PANOPTICAL ARTIFICE

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In thinking about the relation of "artifice" to current poetry, different aspects of Steve McCaffery's work kept coming up, as is evident in the my essay-in-verse, *Artifice of Absorption* (Philadelphia: Paper Air, 1987).

All poems employ "artifice". Although it may be more or less obtrusive, artifice is the very ground of the poetic. At one extreme, the artifice of a work may be completely disguised (although, as in Flaubert, this must be understood, paradoxically, as the height of artifice); on the other, artifice can seem to be the sum and substance of a work (although, as in McCaffery, this may be more of an ideologically oppositional, literally *adversarial,* practice than a formally depoliticizing aestheticization). By "artifice", however, I mean to signal a poem's intractability to being absorbed as the simple sum of its devices & subject matters.

Content never equals meaning. Nonetheless, if the artifice of a work is foregrounded, as is often the case in McCaffery's poems, there is a tendency to say that there is no content or meaning, as if the poem were a formal or decorative exercise concerned only with representing its own mechanisms. But even when a poem is read as a formal exercise, the dynamics & contours of its formal proceedings may suggest, for example, a metonymic model for imagining experience. For this reason, consideration of the formal dynamics of a poem does not necessarily disregard its content; indeed it is an obvious starting point insofar as it can initiate a multilevel reading. But to complete the process such formal apprehensions need to move to a synthesis beyond technical cataloging, toward the experiential phenomenon that is made by virtue of the work's techniques.

McCaffery's essays make a fundamental contribution in just this area by exploring the implications of just those formal features of a poetic work that seem refractory to conventional interpretive practices: for example, the undercurrent of anagrammatical transformations, the semantic contribution of the visual representantion of the text, and the particular associations evoked by the phonic configurations. McCaffery elucidates this point when he discusses how anagrams drove Saussure to distraction near the end of his life when he was studying late Latin Saturnian verse:

> Implicit in this research is the curiously nonphenomenal status of the paragram. [It is] an inevitable consequence of writing's alphabetic, combinatory, nature. Seen this way as emerging from the multiple ruptures that alphabetic components bring to virtuality, meaning becomes partly the

production of a general economy, a persistent excess, non-intentionality and expenditure without reserve through writing's component letters... The unavoidable presence of words within words contests the notion of writing as a creativity, proposing instead the notion of an indeterminate, extraintentional, differential production. The paragram should not be seen necessarily as a latent content or hidden intention, but as a sub-productive sliding and slipping of meaning between the forces and intensities distributed through the text's syntactic economy. [--From "Writing as a General Economy" (1985), in *North of Intention* (New York: Roof Books/Toronto: Nightwood Editions, 1986), p. 208; all subsequent page references are to this book.]

Textual features such as the "paragrams" must be understood as *semantic* elements that contribute to the "total image complex" of the poem, to use Veronica Forrest-Thompson's term. McCaffery can sometimes seem to be saying the reverse: that such features *undermine* the ability of language to mean. In fact, what McCaffery is undermining is not meaning but scleroticized (noneroticized) ideas of "meaning".

For McCaffery, meaning is never a determinate structure but rather an "environment" based on a "contradictory" logic (as he puts it in a letter from the mid-seventies); although it's worth noting that "contradictory" can be thornily misdirecting in this context —polydictory would be more like it. Certainly, his early books— *Ow's Waif* (1975), *Carnival* (1967-75), and *Dr. Sadhu's Muffins* (1974), as well as his essays of this period, can be seen to go over (in the sense of *erasing*) this ground. According to McCaffery, this "deconstruction" (or better *destruction*) releases a "libidinal flow" that is otherwise locked up by, or *in*, conventional language practices or "grammar". As he puts it in his wonderfully polemical 1978 essay on Bill Bisset: "Grammar precludes the possibility of meaning being an active, local agent functioning within a polymorphous, polysemous space of parts and sub-particles; it commands hierarchy, subordination and postponement" [p. 98]. McCaffery's conception of "libidinal flow" can seem to cast all meaning formations, all intention, under semiotic suspicion —a position McCaffery will often hint at in his attempts to redirect our understanding of meaning from *intention* (North) to "intentions", from *objective territory* (South) to sonic domains, as in this 1978 essay on "Sound Poetry" [in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*]. Indeed, McCaffery specifically postulates libidinal energy as destruction of, or in opposition to, the semantic ["Language Writing: from Productive to Libidinal Economy" (1980), p. 154].

But if the libidinal ruptures grammatical norms it does not follow that it unseats or "exceeds" the semantic, which is infinitely elastic; rather I would say *other* semantic domains are unveiled/reveiled: produced (albeit "unproductively"). In contrast, McCaffery's conception of a libidinal energy in writing that can "exceed [in the sense of transcend!] the linguistic" [p. 154] is based on the idea, attributed to Kristeva and others, that there is a prelinguistic, presymbolic domain that is

systematically repressed with the acquisition of language: an idea that is the last outpost of Romantic ideology in poststructuralist doxa. Rather, the linguistic or semantic or symbolic order are coterminus with the body, its coming into being and its expiration. The presymbolic is, at best, a u-topian projection, out of this world (like Romanticism's nonsocial Imagination): literally *nowhere,* never.

There is no "presymbolic" holdout (hideout); language play is simultaneously, *not consecutively, narratively* constitutive of meaning *and* erotic. While it is necessary to reject the reduction of meaning to utility, it is equally necessary to guard against the schizophrenic splitting of meaning from the libidinal flow through which it is enacted. This is the project of McCaffery's most recent essays, such as "Writing as a General Economy"; in these works of the mid-1980s, he has begun to more adequately confront the ideological limitations of the notion os "free play". As Samuel Weber has put it, there is no free play only *power plays*: in the interior of any argument for the liberation of libidinal energy trapped by inscription is the demon of phallic play mar(k)ing its own unchecked reinscription.

For these, largely ideological, reasons it is crucial to avoid designating the nonlexical, or more accurately, extralexical strata of a poem as "nonsemantic"; such elements as line breaks, acoustic patterns, syntax, etc., not only contribute to the meaning of a poem but are themselves meaningful. For instance, there is no fixed threshold at which noise becomes phonically significant; the further back this threshold is pushed, the greater the resonance at the cutting edge. The semantic strata of a poem should not be understood as only those elements to which a relatively fixed connotative or denotative meaning can be ascribed, for this would restrict meaning to the exclusively recuperable elements of language —a restriction that if literally applied would make meaning impossible. After all, meaning occurs only in a context of conscious & nonconscious, recuperable & unrecoverable, dynamics.

Moreover, the designation of the visual, acoustic, & syntactic elements of a poem as "meaningless", especially insofar as this is conceptualized as positive or liberating —& this is a common habit of much *current* critical discussion of syntactically nonstandard poetry— is symptomatic of a desire to evade responsibility for meaning's total, & totalizing, reach; as if meaning was a husk that could be shucked off or a burden that could be bucked. Meaning is not a use value *as opposed to* some other kind of value, but more like valuation itself; & even to refuse value is a value & a sort of exchange. Meaning is no where *bound* to the orbit of purpose, intention, or utility.

Adapting McCaffery's terms in "Writing as a General Economy", the economy of reading suggested here is not a utilitarian "restricted economy" of accumulation (of contents, devices) but a "general economy" of meanings as "nonutilizable" flow, discharge, exchange, waste. An individual poem may be understood as having a restricted or general economy. Indeed part of the meaning of a poem may be its fight for accumulation; nonetheless, its text will contain destabilizing elements —errors, unconscious elements, contexts of (re)publication & the like— that will erode any proposed accumulation that does not allow for them.

McCaffery derives his idea of a general economy from Bataille, whom he quotes:

> The general economy, in the first place, makes apparent that excesses of energy are produced, and that by definition, these excesses cannot be utilized. The excessive energy can only be lost without the slightest aim, consequently without meaning. [p. 201]

McCaffery continues:

> I want to make clear that I'm *not* proposing "general" as an alternative economy to "restricted". One cannot replace the other because their relationship is not one of mutual exclusion. In most cases we will find general economy as a suppressed or ignored presence within the scene of writing that tends to emerge by way of rupture within the restricted [e.g. paragrams, as discussed above], putting into question the conceptual controls that produce a writing of use value with its privileging of meaning as a necessary production and evaluated destination. [p. 203]

In arguing against ascribing to meaning an exclusively utilitarian function, I want to emphasize that loss is as much a part of the semantic process as discharge is a part of the biological process. Yet the meaning of which I speak is not meaning as we may "know" it, with a recuperable intention or purpose. Such a restricted sense of meaning is analogous to the restricted senses of knowledge as stipulatively definable. But let's look at how these words are used or can be used: You know what I mean & you also mean a lot more than you can say & far more than you could ever intend, stipulatively or no. It is just my insistence that poetry be understood as epistemological inquiry; to cede meaning would be to undercut the power of poetry to reconnect us with modes of meaning given in language but precluded by the hegemony of "restricted" epistemological economies (an hegemony that moves toward the negation of nondominant "restricted" economies as much as repressing the asymptotic horizon of the "unrestricted" economies). As McCaffery puts it, "such features of general economic operation do not destroy the order of meaning, but complicate & unsettle its constitution and operation." They destroy, that is, not meaning but various utilitarian & essentialist ideas about meaning. To this point it must be added that to speak of the "nonutilizable" strata of a poem or a verbal exchange is a problematic as to speak of "nonsemantic" elements —for what is designated as nonutilizable & extralexical is both useful & desirable while not being utilitarian & prescriptive.

These comments are partly intended as caution against thinking or formally active poems, such as McCaffery's, as eschewing content or meaning —even in the face of the difficulty of articulating just what this meaning is. That is, the meaning is not absent or deferred but self-embodied as the poem in a way that is not transferable to another code or rhetoric. At the same time, it is possible to evoke

various contours of meaning by metaphorically considering the domains made real by various formal configurations.

I want, then, to conclude with a sketch of how McCaffery deals with the sort of "theoretical" concerns discussed here in one of his most recent "literary" works, *Panopticon* [Toronto: Blewointment, 1984]. *Panopticon* is perhaps the exemplary "antiabsorptive" book. (The dynamic of absorption and impermeability is the subject of *Artifice of Absorption.* While absorptive works may often deny their artificially in order to engross the reader, and antiabsorptive works may often call attention to their devices, these two terms must be understood, in my use, as interdependent and historically contingent.)

The first twenty pages of *Panopticon* are printed on a grid background, a visual trope for the refusal of these pages to be absorbed by the reader. A man's torso with a cutaway view of the digestive system adorns the cover & six of these opening twenty pages. After a halftitle page, the first three recto pages feature a quote from Plato's *Symposium* in English; an ad for acne cream in Spanish; & a brief scenario about a woman playing an aging movie star starring in a film called *The Mark* being photographed reading a novel called *The Mind of Pauline Brain.* The next recto page features a large picture of McCaffery staring at the reader, together with the book's title, author, & press. The pages that follow feature two Latin epigraphs & a page with the handwriten designation "plates 21-29", but of course there are no plates. There follows three pages of prose continuing, or more accurately displacing by varying, the scenario already commenced. At this point, a title page announces "Part III: The Mind of Pauline Bain"; flipping to the end of the book, the reader finds that the last section is designated "Part I: The Mark".

Panopticon makes use of just about every possible antiabsorptive device: several pages summarize "a book entitled *Panopticon*"; the middle section of the work has a separate text running in the bottom third of the page, which is shaded gray; a number of pages are all caps; a number have two separate strands of meaning on alternating prose lines, one designated by caps & the other by upper/lower case. At one point, *The Mind of Pauline Brain* is described as noteworthy "less for its verbal content than for [its] superb illustrations" of anatomical dissections; this suggests that *Panopticon's* value is as dissection of the book & that the title's image represents the multiple scannings that make this possible & mark its break from the single-focus opticon of conventional narrative. But the title also has an ominous ring, since the panopticon is an image of surveillance & control, referring to a prison built radially to allow one centrally placed guard to see all the prisoners. As McCaffery writes, in a statement that is intermixed with other material several times in the book:

THE TEXTUAL INTENTION PRESUPPOSES READERS WHO KNOW
THE LANGUAGE CONSPIRACY IN OPERATION. THE MARK IS
NOT IN-ITSELF BUT IN-RELATION-TO-OTHER-MARKS. THE MARK
SEEKS THE SEEKER OF THE SYSTEM BEHIND THE EVENTS. THE
MARK INSCRIBES THE I WHICH IS THE HER IN THE IT WHICH

MEANING MOVES THROUGH. A TEXTUAL SYSTEM UNDERLIES
EVERY TEXTUAL EVENT THAT CONSTITUTES "THIS STORY"
HOWEVER THE TEXTUAL HERMENEUSIS OF "THIS STORY"
DOES NOT NECESSARILY COMPRISE A TOTAL TEXTUAL READ-
ING. THE TELEOLOGY OF "THIS MARK BEFORE YOU" DOES
NOT SIGNIFY PER SE BUT RATHER MOVES TOWARDS A SIGNIFI-
CATION. HENCE THE MOST IMPORTANT FEATURE OF "THIS
MARK" IS NOT ITS MEANING BUT THE WAY IN WHICH "THAT
MEANING" IS PRODUCED...
THAT WE SPEAK IN ORDER TO DESTROY THE AURA OF LISTEN-
ING. THAT THE MARK UNDERMINES THE MEANING IT ELABO-
RATES.

The "mark" is the visible sign of writing. However, reading, insofar as it
consumes & absorbs the mark, erases it —the words disappear (the transparency
effect) & are replaced by that which they depict, their "meaning". Thus absorption
is the "aura of listening" destroyed in this writing. Antiabsorptive writing
recuperates the mark by making it opaque, that is, by maintaining its visibility and
undermining its "meaning", where "meaning" is understood in the narrower,
utilitarian, sense of a restricted economy. To make a movie of the "mark" is to
theatricalize it, exactly the contrary of creating, as in conventional narrative in film
or writing, the conditions for the mark to be absorbed (repressed or erased). In a
similar way, to make a "play" of the mind & call it "brain", as in *The Mind of
Pauline Brain* suggests that mind/brain dualism is a theatricalization of the
conditions of human being; the brain & the mark are superseded by what they
engender —mind & meaning; *Panopticon* reverses this process by acknowledging
the material base of mind & meaning, marking the return of what has been
repressed: brain & mark. *Panopticon,* then, is the novelization of the movie *The
Mark* based on the play *The Mind of Pauline Brain,* which has been adapted from
a novel called *Panopticon;* or then again, *The Mark* is the play...