Del Rey).<sup>3</sup> Likewise, in *Burn Book*, the poet is constantly haunted by the manufactured models that infest his public audiovisual sphere, and is never independent from his imaginary dialogue with the iconic and ghostly figures who inhabit him. Bridging the private and the public spheres, the poet and critic skilfully integrates the high modernist legacy of his experimental parents (the renowned poet and theorist Charles Bernstein and the imaginative collage-painter Susan Bee) with the attention that cultural critics like Ellen Willis never failed to give to the iconic and political impact of rock stars like Lou Reed and Madonna.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, what Felix’s “post-conceptual” generation seems to add to the cultural significance of his New York background is the role played by digital confessionalism in engendering what Marjorie Perloff would define new “Postmodern genres”<sup>5</sup> that, as a poet, a critic and queer Internet artist, Felix conceives as self-ironic vehicles of revelations in his deconstructive use of media

manipulations. In this respect, although his “post-conceptual poetry” accommodates in one genre his literary and critical positions as the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E P=O=E=T=R=Y coined by his father allows, unlike the previous generation, his art does not depend on the modernist notion of impersonality, being informally suspended between criticism and autobiography, and likely to incorporate the confidential and trivial elements that excite the attention of many readers and viewers. As a result, both *Burn Book* and *Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry*, strike one as intellectually compelling as intimate compounds of sensationalism and erudition. Their dramatization of queer subjectivities advocate a neo-confessional approach to communication, reminding us of the “personal criticism” introduced in 1990 by Mary Ann Caws, and by the generation of feminist and Jewish autobiographers like Nancy Miller,<sup>6</sup> whose memoirs and emphasis on intimacy and subjective discourse, suddenly disrupted the theoretical and abstract categories firmly established by post-structuralism in the previous decades (As Felix puts it in his tricksterish, iconoclastic style: “One deconstruction after another... The core is damaged. The core is emptied” (35)

Another important reference that consciously sustains Bernstein’s intergenerational contention is the “personist” style introduced in poetry by the New York poet Frank O’Hara. His elaborate lyrical discourse equally incorporated in literature a supple interplay of trivia, sentiments, and erudition, letting the most incongruous materials from the quotidian lyrically and sensually overlap, as if to anticipate the emotional avalanche that we daily encounter in the digital chaosmos of private and public emergencies. It can be argued that it is on this surfacing of affective lingo and fleeting states of mind that Bernstein builds his histrionic dramatization of the Internet contacts. In this respect, he reactualizes O’Hara’s and John Ashbery’s camp sensibility as dandy forefathers with a strong taste for the contingent and the transient. In homage to their hybrid combine of high and low cultures, Bernstein’s libretto, recently staged at the Whitney Museum, features the anachronistic juxtaposition of Justin Bieber and Keats’ Adonais, toward to the creation of a new queer style that reproduces, in a digital era, Portnoy’s logorrhoic obsession with Jewish heritage and psychoanalysis. With the important difference that, unlike Roth’s, Bernstein’s effervescence conveys the affective candor of long internet chat sessions in which anyone can question and be questioned.

Against the impending obscurantism of our times and the entropic effects of the information overload that digital culture inevitably intensifies, the Pop-Surrealist sensibility of Felix Bernstein’s generation might not claim a redemptive function. His gender fluid “Post-conceptualism” perhaps does not inaugurate a brand new radical ideology, but is certainly an antidote to intolerance and a hymn to inventiveness and critical acuteness. While sparing the reader the cognitive impasse of modernist experimentalism, his impressive intermedia talents aim to bring recognition of the new clarity requested by a new generation of literati which has grown up with the technical expertise that the web requires. His new queer aesthetic develops in the morphic shapes assumed by digital subjectivities, and, as it flirts with Warhol’s gaudy surfaces, proves quite willing to embrace the real pathos of poets and performers like David Wojnarowicz, whose underground poetry and prose never made a mystery of queer losses and personal vulnerabilities.

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### Notes

1 Virginia Woolf, “The Death of the Moth,” in *The Death of the Moth, and Other Essays*. Ed. Leonard Woolf. London: Hogarth, 1942, pp. 9-11.

2 Charles Bernstein, “Emma Portrait on Herring Cove Beach,” April, 11 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mV3M447XQ14>

3 Leopold Brant, “Lana Del Rey Has Collapsed,” in *Dandysms*. With Illustrations by Toni Simon, 2014, p. 17. <http://dl.gauss-pdf.com/GPDF122-LB-D.pdf>

4 Nona Willis Aronowitz ed., *Out of the Vinyl Deeps: Ellen Willis on Rock Music*, Minneapolis: Minnesota U.P., 2011.

5 Marjorie Perloff, *Postmodern Genres*. Norman: Oklahoma U.P., 1989.

6 I discussed that theoretical turn in "Locations: Notes on (Post)Feminism and Personal Criticism" in *Critical Studies on the Feminist Subject*. Ed. Giovanna Covi, Trento: Ed. Università degli Studi di Trento, 1997, pp. 79-100.

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