March, 1995

Performing the Book: A. F. Caldiero's "The Food that Fits the Hunger"

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PERFORMING THE BOOK

A. F. CALDIERO'S

"THE FOOD THAT FITS THE HUNGER"

SALT LAKE ART CENTER
UPSTAIRS GALLERY
MARCH 24 -- MAY 7, 1995

An essay by Scott Abbott with photos by Jim Taylor
One of my fondest theories and beliefs is that all the arts are really one art. This one art we never really get to practice because we are doing it always in terms of one of the so called arts (painting, drawing, writing, singing, dancing, etc.). This exhibit is a crucial experiment. If all the arts are one, that is, based on identical principles, then an artist should be able to apply these principles in any field and produce art. . . . as I've attempted to erase the lines that separate poetry from music and music from painting, etc., I have felt a kind of liberation from art and (as a bonus) from life. And in those moments of freedom, I've been alone with my making and, by extension, with my "maker." (Remember the Celtic "makar" and the Greek "poesis" (making)). . . .

A. F. Caldiero

In his widely influential eighteenth-century essay Laokoon (1766), Gottfried Ephraim Lessing asserts that the essential difference between painting and poetry is that time is the realm of poetry and space the realm of painting.

Lessing didn't know Alex Caldiero.

I imagine Lessing as the tiny, business-suited, briefcase swinging bronze "Traveler" who greets visitors at one door of Caldiero's exhibition in the Salt Lake Art Center. Fitted with a fiery upsweeping mask, Lessing is transported out of his meticulous eighteenth-century distinctions and into rooms where his time-bound books are performed in space.
On the two shelves of a rickety pine bookshelf stand and lie and lean binders, folders, and several dozen black, bound books. *Source Book*. Singular. Brown twine wraps, fences in, enacts the gesture of closed covers. The books on its shelf are performed as unperformed. They are ordered there in a library's obedient temporal line, stacked one row above the other, the material history of the poet's makings. This manner of ordering leaves us to only guess at the poetic, artistic process, at the many-leaved subconscious whose sheer volume, as manifest here, suggests that the images mounted on the walls around us are only a taste of the writings and drawings that fill the black volumes. *Source Book* is the quiet dusty study before the explosion. The locked and abandoned diary before the great-granddaughter finds the key. Private notations for a public performance.
Caldiero spent nine years as a child in Sicily, grew up thereafter in Manhattan and Brooklyn, and as an adult, while working days as a technical writer, has forged a career as poet and performance artist. In a poem read at the opening of the exhibition, he provides a series of autobiographical insights:

this is not the time to think about
growing a beard. You just
got layedoff and you're in
Utah and you're a minority and
you're a little weird and you're
in a movie about a space feminist's
revenge and you're so ready
to sing and you love to dance
and you like comic books and
you're 45 years old and you
don't know god personally
and you're in love
and you're making
believe which if you got
paid would be called acting
and you're dreaming of being
a standup comedian and you're
realizing more and more how
uninteresting the list of your
accomplishments is and your positive
mental attitude is shot to hell
and you want to stop writing with
this kinda pen because it forces
you to go up and down too much
and too fast.

morning, 2 Sept 94

Writing with the poet's manic/depressive pen, as unpleasant as it may be, has produced, in Caldiero's case, what might be described as an extended experiment in performing the book.

Why perform the book?
Not by magic, does art transforms us, but by moving us by means of metaphor from the normal to the abnormal, from the mundane to the miraculous, from the possible to the impossible. Art changes our vision, warps our perspective, transports us from one state to another, awakens feelings and thoughts we have forgotten or have never known. It suspends us over guls that exhilarate and terrorize us. Poetry often performs or makes concrete the transformations that are its substance, thematizing them, as in the final figure of Or, in which the letters A-J become a fanciful form, word becomes flesh:

As these embodied letters demonstrate, and as the book’s title intimates, the texts in Or are meant to provide alternatives, to move us beyond the given, from the single to the plural.

The book’s forms proliferate when Caldiero performs one of its texts, when he transforms marks on paper into sounds and gestures that transport an audience into alternate spaces. His physical performances transfix viewers, bring about states of meditation, and dissolve audiences into laughter or tears. They transport, enliven, seduce, and fulfill.
it is plain and simple like the solitary loaf of bread on the table and we come in after a whole day outdoors and grandma cuts it just right and it's still warm and the olive oil seeps into the soft part which has its own name in the Sicilian language, this inner part the crust protects and holds dear and which we construe as something wonderful because it is good to eat just as it is.

12:43, 28. Sept 94

The products of Caldiero's hunger for forms, a plethora of drawings and poems, visual and aural essays into the unknown, cram his notebooks.

For example, Text V from Or, Book O'Lights, this "food that fits the hunger," includes a human face with symbols in the place of nose, eyes, and ears, and on the forehead. The promise of the ancient signs (paired symbols for the "seven planets" of an earlier cosmology: Mars and Venus, sun and moon, Jupiter and Saturn, and Mercury) is that the head's hunger will be satiated, that the meaning they represent will satisfy like a mother's milk. The pairs are polarities out of whose tensions significance may arise: male and female or fire and water or war and love (Mars and Venus), antagonistic father and son (Jupiter and Saturn), the warmth
and coolness, day- and night light of sun and moon, and finally the mercurial Mercury that in itself embraces multiple polarities. In conjunction with the exhibition at the Salt Lake Art Center, Caldiero has performed this text as a polarity, with his friend, Larry Harper, reading the commentary as a scholarly, logical text ("AhM" we say to the child, as we hold up a spoonful of food. In Lexicon I: (A) = primal, (M) = water. . . ") while Caldiero chants the "a" and "m" separately and together as pure sound, a mantra beyond logic. Heightening this doubled aural performance of Text V of Or, Book O'Lights, is the visual performance of Or that looms behind Caldiero as he chants.

Exploded onto a wall, its pages are amputated from their spine and affixed in new patterns that emphasize the dimensions of space instead of the temporalities of book pages. The work is now a flat, concrete manifestation of Or that minimizes the abstractions of the words on the pages and brings out the dialectic play between black pages and white pages. Or has become a 7' X 6' painting. The overall structure is fixed by the arrangement on the wall, a fixed but accidental form, the result of an arbitrary choice of fifteen vertical rows. It is an extraordinary piece, this book displayed, performed, exposed -- uncovered -- the absolute antithesis of the books lined up and wrapped Sphinx-like on the shelves across the room.

And if Or, Book O'Lights is a performance of one of the notebooks featured en masse in Source Book, so too are many of the other works in the exhibition. Caldiero works initially in the hardback sketchbooks featured in Source Book. With black ink, often in the late-night or early-morning hours when
the subconscious lurks close to the surface, he writes figures and draws poetry on the white pages, transgressing the strict boundaries that traditionally separate those genres. To perform these works in a gallery, Caldiero transfers bookbound images to paper or wood through monoprints. The process begins with a photocopy made on a low-grade machine (the one at the Orem Public Library is especially good for this, Caldiero reports). Then, with lacquer thinner and a press, he transfers the photocopied image onto paper or wood. The result is a single print, which Caldiero either leaves a simple black on paper or birch wood, or then paints with bright, unmixed acrylic or oil colors. Some are bound together in polarities, like the diptychs *Sun and Moon* and *Cat and Key:*
Others are displayed in thematically related series, like the ritual performance work *A*.

or the extraordinary "mute book," *Various Atmospheres*, that can be read as a tender and realistic history of love:
Dozens of striking, quirky, remarkable images are on display, evidence of Caldieri's powerful imagination and skillful pen.
Some of the strongest images are found in another performance of the book, of five books, to be precise: Selph Portraits, or errata to all my work, Les Yeux Chauds, Impossible Instrument, Book of Seeds, and What the Words Forget the Song Remembers. Each book, bound in black, lies atop a white pedestal. A sign on the wall names them Five Books to Read, and the viewer who takes the time to do so is richly rewarded. The Selph Portraits, for example, reveal Caldiero in quick and sometimes desperate sketches done sequentially in early-morning hours, on February 22, for instance, at 12:02 a.m., 12:08 a.m., and 12:18 a.m.
The drawings of *Impossible Instruments*, as the two reproduced here suggest, return to the question of language as both enabling and inhibiting, as an impossible instrument and as the only instrument:

Per/Sonal Effects, a locked oak box on a pedestal, repeats the exhibition's guiding question as to the possibility of finding access to the transcendental, to "the food that fits the hunger." The box contains, we suppose, someone's personal effects, although we cannot see them. The unexpected orthography -- "Per/Sonal" -- directs us to headphones on the pedestal. When we don them we hear Caldiero's voice intoning riddles, the answers to which are, presumably, the names of the objects in the box.

- Just a knot
tied by hands
that are now
eternally free.
My grandfather's wisdom
tooth:
an object to remember him
with
out.

and it's a wonder if love shows itself
in a sign of non
retaliation.

This would-be grimoir is a record of that
unique occurrence
when from a distant land a small pebble
appeared called
or sent as a token of one who died at its arrival
with
a tender goodbye writ upon it not for eyes to
read.

The key without a door.
It yearns to enter in.
Forever erect.
Forever unsated.

Some of the described objects, like the wisdom tooth or the key, are directly and unambiguously named, and yet even these are twisted and bent and reshaped by the words that describe them. About the other objects, simultaneously disclosed and hidden by the riddles, we can only speculate. Along with the message of the locked box, the recurring themes of these riddles -- insufficient language, implacable death, and unrequited love -- again show Caldiero's awareness of life's impenetrable barriers and his hard-headed insistence on at least beating his head against them.
Influenced by John Cage, intrigued by chance, continuing his performances of the book, Caldiero gathers five installations under the title Coincide. One of these, Nailing It, consists of a foot-thick stack of books, pamphlets, and even a floppy disk, all impaled on a giant nail and hanging from the ceiling. The work asks us to imagine the text that would emerge out of the words the nail happens to pass through, and reminds us, in the process, that all texts are constructed, from pieces of other texts, by choices to include and exclude. A related piece, W. W. W., is made of three upright plexiglass plates, each on a separate pedestal, each bearing a page of a book. Between them are strings that link the word "Weimar" as it appears in each text. Of this Caldiero says:

Reading Goethe, in a footnote to one of his poems, I read the name of the city of Weimar.
I put down Goethe and pick up a book on Dada and on opening it, there is mentioned the city of Weimar.
I put this book down and pick up Nova Express by W. S. Burroughs, open it, and there is Weimar. All three Weimars within an hour's time.

The physical and verbal depictions of these coincidences, located in space and time respectively (getting back to Lessing), confront us with events beyond space, time, and causality. In his essays on synchronicity, C. G. Jung points out that the kind of meaningful coincidences Caldiero shows us, because they relativize space and time, are thinkable as chance, but that any cause is beyond logical thought; and he posits the category of synchronicity to fill the void. It makes more sense in the way I see the world, and it doesn't feel contradictory to the spirit of Caldiero's work, to describe this category as play.
My experience visiting "The Food That Fits The Hunger" is marked by a thematic coincidence, by my focus on various performances of the book. By choice and necessity I have left out many works that don't fit this context, and even some that do -- including Biotexts 2nd Series, which superimposes editorial marks on plexiglass over pages of text, and Birthmarks, a stack of plexiglass plates marked again by editorial scribbles, but this time completely abstracted from the texts they changed. In the end, my descriptions work like the riddles of Per/Sonal Effects, pointing at the things inside the exhibition's box, perhaps with enough skill to arouse curiosity, but never reaching the things themselves.