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Reading from A to Z: The Alphabetic Sequence in Experimental Literature and Visual Art

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Reading from A to Z:

The Alphabetic Sequence in Experimental Literature and Visual Art

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in English

by

Jacquelyn Wendy Ardam

2015

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Reading from A to Z:

The Alphabetic Sequence in Experimental Literature and Visual Art

by

Jacquelyn Wendy Ardam

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Michael A. North, Chair

"Reading from A to Z" argues for the significance of the alphabetic sequence to the transatlantic experimental literature and visual art from the modern period to the present. While it may be most familiar to us as a didactic device to instruct children, various experimental writers and avant-gardists have used the alphabetic sequence to structure some of their most radical work. The alphabetic sequence is a culturally-meaningful trope with great symbolic import; we are, after all, initiated into written discourse by learning our ABCs, and the sequence signifies logic, sense, and an encyclopedic and linear way of thinking about and representing the world. But the string of twenty-six arbitrary signifiers also represents rationality's complete opposite; the alphabet is just as potent a symbol and technology of nonsense, arbitrariness, and (children's) play. These inherent tensions between meaning and arbitrariness, sense and nonsense, order and chaos have been exploited by a century of

experimental writers and artists who have employed the alphabetic sequence as a device for formal experimentation, radical content, and institutional and cultural critique.

"Reading from A to Z" argues that, as a result of the post-Saussurean linguistic turn of the twentieth-century humanities, the alphabetic sequence—the medium of language itself—became a vital means for artistic investigation. By bringing together works from across different genres and media, the dissertation suggests that most experimental alphabetic works have a push and pull effect: they admit a complicity in a mass culture of order that is standardized, segmented, and sequenced, while simultaneously expressing a desire for something *other* to that order. In the hands of writers and artists, the alphabetic sequence is both tyrannical and liberatory. For Virginia Woolf in the 1920s, the alphabetic sequence is a rational means of understanding a totalized world as well as a generative creative structure, while for John Baldessari and Martha Rosler in the 1970s, the sequence is an oppressive symbol of institutional and patriarchal power and also the means through which to imagine a resistance to that power. By taking on works as diverse as Gertrude Stein's long-ignored writing for children and the recent spate of alphabetized texts by Kenneth Goldsmith and other conceptual poets, the dissertation finds commonalities across a century of experimental writing and art. It pushes past Bourdieuian sociological readings of the avant-garde to establish a common ground between experimental writing and art movements, and ultimately reveals the alphabetic sequence—as a formal structure, a metaphor for knowledge, a didactic tool, an organizational system, and a procedural method—as the paradigmatic trope of a language-obsessed century.

The dissertation of Jacquelyn Wendy Ardam is approved.

Louise E. J. Hornby

Brian Kim Stefans

Sianne Ngai

Kathleen L. Komar

Michael A. North, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2015

For my parents,

David and Diane Ardam

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"*Teaching a Plant the Alphabet* at the Radical Arts Institution: John Baldessari, CalArts, and the
      Elemental," Seminar: "Modernism and Aesthetic Education," MSA Conference,
      Pittsburgh, PA, November 2014
"Reading and Writing Conceptually," Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, October 2014
"Mr. Ramsay's Alphabet: Virginia Woolf and Sequential Thinking," Seminar: "Capitoli: Serial
      Form in Literary Culture," ACLA Annual Meeting, New York, NY, March 2014
"Exceeding Poetry: The Abecedarian and Other Arts," Seminar: "Poetry as Muse," MSA
      Conference, Las Vegas, NV, October 2012
"Remaking the Alphabet: Children's Texts by Stein and Barnes," Panel: "ABC, it's Easy as 123,"
      PAMLA Annual Conference, Claremont, CA, November 2011
"Reaching Z: What the Alphabet Transmits," Seminar: "Transmission and Modernity from the
      Typewriter to Twitter," MSA Conference, Buffalo, NY, October 2011
"'The Suckers Love a Weird Wedding': Alice Fulton, Ovid, Trees," Seminar: "Re-vision in
      Contemporary Women's Writing," ACLA Annual Meeting, Vancouver, Canada, April 2011
"'read my poems and flash / them onwards to a friend': Frank O'Hara and the Verse Epistle,"
      Panel: "Frank O'Hara," ALA Annual Conference, Boston, MA, May 2009

INTRODUCTION

The alphabet is euphoric: no more anguish of "schema,"
no more rhetoric of "development,"
no more twisted logic, no more dissertations!
—Roland Barthes

Preamble

The alphabet is everywhere.

And of course the alphabet is everywhere. The letters of the Roman alphabet are the

building blocks of written discourse in the West, and the alphabetic sequence—the string of all

twenty-six letters from A to Z—is the alphabet's most common manifestation. The alphabet is

the medium of written language, and the alphabetic sequence is the structure that contains,

organizes, and transmits that medium. For hundreds of years, we have learned the alphabet in,

well, alphabetical order, and the sequence has served as a, if not *the* primary tool for our

acquisition of written language. Accordingly, the sequence has structured didactic texts ranging

from the hornbooks of pre-Renaissance Europe to *The New England Primer* to *Dr. Seuss's ABC*.

For hundreds of years, the alphabetic sequence has functioned as the site of our initiation into

the culture of written discourse.[1] It's not just the alphabet that's everywhere; it's the alphabetic

sequence too.

The roles and functions of the alphabetic sequence changed and broadened in the

twentieth century. The sequence itself stayed the same, of course—no changes have been

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[1] I am speaking here of the phonetic Roman alphabet. For historical and cultural considerations of the Roman alphabet, see David Sacks, *Language Visible: Unraveling the Mystery of the Alphabet from A to Z* (New York: Broadway, 2003); Robert K. Logan, *Alphabet Effect: A Media Ecology Understanding of the Making of Western Civilization* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2004); Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet, 1966); Johanna Drucker, *The Alphabetic Labyrinth: The Letters in History and Imagination* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999).

made to it since the letters J and V were gradually standardized as part of the sequence in the

mid-nineteenth century—but the alphabet began to appear more and more frequently in

realms outside of the didactic.[2] No longer was the alphabet relegated to children's literature; in

the modern era, the sequence began to appear in different forms of media in many different

capacities: as a formal structure, a metaphor for knowledge, an organizational system, and a

representation of totality. In the past one hundred years, the alphabetic sequence has become

a vital means for writers and artists—particularly experimental and avant-garde writers and

artists—to explore the possibilities and limitations of a symbolic discourse that, part and parcel

of the post-Saussurean linguistic turn of the twentieth-century humanities, could no longer be

read as transparent.

Alphabetic texts in all of their manifestations—whether an abecedarian poem, a

children's book, or even an alphabetized list—make the medium of language not just visible,

but tangible. In doing so, alphabetic texts crystallize their authors' and eras' particular concerns

with language while also continuing to ask broader questions about the means and purposes of

reading, writing, and knowing that we've been asking since Plato: What is the role of

didacticism in art? Is form oppressive or liberatory? What are the units and foundations of

language? Do we read literature alongside or against newer media forms? "Reading from A to Z"

undertakes these questions and more, and, by focusing in particular on the alphabetic works of

experimental and avant-garde writers and artists—those particularly committed to the

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[2] The letters J and V were long considered variations on the vowels I and U, respectively; Samuel Johnson used J and V in spelling, but not in the alphabetic sequence in the *Dictionary of the English Language.* J and V became standardized as part of the alphabetic sequence in the mid-nineteenth century. For more, see chapters "J" (184-199) and "V" (320-329) in Sacks, *Language Visible.*

exploration of and experimentation with language in their work—argues that alphabetic texts

are central to understanding how we read, write, and know in the twentieth and twenty-first

centuries.

Pattern and Paradox

To crystallize the importance of the alphabetic sequence to twentieth-century thinking, I will

begin by juxtaposing two disparate alphabetical moments: one historical, one literary. The

historical moment is the First Annual Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, which

opened at the Grand Central Palace in New York on April 10, 1917. This show was the first

major exhibition of avant-garde art in the United States since the Armory Show in 1913, and it

opened just days after the United States entered World War I. The literary moment comes from

Agatha Christie's *The A.B.C. Murders*, a 1936 mystery novel in which a serial killer chooses his

victims on account of their alliterative names and murders them in alphabetical order. While

this study is mainly concerned with experimental and avant-garde writers and artists, I begin by

juxtaposing the high and lowbrow to demonstrate both that twentieth-century alphabetic

thinking is not limited to high culture, and that much of the highbrow or experimental

alphabetical work's potency comes from its encounter with historically low—which is to say

pre-, anti-, and/or didactic—literary forms and genres.[3]

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[3] In so doing, my works builds on considerations of modernism in/and mass culture in books such as Michael North's *Reading 1922* and, more recently, Jessica Burstein's *Cold Modernism*, and the essay collection *Regarding the Popular: Modernism, the Avant-Garde, and High and Low Culture*, all of which refuse the so-called mass culture/modernism divide articulated most influentially by Andreas Huyssen in *After the Great Divide*. See Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Jessica Burstein, *Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2012);

The Society of Independent Artists was founded in 1916 by a group of American and European avant-garde artists and patrons including Walter Arensberg, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and Joseph Stella. The Society's first exhibition was planned with a radical motto and ethos: "no jury, no prizes." Any artist who wanted to submit her work could, and each had only to pay a one dollar initiation fee, plus annual dues of five dollars for the exhibition to display her work. The First Independent's Exhibition ultimately displayed about 2,500 pieces of work by over 1200 artists.[4] In the first issue of the short-lived Dada magazine *The Blind Man*, produced contemporaneously with the exhibition, Henri-Pierre Roché declared that the show filled a "great need" for an exhibition "to be held at a given period each year, where artists of all schools can exhibit together—certain that whatever they send will be hung and that all will have equal opportunity."[5] The first show thus juxtaposed works of artists well-known in avant-garde circles—including Pablo Picasso, Charles Demuth, Constantin Brancusi, Francis Picabia, Beatrice Wood, and Mina Loy—alongside the work of total unknowns.[6]

Sascha Bru and Peter Nicholls, *Regarding the Popular: Modernism, the Avant-Garde, and High and Low Culture,* ed., (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011); Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

[4] The most detailed account of the First Independent's Exhibition comes from a series of articles published in *Artforum* in 1979. See Francis Naumann, "The Big Show: The First Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, Part I," *Artforum*, February 1979, 34-39, and Naumann, "The Big Show: The First Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, Part II: The Critical Response," *Artforum*, April 1979, 49-53. The event is also narrated with different emphases in Carolyn Burke, *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), and Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography*, Revised edition (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014).

[5] Henri-Pierre Roché, "The Blind Man," The Blind Man, April 1917, 3, < http://www.toutfait.com/issues/issue_3/Collections/girst/Blindman/4.html/ >

[6] Interestingly, and likely due to its open policy, more than one third of the exhibitors were women. Burke, *Becoming Modern*, 227.

The deliberately democratic ethos of the exhibition was reinforced by its organization. Duchamp, head of the hanging committee, insisted that the works in the exhibition be hung alphabetically by the artists' surnames. Rather then displaying works according to various affinities or classifications—such as nation, school, aesthetic, or reputation—Duchamp was committed to displaying the works in alphabetical order. Roché explains: "The hanging of works in alphabetical order for the first time in any exhibition will result in the most unexpected contacts and will incite every one to understand the others."[7] The arbitrary arrangement of the works, which refused to classify or taxonimize art or artists under any meaningful rubric, would echo the "equal opportunity" ethos of "no jury;" anyone could enter the show, and the work of all artists would be displayed as equally as possible. But for Duchamp, alphabetical order was not arbitrary enough; to avoid privileging those whose names began with letters early in the alphabet, he and the hanging committee decided to put the letters of the alphabet in a hat, draw a letter at random, and begin the show with that letter. They drew an "R."[8]

Duchamp's refusal to taxonimize, classify, or hierarchize artists was double, then: first he demanded that the exhibition's works be organized by alphabetical order, and second, that the already-arbitrary alphabetical order be made *even more* arbitrary. In doing so, Duchamp not only refused taxonomic and classificatory systems with his alphabetical scheme; in beginning his alphabet at "R," he also refused the neat A-Z teleological determinism of the alphabetic sequence itself. Duchamp's organizational decisions for the exhibition were not mere whims, nor were they a minor feature of the show; its catalogue prominently claims "Exhibits Hung in Alphabetical Order" on multiple pages of its front matter, and begins its list of

[7] Roché, "The Blind Man," 3.
[8] Naumann, "The Big Show: Part I," 35.

exhibitors with a note announcing that "the pictures are hung commencing at the north east corner of the main gallery, and beginning with the letter 'R.' This letter was drawn by lot."[9] The alphabetical hanging of the exhibition was a vital expression of its democratic impulse.

Critics were not kind to the exhibition, and they took particular umbrage to its non-existent jury and its alphabetical hanging. Robert Henri called it a "disastrous hodgepodge" akin to "eating in sequence mustard, ice cream and pastry,"[10] while Henry McBride referred to exhibitor Mina Loy as "one of those upon whom the whirligig of fate, I mean, of course, the alphabetical hanging system, had played a scurvy trick," as her piece *Making Lampshades* was hung next to a scandalous and much-discussed nude by George Lothrop.[11] Perhaps the comments of W.H. De B. Nelson of *International Studio* reflect the almost-ubiquitous unenthusiastic critical response most succinctly: "the good ship Independent was wrecked on the Scylla of No Jury and the Charybdis of Alphabetical Hanging."[12] The arbitrary organization and selection of the exhibition, and, in turn, the entire exhibition itself, were largely deemed failures by art critics, and the exhibition is best remembered today not for its revolutionary premise and organization, but for its refusal to exhibit Duchamp's *Fountain*, which was submitted to the exhibition under the name R. Mutt.[13] The art world was not yet ripe for a urinal in an art gallery, nor was it ripe for an alphabetically-ordered show.

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[9] Society of Independent Artists, *Catalogue of the Annual Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists* (New York: William Edwin Rudge, 1917), 19.
[10] Qtd. in Naumann, "The Big Show: Part II," 50.
[11] Qtd. in Burke, *Becoming Modern*, 227.
[12] Qtd. in Naumann, "The Big Show: Part II," 50.
[13] For more on the history of *Fountain* at the Society of Independent Artists First Annual Exhibition, see Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography*, 179-186. For a consideration of *Fountain* alongside the other works of art at the exhibition, see Marjorie Perloff, "'The Madness of the Unexpected,': Duchamp's Readymades and the Survival of 'High' Art," in *Regarding the Popular:*

We can compare the alphabetical hanging of the First Independent's Exhibition in fruitful ways with the fictional case undertaken by Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot in *The A.B.C. Murders* (1936). In this mystery novel, Poirot investigates a serial killer who taunts the famed detective with missives signed "ABC" and who leaves an *A.B.C. Railway Guide* at the scenes of his crimes. The killer chooses his victims based on their alliterative names and locations; the first victim is Alice Ascher from Andover, the second is Betty Barnard from Bexhill, and so on. "ABC" appears to be a sociopath who selects his victims according to the arbitrary signifiers of the alphabetic sequence. However, Poirot eventually deduces that the alphabetic scheme is a pattern designed to distract from the truth of the murders, and reveals the killer to be the brother of the third victim, the wealthy Carmichael Clarke. Franklin Clarke, Carmichael's avaricious brother, uses the alphabetic scheme to focus the attention of the police away from the victims' kin, and towards Augustus Bonaparte Cust, an unhinged but certainly not murderous man with a convenient name. Franklin Clarke murders three "needless" victims (in addition to his brother Carmichael) in order to make *all* of the murders seem unmotivated (outside of the alphabetic sequence, that is).

In *The A.B.C. Murders*, Christie shows us just how seductive the logic of the alphabetic sequence can be. Hastings (the narrator), Poirot, and the other investigators for a long time cannot see past the sequential nature of the murders, and they become convinced that they can anticipate the next murder based on the rules of the alphabetic game. In the novel, each killing is subsumed by its relationships to the others, or, in Poirot's words: "When do you notice

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Modernism, the Avant-Garde, and High and Low Culture, ed. Sascha Bru and Peter Nicholls, (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 13-32.

an individual murder least? When it is *one of a series of related murders."*[14] There is almost a

sense in the novel that a crazed, alphabetically-committed murderer might have been

somehow preferable (or at least more sensical) than the murderer who disguises his motives

with the alphabetic sequence. Once the pattern is revealed as a red herring, three of the four

murders (A, B, and D) become even *more* senseless than they would have if they were part of a

coherent and equally-motivated series of alphabetic murders. At first, the alphabetic sequence

signifies cold and murderous rationality, logic, and predictability, and then, Poirot exposes it as

a site of arbitrariness, meaninglessness, and dark, murderous play.[15]

By bringing these historical and fictional narratives together, I aim to throw into sharp

relief the paradoxes of the alphabetical sequence itself. It is an arbitrary sequence of arbitrary

letters, but it is also a culturally meaningful trope, which is why Duchamp, in his refusal to

taxonimize the art of the First Independent's Exhibition, must begin the alphabetical ordering of

artwork anywhere but "A," and why the various characters of *The A.B.C Murders* cannot see

past the forest of the alphabetic sequence for the trees of the individual murders that hold the

clues to the killer's identity. The alphabetic sequence has great symbolic import; we are, after

all, initiated into written discourse by learning our ABCs, and the sequence signifies logic, sense,

and an encyclopedic and linear way of thinking about and representing the world. But the string

of twenty-six arbitrary signifiers also represents rationality's complete opposite; the alphabet is

just as potent a symbol and technology of nonsense, arbitrariness, and (children's) play, which

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[14] Agatha Christie, *The A. B. C. Murders: A Hercule Poirot Mystery* (New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 2011), 239.

[15] For a reading of the novel's alphabetical series of crimes in the context of detective fiction, see Eliot A. Singer, "The Whodunit as Riddle: Block Elements in Agatha Christie," *Western Folklore* 43.3 (1984): 157–71.

is why the critics of the First Independent's Exhibition disdained the show, and also why the characters of Christie's mystery are particularly horrified by the arbitrariness of the alphabetically-ordered murders, even after the truth is revealed. The alphabetic sequence's tensions between meaning and arbitrariness, sense and nonsense, order and chaos—exploited by both Duchamp and Christie—have also been exploited by a century of experimental writers and artists who have employed the alphabetic sequence as a device for formal experimentation, radical content, and institutional and cultural critique.

Susan Stewart and Roland Barthes have each explored this paradox in their theoretical writing. In her book *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*, Stewart theorizes the appeal of the alphabet for literary works by setting out the basics of the alphabetic sequence as a form. She suggests that alphabetical order is "the convention of conventions" in that it is finite, fixed, arbitrary and sequential. She explains that "alphabetical order epitomizes the elimination of hierarchy, the leveling of elements in the list," and that it presents us with a time without order, a sequence where before and after hold no hierarchical import."[16] For Stewart, then, the key to the alphabetic sequence is that it is both arbitrary and sequential, that it is pure, non-hierarchical structure without content. Her Saussurean reading of the alphabet is that the arbitrary form resists interpretation, that it is, in fact, pure form.[17] For Stewart, the alphabet's lack of hierarchy connotes a lack of order. "Z" isn't worth more than "A" is. It's just further along. Stewart's alphabet is a sequence without meaning, or, in slightly

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[16] Susan A. Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 190.

[17] I refer here, of course, to linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's influential notion that language is both arbitrary and relational, and that there is no inherent connection between signifier and signified. For more, see Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (LaSalle: Open Court, 1998).

different terms, a metonymic form, in which relationships between letters are about contiguity, and not about similarity or meaning. B comes after A, and C comes after B, but neither A, B, nor C mean anything. The letters are positional, not meaningful.

Roland Barthes puts forth a different theory of the alphabet in his aphoristic book *Roland Barthes*, and it is the tension between Stewart and Barthes's theories which we find at the crux of many alphabetic texts, which can't help but undertake the questions of language, irrationality, meaning, and power. Barthes writes:

> Temptation of the alphabet: to adopt the succession of letters in order to link fragments
> is to fall back on what constitutes the glory of language (and what constituted
> Saussure's despair): an unmotivated order (an order outside of any imitation), which is
> not arbitrary (since everyone knows it, recognizes it, and agrees on in). The alphabet is
> euphoric: no more anguish of "schema," no more rhetoric of "development," no more
> twisted logic, no more dissertations! an idea per fragment, a fragment per idea, and as
> for the succession of these atoms, nothing but the age-old and irrational order of the
> French letters (which are themselves meaningless objects—deprived of meaning).[18]

Barthes here points out one of the alphabet's greatest tensions: as Saussure teaches us, the letters themselves are arbitrary and meaningless and there is no inherent connection between the signifier and the signified. However, as Barthes explains, the alphabet is not devoid of all meaning or content: it is known, recognized, and agreed upon by billions of people. It is simplistic, it is "euphoric," it is the kind of thing that doesn't require "twisted logic" or "dissertations." The alphabet is not developmental. It progresses, but it doesn't evolve. It is

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[18] Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 147.

teleological; we might even think of it as a quasi-narrative form without a narrative. Barthes

argues that culture has given these meaningless letters meaning, and he thus proposes a

metaphoric model of the alphabet which competes with Stewart's metonymic model. The two

theorists thus aligned crystallize that basic question of the alphabet text: Is the sequence

arbitrary or meaningful? Can it be both?

Despite their differences, Stewart and Barthes, both writing in the 1970s, use parallel

vocabularies to discuss the alphabetic sequence; for Stewart it is "arbitrary" and "non-

hierarchical," while for Barthes, it is "unmotivated" and an "irrational order." And both admit

its power and utter familiarity: for Stewart it is the "convention of conventions," while for

Barthes, it is "euphoric." This is the paradox of the alphabetic sequence; it is both familiar, even

ubiquitous, and at the same time, it is completely irrational, arbitrary, and unmotivated.

Duchamp's organization of the First Independent's Exhibition, and Agatha Christie's *The A.B.C.*

Murders both play on this paradox, and other alphabetic texts tend to both reproduce and

exploit it. The alphabetic sequence is a potent device for figuring and structuring the

relationships between self, language, and culture, and alphabetic texts tend to admit a

complicity in an arbitrary culture of order that is standardized, segmented, and sequenced,

while simultaneously expressing a desire for something *other* to that order. Media theorist

Marshall McLuhan, one of the first critics to describe the alphabet not just as the medium of

language, but as the primary *technology* of language, boldly claims in his influential

Understanding Media that the alphabet "is the technology that has been the means of creating

'civilized man."[19] In McLuhan's terms, then, the alphabetic texts of the past one hundred years to varying degrees accede to and contest what it might mean to be "civilized" by a symbolic discourse that is structurally arbitrary but culturally meaningful.[20]

Alphabetical Form

In the previous section I discussed the alphabetic sequence's theoretical implications; here I will discuss its formal manifestations. The alphabetic sequence is perhaps most familiar to scholars of literature as a form of poetry, and indeed, most of the alphabetic written texts of the past one hundred years have been categorized as poetry. While alphabetic texts may take many different forms, the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* offers the following definition of the abecedarian, also sometimes referred to as an abecedarius or an abecedary:

> ABECEDARIUS, abecedarian (med. Lat. term for an ABC primer). An alphabetic acrostic, a
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> poem in which each line or stanza begins with a successive letter of the alphabet. The
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> abecedarius was often a spiritual or meditative device in the ancient world, used for

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[19] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet, 1966), 86.

[20] Here and at other points throughout this study, I use the term "symbolic discourse" to recall Lacan's notion of the symbolic order that encompasses not just language itself, but law, custom, tradition, and ideology—all of which are, of course, mediated by language. While the whole of this dissertation does not take a distinctly Lacanian approach, the reading of Martha Rosler in Chapter Three draws on Lacan's idea of the symbolic articulated in his writing and seminars of the 1950s, particularly in *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York.: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), and "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," and "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious," *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004).

players, hymns, and prophecies, but it also has an inveterate role as a tool for teaching children language.[21]

While this edition goes on to list some early and influential abecedarians (such as the Bible's Psalm 119, which has 22 octaves, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and Chaucer's "ABC," in which the first letter of each stanza proceeds alphabetically), it notes only one "modern" abecedarian—the song "A You're Adorable" by Buddy Kaye, Fred Wise, and Sidney Lippman—and concludes with the brief mention that the form is a "modern instructive device for children."[22] An earlier edition of the encyclopedia, however, makes two other important claims that acknowledge the abecedarian's more recent manifestations. First, it explains that the alphabetic sequence in poetry, in addition to being a "mnemonic" for children to learn the alphabet, "has been widely viewed as a mere word game," and second, that "even outside religious contexts the [alphabetic] principle held power, since in the a[becedarian], the master code of the lang[uage] is made the constitutive device of the form."[23] The familiar tension of the alphabetic sequence is, in fact, definitional; the alphabetic sequence is an occasion for "mere" word games, and also the powerful "master code" of language.

Though the newer edition of the encyclopedia gives twentieth and twenty-first century iterations of the abecedarian short shrift, there has nonetheless been an explosion of alphabetically-ordered texts created in the past one hundred years. There are infinite ways to organize a text around the alphabet outside of the narrow limits of the "alphabet acrostic"

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[21] Roland Greene et al., eds., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Fourth edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 1.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Alex Preminger, Terry V. F. Brogan, and Frank J. Warnke, eds., *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Third edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 3.

model. My term "alphabetic text" is deliberatively more broad than "abecedarian," and it encompasses all texts—acrostic or not—that are structured by and/or invested in the alphabetic sequence as an organizational, procedural, and/or compositional mechanism.[24] Some of these texts have discernible roots in the didactic tradition of abecedarian poems, but many do not. The alphabetic sequence has permeated many segments of Western culture, and it appears not just in poetry, but in fiction and philosophy, rap music and performance art, experimental film and reference texts, all of which have all taken up the alphabetic sequence as an aesthetic and/or organizational form.[25] One of the primary concerns of this study is the manifestation of the alphabetic sequence in forms of literature and art *outside* the field of poetry.

[24] For a useful consideration of the alphabetic sequence as a device for composition from the point of view of a poet, see Matthea Harvey, "Don Dada on the Down Low Getting Godly in His Game: Between and Beyond Play and Player in the Abecedarius." *American Poet* 30, (2006): 10-15. See also this collection of interviews with Harryette Mullen about her *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, am alphabetically-ordered and Oulipian-inflected poetry collection: Barbara Henning, *Looking Up Harryette Mullen: Interviews on Sleeping with the Dictionary and Other Works*, (Brooklyn: Belladonna, 2011). Finally, for a consideration of the reference text as the basis for an alphabetical work, see Andrew Epstein's excellent article on Frank O'Hara's French poem "Choses Passagères": Andrew Epstein, "Frank O'Hara's Translation Game," *Raritan* 19.3 (2000): 144-61.

[25] To show the range of alphabetically-invested texts produced in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, here are interesting examples that this study does not cover include (but might have): the rap songs "Alphabet Aerobics" by Blackalicious and "Alphabet Bitches" by Lil Wayne; *L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*, an eight-hour documentary and series of interviews with the French philosopher; Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*; experimental films such as Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma*, Su Friedrich's *Sink or Swim*, and David Lynch's *The Alphabet*; Ezra Pound's *The ABC of Reading* which uses the "ABCs" as a shorthand for totalizing knowledge; Djuna Barnes's children's book *Creatures in an Alphabet*; James Merrill's poetry collection *The Changing Light at Sandover*; Louis Zukofsky's *"A;"* Denise Levertov's poem "Relearning the Alphabet;" Matthea Harvey's poetry sequences "The Future of Terror" and "The Terror of the Future;" Bob Perelman's "An Alphabet of Literary History;" Carolyn Forche's poetry sequence "On Earth;" Juliana Spahr's "Alphabet Poem;" Billy Collins's "The Names," Susan Sontag's short story "The Way We Live Now," novels such as Mark Dunn's *Ella Minnow Pea* and Ben Marcus's *The Flame Alphabet*; and Brian Kim Stefans's electronic flash poem *The Dreamlife of Letters*.

Whether the alphabetic sequence is structuring a poem or video, a work of philosophy

or a rap song, the sequence itself is a quite malleable form. It can be loose or rigid, and it can be

narrativized, broken apart, or strictly adhered to. The form is simultaneously closed and open.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the alphabet always has twenty-six letters, and the

letters are always in the same order; the alphabet always begins with A and ends with Z. What

makes alphabetic texts—particularly those outside the purview of children's literature—differ is

the ways they work within or break down this form. The sequence is a container that can be

filled in an infinite number of ways, and as such, it is a potent form for twentieth and twenty-

first century poets working in an age in which formal constraints in poetry are a site of

experimentation, contestation, and sometimes outright disavowal.[26]

I will provide a few examples of twentieth and twenty-first century alphabetic texts

from the field of poetry to provide a sense of the range of formal possibilities of these works.

Robert Pinsky's poem "ABC" is one of the shortest, most restrictive alphabetic texts possible; it

is a 26-word non-acrostic poem in which each word begins with the subsequent letter of the

alphabet. The first line, for example, reads: "Any body can die, evidently."[27] On a much less

restrictive level, poems in books such as Bruce Andrews's *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up*

(1992) and John Ashbery's *Can You Hear, Bird* (1997) are organized alphabetically—as just a

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[26] In his recent book *Nobody's Business*, Brian M. Reed notes another appealing aspect of the alphabetical form from the position of the writer; abecedarians "require no facility in meter or rhyme," and "provide a set of fixed compositional procedures without demanding prior immersive reading in the English-language poetic tradition…. Mechanical forms offer blueprints for composition without instantly and appreciably burdening poets with the weight of the past." Brian M. Reed, *Nobody's Business: Twenty-First Century Avant-Garde Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 60-61. For more on the alphabetic sequence in the context of other "mechanical" or procedural methods, see Chapter 3, "Mechanical Form and Avant-Garde Aesthetics."

[27] Robert Pinsky, *Jersey Rain* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2000).

glance at the Table of Contents will show—but have nothing else to do with the alphabetic

sequence. Walter Abish's Oulipian novel *Alphabetical Africa* (1974), meanwhile, shares Pinsky's

highly restrictive ethos. In the first chapter of *Alphabetical Africa*, every word begins with the

letter A; in the second, every word begins with A or B; in the third, every word begins with A, B,

or C, and so on. For example, the first sentence of the first chapter begins "Ages ago, Alex, Allen,

and Alva arrived at Antibes..." while the first sentence of the second chapter begins, "Before

Africa adjournment, Alex, Allen and Alva arrive at Antibes, beginning a big bash..."[28] The book

keeps expanding its possibilities, and chapters 26 and 27 make use of the entire alphabet. At

chapter 28, the book begins to contract as its logic is turned in reverse and letters are

subtracted from use. The last chapter, like the first, features only words that begin with A.

Most alphabetic texts fit somewhere between Abish's restrictive *Alphabetical Africa* and

Ashbery's loosely-organized *Can You Hear, Bird*. In her Oulipo-inflected *Sleeping with the*

Dictionary, for example, Harryette Mullen organizes her poems alphabetically and has at least

one poem for every letter of the alphabet but I, U, and Y. Her poem "Why You and I," which

begins with "Who knows why you and I fell off the roster?" playfully acknowledges and

questions these omissions, as well as the homophonic possibilities of these letters.[29] Mullen

plays many other "word games" in the collection—including a number of variations on the

Oulipian procedure n+7—and individual poems such as "Blah-Blah" and "Jinglejangle" have an

alphabetic scheme oriented not just toward the visual but aural manifestations of letters;

"Jinglejangle," for example, begins: "ab flab abracadabra Achy Breaky Action Jackson airy-fairy

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[28] Walter Abish, *Alphabetical Africa* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1974) 1-3.
[29] Harryette Mullen, *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 78.

airfare."[30] Whether a text's alphabetic investment is major like Abish's, minor like Ashbery's, or something in between, the sequence always carries with it the set of theoretical implications that I laid out in the previous sections. Furthermore, the alphabetic sequence is always a meta-discursive form, for, as the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* reminds us, "the master code of the language is made the constitutive device of the form." Alphabetic texts make the very medium of language not just visible, but tangible; the sequence is always both a formal structure and a repository for the letters that serve as the building blocks of language.

In the chapters that follow, all of the texts that I discuss take on the alphabetic sequence *as a sequence*; they are structured by or concerned with all twenty-six letters from A to Z. While many twentieth and twenty-first-century visual artists are interested in the visual aspects of the alphabet and language more generally, and while many poets write constraint-based work based on alphabetic principles (perhaps most influentially the Oulipo), this study is focused on works that are specifically invested in the alphabetic sequence *as a whole entity*. Alphabetic texts that employ the whole sequence are quite different from those that deal with isolated letters; the issues of totality, synecdoche, order, sequentiality, and the cultural power of the totalized form exist in works that deal with the sequence as a whole, and not necessarily in works interested in individual letters.[31] The works I discuss here are all invested in the idea of all twenty-six letters, in a row, from A to Z.[32]

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[30] Ibid., 34.

[31] For example, Christian Bök's Oulipian *Eunoia* (one of the most widely-read poetic texts of the last decade) whose sections are each composed in using only one vowel, is not interested in the alphabetic sequence-qua-sequence, and thus is outside the scope of this project. While it is interested in the alphabet for sure, its focus on single letters through a univocalic procedure—the first chapter, for example, begins, "Awkward grammar appals a craftsman"—and not the sequence itself puts it into another category entirely. Christian Bök, *Eunoia* (Toronto: Coach

Methods and Debates

"Reading from A to Z" intervenes in a number of fields—modernism, children's literature, contemporary literature, and visual art—and finds common practices, impulses, and concerns across movements and media. By placing a century of disparate experimental and avant-garde works in conversation with each other on the basis of a shared device, this study links authors and artists not through the sociological theories of critics of the avant-garde such as Pierre Bourdieu and Peter Bürger, but instead through the identification of a set of epistemological and linguistic concerns of a century's worth of experimental and avant-garde work.[33] The works discussed in this study share a similar constellation of concerns; to varying degrees and with

House Press, 2001), 12. A few of the many other texts that I might list here includes the visual art of Russian Constructivists and French Lettristes, and texts such as Wallace Stevens's "The Comedian as the Letter C," or Georges Perec's *La disparition*, a lipogram on the letter "E."

[32] A brief note on terminology: the words "series" and "sequence" have been used interchangeably by some critics to describe the alphabet's form. This is a mistake, as there are some important differences between the terms. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the series as a "number or set of material things of one kind ranged in a line, either contiguously or at more or less regular intervals; a range or continued spatial succession of similar objects." The *OED* provides several definitions of the word "sequence": it is "the fact of following after or succeeding; the following of one thing after another in succession; an instance of this," the "order of succession," "a continuous or connected series (of things)." The distinction between a sequence and a series, then, is that the sequence implies more than just contiguity. The sequence implies an order, and a dependence or relationship between the "things" in that order. A sequence is a *type* of series in which the "things" in it are arranged in a fixed (and thus meaningful) order that implies *more* than just a contiguous relationship between parts. Finally, the terms "sequence" and "series" are used differently in mathematical discourse: a sequence of numbers is a list of numbers in which order matters ([2, 4, 6, 8] is one sequence, while [4, 6, 8, 2] is a different sequence), while a series is a *sum* of numbers. A series is made up of a sequence whose numbers are added together (2+4+6+8). In a series, the order is not important. See "series, n." OED Online. March 2015. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/176458; "sequence, n." OED Online. March 2015. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/176289.

[33] See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Standford University Press, 1996); Peter Bürger and Michael Shaw, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

different emphases, they take on the relationships between self, language, and culture; the role of didacticism in art; the relationship between form and structures of authority; and the questions of how and why we read, write, and know. "Reading from A to Z" opens up new critical ground between writers and artists who are rarely discussed alongside one another, and finds commonalities between writers as different as Virginia Woolf and Kenneth Goldsmith on the basis of a shared interest in and use of the alphabetic sequence.

Both building on and departing from work by Marshall McLuhan, Johanna Drucker, and Patricia Crain, all of whom consider the alphabet and the alphabet book as historical phenomena, this study reads the alphabetic sequence as a device *within* literature and visual art. Though the study often draws from the vocabulary developed in Crain's *The Story of A: The Alphabetization of America from* The New England Primer *to* The Scarlet Letter (which uncovers the history of didactic alphabet texts and books in Europe and America, and pays particularly attention to those in eighteenth and nineteenth-century America), my study has a different focus.[34] Crain describes the previously-uncharted material history of alphabet books, and, in her later chapters, their effect on an "alphabetized" American culture, while my study is interested in the alphabetic sequence as a form in literature and visual art when it has been *decoupled* from the explicitly didactic environment.[35] By focusing on the alphabetic sequence as a *form* within literature and art, "Reading from A to Z" contributes to current critical

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[34] See Patricia Crain, *The Story of A: The Alphabetization of America from* The New England Primer *to* The Scarlet Letter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). Only her epilogue, which takes on *Sesame Street* and the art of Ed Ruscha, ventures into the alphabetic sequence in the twentieth-century.
[35] For a useful take on the broader relationship between didacticism and avant-garde writing, see Alan Golding, "'Isn't the Avant Garde Always Pedagogical': Experimental Poetics And/as Pedagogy," *The Iowa Review* 32.1 (2002): 64–70.

conversations about experimental forms and compositional practices, technology and

materiality, and the intersections of transmedial experimental and avant-garde movements in

recent criticism by Marjorie Perloff, Brian M. Reed, and Liz Kotz.[36]

By highlighting the issue of form across twentieth and twenty-first experimental

literature and art, this study takes a particular interest in what the alphabetic sequence has to

say about reading and writing methodologies. I use the word "read" here broadly to refer both

to the receptive act of absorbing written material and to our subsequent interpretation of that

material. Each chapter in this study poses questions about the relationship between alphabetic

texts and methods of reading and writing, and covers a set of intersecting topics such as

childhood language acquisition, the relationship between the aural and visual aspects of

language, and compositional and reading practices in the digital age. The chapters are also

interested in the composition and organization of works, for the alphabetic sequence is not just

a creative or generative structure for literature and art; it also provides a backbone to very

*un*creative reference texts such as dictionaries and encyclopedias.[37] The alphabetic sequence,

as I have already suggested, is always meta-discursive, and alphabetically-organized texts make

reading and writing an explicit concern of both their form and content.

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[36] See Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2012); Marjorie Perloff, *21st-Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002); Brian M. Reed, *Nobody's Business: Twenty-First Century Avant-Garde Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Liz Kotz, *Words to Be Looked at: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2010).

[37] A recent special issue of *Comparative Literature Studies* on "Poetry Games" is dedicated to the study of ludic and procedural compositional approaches to writing poetry. A version of Chapter Four was published in this special issue; for more on contemporary debates about compositional practices, see Jonathan P. Eburne and Andrew Epstein, "Introduction: Poetry Games," *Comparative Literature Studies* 51.1 (2014): 1–17.

By identifying alphabetic texts as a locus of reading and writing-related concerns, "Reading from A to Z" enters into decades-long debates about our methodologies for these practices. A significant strain of the literary criticism of the past decade positions itself against the "paranoid" or "symptomatic" set of reading practices developed through Marxist and psychoanalytic approaches to literature; Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus have influentially articulated their notion of "surface reading" as an anti-paranoid methodology.[38] For them, surface is "what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding… A surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through.*"[39] In emphasizing form in this project—and, in particular, a very conspicuous form such as the alphabetic sequence—I am doing a kind of surface reading. But this project does not give up a valuable hermeneutics of suspicion; nor is it a "new Formalist project."[40] Rather, "Reading from A to Z" remains, to borrow the recent words of Nathan K. Hensley; "properly paranoid."[41] Because the alphabetic sequence operates both metaphorically and formally in literature and visual art—and because it so often represents not just language, but a Lacanian-inflected symbolic order of language and law, ideology, customs, and above all else,

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[38] For works that position themselves against, in the words of Paul Ricoeur, a "hermeneutics of suspicion," see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Thinks this Essay is About You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2003): 123-51; Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso Books, 2013); Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York; Columbia University Press, 2011); Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

[39] See Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108.1 (November 2009): 1–21.

[40] For definitions of New Formalism, see Marjorie Levinson, "What Is New Formalism?," *PMLA* 122.2 (March 2007): 558–69.

[41] Nathan K. Hensley, "Curatorial Reading and Endless War," *Victorian Studies* 56.1 (October 2013): 59–83.

order—my formal approach to various alphabetic texts would be remiss if it did not address the underlying ideologies behind them. The alphabetic sequence is so often a site of power and authority—whether that authority takes the shape of the father of a family unit, the educational institution (whether the elementary school or radical art school), the patriarchal structures of government, or even language in general—that ideological critique cannot be separated from form. What could be more ideological, after all, than our submission to the ABCs?

Chapter Summary

"Reading from A to Z" is organized chronologically, and each of its chapters tackles the work, alphabetic and otherwise, of one or two experimental authors or artists. Chapter One's very first pages address Virginia Woolf's juvenilia from the 1890s, and the chapter eventually focuses on her 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse* and her later life writing; the study then ends with a chapter on Kenneth Goldsmith and conceptual writing in the 1990s and 2000s. In between, it covers several distinct moments in time—Gertrude Stein's wartime writing for children in the 1940s, and the advent of conceptual visual art in the 1960s and early 1970s. None of the chapters are hermetic, however. Chapter Three, for example, places conceptual art videos by John Baldessari and Martha Rosler in the context of didactic modern art in the twentieth century beginning with Magritte's paintings of the 1920s, while Chapter Four considers Goldsmith's piece *No. 111 2.7.93–10.20.96* alongside other alphabetically-organized texts from throughout the century, including Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* (written between 1927 and 1940, and published in the 1980s) and Ron Silliman's *The Alphabet* (published in

smaller editions beginning in 1983, and then collected and published as a single book in 2008).

The study covers a variety of different media and genres—poetry, novels, children's books,

reference texts, paintings, and video—and creates conversations across a century's worth of

experimental and avant-garde work. In the first chapter, Virginia Woolf's alphabet has a

personal meaning influenced by her distinct family and romantic histories; by the time we

arrive at the final chapter, the alphabetic sequence has become an impersonal tool for

organizing massive amounts of arbitrarily-culled language.

Chapter One, "Virginia Woolf's Alphabets: *To the Lighthouse*, Order, and Generative

Structure" considers the role of the alphabetic sequence in Woolf's fiction, essays, juvenilia,

and life writing, and newly interprets the central idea of order in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). By

reading the novel alongside Woolf's childhood poem "An Easy Alphabet for Infants," her

alphabetically-ordered correspondence with Vita Sackville-West, and the autobiographical "A

Sketch of the Past," the chapter complicates the traditional critical response to the novel that

reads Mr. Ramsay's alphabetic fixation as Woolf's condemnation of the sequential and

encyclopedic ethos that marked her father's work on the *Dictionary of National Biography*. The

chapter argues instead for a much more expansive view of the alphabetic sequence as a form of

totality in the novel and in Woolf's other writing, and suggests that the figure functions for

Woolf as a means of both envisioning and negotiating a relationship between historical and

personal pasts and present, and as a playful, and more importantly, *generative* structure that

engenders intimacy and the occasion for aesthetic creation.

Chapter Two, "'Too Old for Children and Too Young for Grown-ups': Gertrude Stein's *To

Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays*" is a reading of Stein's long-ignored children's alphabet

book which was written in 1940 and published posthumously in 1957. This chapter argues that by simultaneously flirting with and disavowing the traditions of the didactic alphabet book, Stein created the conditions for *To Do*'s failure; it was, in Alice B. Toklas's words, "too old for children and too young for grown-ups." Through an extended close reading of *To Do*'s alphabetic structure, and by positioning the strange book within the context of both children's literature and modernist literature, the chapter ultimately suggests that the book has no interest in teaching the alphabet at all. Rather, it suggests that *To Do*'s didacticism lies in its interest in both promoting and justifying a brand of Stein-inflected writing practices.

Chapter Three, "The Alphabet in Video Art: Baldessari, Rosler, and Pedagogical Form" identifies and explores the trend of didacticism in twentieth-century avant-garde art, and focuses on the role of the alphabetic sequence in two conceptual art pieces from the 1970s: John Baldessari's *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet* (1972) and Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975). Both explorations of the new medium of video meditate on the relationship between subject and linguistic system and on the role of pedagogy in the avant-garde. In *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet*, Baldessari is interested in the (im)possibilities of pedagogy in the studio art classroom after the discursive turn of conceptual art, while in *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, Rosler is interested in the alphabetic sequence as a site of patriarchal over-determination exemplified by the uniquely late twentieth-century space of the cooking show. Video enables both artists to explore the alphabetic sequence as a symbol of oppression—along with the possibility of that oppression's subversion—through a medium that is both visual and time-based, and through which the alphabet functions as narrative.

Chapter Four, "The ABCs of Conceptual Writing: Kenneth Goldsmith and the Alphabetization of Literature" discusses the spate of alphabetized texts in the current conceptual writing movement. By looking at these works through a formal lens, it argues that we should seek their forebears not just in visual art (as conceptual writers and critics are wont to do) but in other alphabetic texts, such as abecedarian poetry and reference texts. The chapter focuses primarily on Kenneth Goldsmith's *No. 111 2.7.93–10.20.96* (1997) but also constellates Goldsmith's work with other alphabetic texts (conceptual and non-conceptual alike), including the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Ron Silliman's *The Alphabet*, Harryette Mullen's *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, Claude Closky's *The First Thousand Numbers Classified in Alphabetical Order*, and Ara Shirinyan's *Your Country is Great*. The chapter ultimately argues that the alphabetic sequence is the epitomic form of a movement that would like to deny form's centrality to its goals, and that the procedure of alphabetization—and the multiplicity of texts that this seemingly rote procedure creates—throws into sharp relief many of the concerns of conceptual writing, especially the boundary between creative and "uncreative" writing.

CHAPTER ONE:

Virginia Woolf's Alphabets:

***To the Lighthouse,* Order, and Generation**

"An Easy Alphabet for Infants"

Like the Brontës before them, the remarkably literate children of Leslie and Julia Stephen

created their own family magazine. The *Hyde Park Gate News*, which the children wrote from

1891-1895, features work by the young Virginia Stephen (later Woolf), Vanessa Stephen (later

Bell), and their younger brother Thoby. The family magazine, modeled after magazines such as

the popular *Tit Bits,* contained a miscellany of short pieces—articles about the comings and

goings of the Stephen household at 22 Hyde Park Gate, drawings of family members, jokes and

riddles, advice columns, fabricated love letters, character sketches, and serialized stories. A

representative piece on the Stephens, for example, reports that "the Editor of this pamphlet"—

the young Virginia—"has recently been to Messrs. Goberg for the purpose of having a fringe

cut: while her younger brother had his hair cut moderately short The Editor now looks so like a

cockatoo that she is ridiculed on all sides."[1] While most of the pieces of the *Hyde Park Gate*

News are unsigned and written in Vanessa's handwriting, Vanessa Bell recalls that the young

Virginia authored most of the pieces herself.[2] The extant issues of the *Hyde Park Gate News*

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[1] Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, and Thoby Stephen, *Hyde Park Gate News: The Stephen Family Newspaper*, ed. Gill Lowe (London: Hesperus Press, 2005), 12.
[2] Vanessa Bell, "Notes on Virginia's Childhood," in *Virginia Woolf: Interviews and Recollections*, ed. John Henry Stape (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995), 8.

(from 1891-2, and 1895) are held by the British Library, and were published in 2005 as *Hyde Park Gate News: The Stephen Family Newspaper*.[3]

When the Stephen children began writing the *Hyde Park Gate News* in 1891, Virginia was nine years old and Vanessa was eleven. Hermione Lee considers the family newspaper to be "very much of its time and genre;" she describes it as "a production of highly literate upper-middle-class English children."[4] The Stephens, encouraged by their parents, followed in a long line of other Victorian juvenile writers, most famously the Brontës, who also produced family magazines. But where the Brontës, particularly Charlotte and Branwell, produced hermetic fantasy worlds as an escape from daily family life in, most famously, *The Glass Town* and *Gondal*, the Stephens relished the day-to-day events of their late Victorian childhoods.[5] Woolf later described her childhood milieu in "A Sketch of the Past," her unfinished autobiography, as "a very communicative, literate, letter writing, visiting, articulate, late nineteenth century world."[6] Virginia Woolf's sense of growing up in a distinctly Victorian home has been affirmed many times over; she wrote that as late as 1900, Hyde Park Gate was "a complete model of Victorian society."[7] Part of the reason for this lies in the age of her parents; Leslie and Julia Stephen were each other's second spouses, and Leslie Stephen was 49 years old when Virginia was born.

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[3] For more on the history of the family newspaper, see Gill Lowe, introduction to *Hyde Park Gate News: The Stephen Family Newspaper*, by Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, and Thoby Stephen, ed. Gill Lowe (London: Hesperus Press, 2005), xi-xviii.

[4] Hermione Lee, forward to *Hyde Park Gate News: The Stephen Family Newspaper*, by Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, and Thoby Stephen, ed. Gill Lowe (London: Hesperus Press, 2005), vii.

[5] For a detailed account of the family magazines of the Brontës, Stephens, and other child writers, see: Christine Alexander,"Play and Apprenticeship: The Culture of Family Magazines" in *The Child Writer from Austen to Woolf*, ed. Christine Alexander and Juliet McMaster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 31-50.

[6] Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," in *Moments of Being* (New York: Harvest Books, 1985), 65.

[7] Ibid., 147.

Woolf had four older half-siblings (George, Gerald, and Stella Duckworth, and Laura Stephen)

from her parents' first marriages, and the differences between the generations were palpable,

as was Woolf's sense that she was growing up in an atavistically Victorian home. In "A Sketch of

the Past,"[8] she writes:

> Two different ages confronted each other in the drawing room at Hyde Park Gate: the
>
> Victorian age; and the Edwardian age. We were not [Leslie's] children, but his
>
> grandchildren. There should have been a generation between us to cushion the
>
> contact…. But while we looked into the future, we were completely under the power of
>
> the past. Explorers and revolutionists, as we both were by nature, we lived under the
>
> sway of a society that was about fifty years too old for us. It was this curious fact that
>
> made our struggle so bitter and so violent. For the society in which we lived was still the
>
> Victorian society. Father himself was a typical Victorian. George and Gerald were
>
> consenting and approving Victorians. So that we had two quarrels to wage: two fights to
>
> fight; one with them individually, and one with them socially. We were living say in
>
> 1910; they were living in 1860."[9]

The Victorianism of the *Hyde Park Gate News*, which today reads as charming and quaint,

seems considerably less so when we consider the burden that the customs and expectations of

the Victorian era would eventually place on the young Virginia's shoulders. That the mores of

the era persisted in the Stephen household well past its end was a major cause of distress in the

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[8] For a useful account of the status of "A Sketch of the Past" among Woolf's other autobiographical writing, see: Alex Zwerdling, "Mastering the Memoir: Woolf and the Family Legacy," *Modernism/modernity* 10.1 (2003): 165–188.
[9] Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," 147.

lives of Virginia and Vanessa, and the many incarnations of "the power of the past"—both

personal and historical—will be one of the major considerations of this chapter.

But as we can see in the *Hyde Park Gate News*, the Victorianism of 22 Hyde Park Gate

wasn't always troubling. In the years before Julia Stephen's death in 1895, the prototypical

family magazine provided an opportunity for the young Stephens to flex their precocious

literary muscles. On Monday, November 30, 1891, the Stephen children "published" "An Easy

Alphabet for Infants," an abecedarian that glories in England's contemporary and historical

personages. A more perfect specimen of Victorian juvenilia could not be fabricated; "An Easy

Alphabet for Infants" begins with "A is for Prince Albert / so good and so kind," and goes on to

feature a number of other eminent Victorians—"C for Carlyle / a great author was he;" "V

Victoria queen to / you and me."[10] The poem expands its historical reach back to "the 8th Henry"

and "Sam Johnson," and comes close to home with the entry for S: "S for Leslie Stephen / Well

known to you."[11] The children's figuring of their father among these major English personages

speaks to the powerful role he played in their imagination as a man of historical as well as

personal importance. While the children do include a few women in the poem (such as writers

Maria Edgeworth and Charlotte Mary Yonge), they do not include their mother. The

abecedarian is for public figures only.

In full, "An Easy Alphabet for Infants" reads:

---

[10] Woolf, *Hyde Park Gate News*, 7-8.
[11] In a version of the poem that the Stephen children reprinted the next week, some of the couplets are changed; the later couplet for the letter "S" reads: "S for Leslie Stephen / Who lives in Hyde Park Gate," Ibid., 10.

An Easy Alphabet for Infants

A is for Prince Albert
so good and so kind

B for the black Prince
Who was never behind

C for Carlyle
a great author was he

D for Drake
Who sailed O'er the sea

E for Miss Edgeworth
Who wrote many books

F for the Frenchmen
Who take care of their looks

G for Goliath
so great and so strong

H the 8th Henry
Who to his wifes did great wrong

I for Hal Irving
a painstaking actor

J for Sam Johnson
your minds benefactor

K for John Keats
a poet of merits

L for Sir Lawson
Who puts down the spirits

M for Lord Macaulay
Who wrote the Laws of Rome

N for Nelson
Before whom the French have flown

O for Will Owen
Who portraits did

P for William Pitt
Who was minister to the state

Q for John Quick
Who acted in plays

R for Hal Reaburn
Well known for his ways

S for Leslie Stephen
Well known to you

T for Hal Talor
a poet so true

U for James ussher
Archbishop was he

V Victoria queen to
you and me

W for Watts
a painter is he

X for XERXES
Murdered B.C.

Y for Miss Yonge
Who many things can tell

Z for Zuckertort
Who played chess very well[12]

---

[12] Ibid., 7-8. All misspellings retained.

An Easy Alphabet for
Infants

A for Prince Albert
so good and so kind

B for the black Prince
Who was never behind

C for Carlyle
a great author was he

D for Drake
Who sailed O'er the sea

E for Miss Edgeworth
Who wrote many books

F for the Frenchmen
Who take care of their looks

G for Goliath
so great and so strong

H for the 8th Henry
Who to his wifes did great wrong

I for Hal Irving
a painstaking actor

J for Sam Johnston
your minds benefactor.

K for John Keats
a poet of merits

L for Sir Lawson
Who puts down the spirits

M for Lord Macaulay
Who wrote the Lays of Rome

N for Nelson
Before whom the French have
flown

O for Will Owen
Who portraits did

P for Will Pitt
Who was Minister to the state

Q for John Quick
Who acted in plays

R for Hal Reaburn
Well known for his ways

S for Leslie Stephen
Well known to you

T for Hal Thalon
a poet so true

U for James ussher
Archbishop was he

Figure 1.1: "An Easy Alphabet for Infants," *Hyde Park Gate News,* 1891. Copyright ©
The British Library Board

V for Victoria queen to
you and me

W for Watts
a painter is he

X for Xeales
Murdered in ~~----~~ B.C.

Y for Miss Yonge
manything can
Who can tell manything

Z for Zukertort
Who played chess very well

JOKES

Once there was a man
Who whent to a lage assem-
bly of people in order to
Entertain them with jokes
He told them some very god
joke at wich all the peopl
laughed with the exception
of one young gentleman
who dident see the joke
then the man them a very
sad story all of a sudden
they heard sombody laughing
very hard it was the young
man who just then saw the
joke

A little girl once said
to her brother I have been read
ing a story called Under the Niaga
Falls. It is very dry.
"No" said her brother
"it is very wet."

NOTICE

THE AUTHORS OF THE
HYDE PARK GATE NEWS
WILL BE GLAD TO HELP ANY
YOUNG PEOPLE WHO WHISH
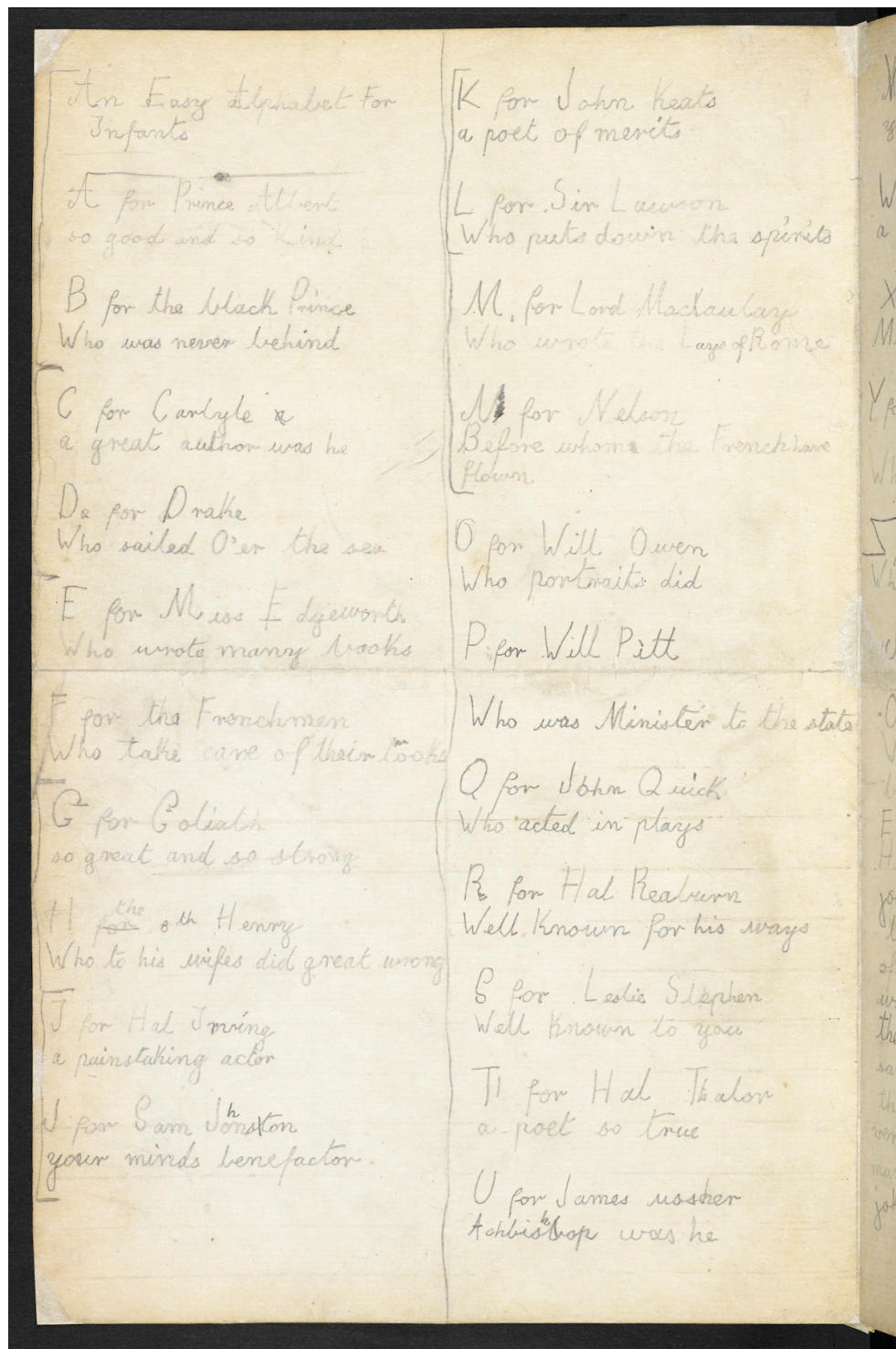FOR ASSISTANCE OR TO
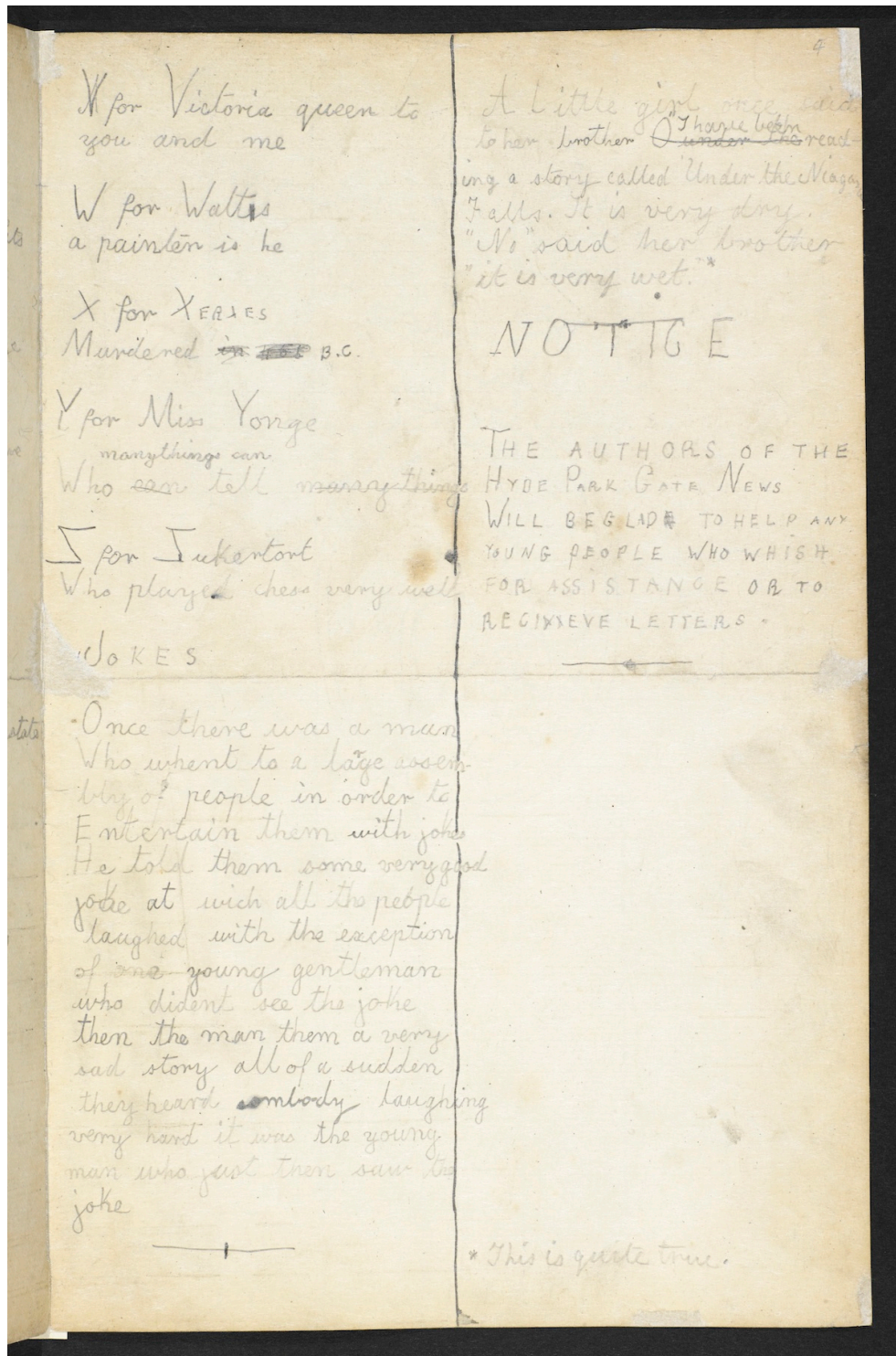RECIXEVE LETTERS.

* This is quite true.

Figure 1.2: "An Easy Alphabet for Infants," *Hyde Park Gate News*, 1891. Copyright © The British Library Board

While this abecedarian may not be a paragon of alphabet poems, "An Easy Alphabet for Infants"

provides a glimpse into the extraordinarily literate childhood of the young Virginia Stephen and

her siblings. At just ten years old, Virginia could not only compose a long rhyming poem, but

could also reference and even contextualize some of England's major historical figures, as well

as contemporary authors, painters, politicians, mythological and Biblical figures. The form of

"An Easy Alphabet for Infants," a particular kind of abecedarian known as an "alphabet array,"[13]

provides the Stephen children with a framework for showing off their impressive knowledge to

an unusually tough parental audience; in Alex Zwerdling's description, "the parents were

editorial board, audience and judge in one, and everything in the paper was designed to win

their approval."[14] "An Easy Alphabet for Infants" must have been a source of pride for its young

authors, as they reprint it in the following week's issue of the *Hyde Park Gate News* (with a few

alterations) with the note that "this is repeated for the benefit of certain people who did not

read it last time."[15]

    "An Easy Alphabet for Infants" might be easily dismissible as not much more than the

work of precocious children if not for the fact that Virginia Woolf returned to the alphabetic

sequence as a locus of knowledge a number of times throughout her career. Most famously, of

course, the frustrated philosopher Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* uses the alphabetic

sequence as a model for his linear and encyclopedic approach to understanding the world. Mr.

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[13] Patricia Crain coins this term to refer to the familiar "A is for… B is for…" form that many children's alphabet poems and books take. See Patricia Crain, *The Story of A: The Alphabetization of America from* The New England Primer *to* The Scarlet Letter (Stanford University Press, 2000), 91.

[14] Zwerdling, "Mastering the Memoir," 171. See also, Lowe, introduction, xi; Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 107.

[15] Woolf, *Hyde Park Gate News*, 11.

Ramsay's metaphoric quest echoes the real-life work of Leslie Stephen, who served as the first editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, an encyclopedia of British notables. Stephen's alphabetically-ordered task would throw a dark shadow over much of the young Virginia's childhood; his overwork was the cause of a number of nervous breakdowns over the years, and he eventually had to resign from his position as editor of the *Dictionary* in 1891.

With this in mind, it is difficult to dismiss "An Easy Alphabet for Infants" as mere childish play; the poem is, in fact, an acute mimetic exercise in the vein of Leslie Stephen's alphabetic and biographical work. Their father's occupation was surely on the Stephen children's minds when they wrote the poem, as the issue in which the abecedarian is "reprinted" also announces their father's retirement from the *Dictionary.* The *Hyde Park Gate News* reports that "[o]n the retirement of Mr Leslie Stephen from his function of Editor of the 'Dictionary of National Biography' he was presented with a pair of silver candlesticks together with a snuffer tray."[16] Though the Stephen children do not present it explicitly as such, we might read "An Easy Alphabet for Infants" as their response to, or even as their celebration of their father's life work. Even in this work of juvenilia, then, we can see the young Virginia Woolf beginning to position herself as inheritor of her father's literary legacy. Leslie Stephen may have put aside his alphabetic and biographical task, but Virginia was there to take up the family business of biography; we can, in fact, read "An Easy Alphabet for Infants," as a *Dictionary of National Biography* in miniature. The Stephen children seem particularly aware of their poem's "miniature" status. By suggesting in its title that it is an "easy" alphabet poem for "infants," they frame their poem as diminutive next to their father's work, even if their poem is not quite

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[16] Ibid., 9.

easy, nor is it intended for an audience of "infants."[17] Rather than relating it to other children's

verse, or to other children's family magazines, the most appropriate context for considering

"An Easy Alphabet for Infants" is the *Dictionary of National Biography*—and this context for the

young Virginia Stephen is not just intellectual, but deeply personal.

The alphabet for Woolf, then, is never just the medium of the English language. As we

will see in *To the Lighthouse* and in her other writing, the alphabetic sequence operates as a

symbol of linear and encyclopedic thought, but the sequence has other meanings for Woolf as

well. In "An Easy Alphabet for Infants," for example, it operates as a locus of familial intimacy,

and as a form of intellectual transmission between generations. The alphabetic sequence also

resonates metaphorically for Woolf outside of the sphere of her father and in her intimate

relationship with Vita Sackville-West. In their correspondence, Woolf and Sackville-West have a

private joke about the alphabetic sequence—Vita was fond of writing in what Woolf called an

"alphabetical system"[18]—and, during their separation of 1926, when Woolf was composing *To

the Lighthouse*, Sackville-West wrote a long alphabetized letter to Woolf to describe her

experiences as a tourist in Egypt. By examining Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf's more

abstract ideas of order in "A Sketch of the Past," her figurations of literary history in her essays,

and Woolf's and Sackville-West's personal letters, I will go on to argue that the alphabetic

sequence for Woolf is not only, as many have suggested, a figure of cold, linear rationality.

Instead, I will suggest that the alphabetic sequence also functions for Woolf as a way of both

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[17] I take up the question of audience and alphabet books more significantly in later chapters; see in particular the first section of Chapter Two, "Stein and Children's Literature" for more on this topic.

[18] Virginia Woolf to Vita Sackville-West, September 1925, in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Volume III, 1923-1928*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautman (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1977), 215-216.

envisioning and negotiating a relationship between historical and personal pasts and present, and as a playful, but more importantly, *generative* structure that creates intimacy and the occasion for aesthetic creation. The alphabetic sequence represents both rationality and irrationality, order and chaos, dead seriousness and lighthearted play, and Woolf's investment in this deeply ambivalent figure provides a new lens through which to read some of her most important work.

Leslie Stephen and the *Dictionary of National Biography*

It's difficult to discuss Mr. Ramsay's alphabetic quest in *To the Lighthouse*—indeed it's difficult to discuss the novel in general—without making reference to Woolf's own family, as Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, the patriarch and matriarch of the novel, are such clear figures of Leslie and Julia Stephen. In her diaries, Woolf makes the connection between the Ramsays and her parents quite explicit; in her preparation for the novel, she writes that:

> this is going to be fairly short: to have father's character done complete in it; & mothers; & St Ives; & childhood; & all the usual things I try to put in--life, death &c. But the centre is father's character, sitting in a boat, reciting, We perished, each alone, while he crushes a dying mackerel."[19]

Here and elsewhere, Woolf is transparent about her plans for Mr. Ramsay, whom she refers to as a "character" of her father.[20] Two months later, she uses the same term to describe the

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[19] Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume III, 1925-1930*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1981), 18-19. Entry for 14 May 1925.

[20] In these very early stages of thinking about the novel, Woolf (ominously) refers to Mr. Ramsay as "The Old Man." After finishing work on *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf writes: "The only difficulty is to hold myself back from writing others. My cul-de-sac, as they called it, stretches so

figure, and writes that she "vacillates between a single & intense character of father; & a far wider slower book."[21] Once her writing was really underway in the winter of 1926, she wrote in her diary that she "fe[els] rather queer to think how much of [the Stephens] there is in To the Lighthouse, & how all these people will read it & recognise poor Leslie Stephen & beautiful Mrs. Stephen in it."[22] Whether writing for herself in her diary, or for an imagined wider reading public years later in "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf makes the affinities between the Ramsays and her parents clear. And Woolf's use of her life as material for fiction did not begin with *To the Lighthouse*; years earlier in 1920, in the midst of a consideration of another author, she writes in her diary: "I wonder, parenthetically, whether I too, deal thus openly in autobiography & call it fiction?"[23]

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far, & shows such vistas. I see already The Old Man." Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume II, 1920-1924,* ed. Anne Olivier Bell (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1981), 316-317. Entry for 17 October 1924. The phrase "The Old Man" appears again in her diary a few months later; she writes "I'm always conceiving stories now. Short ones—scenes— for instance The Old Man (a character of L.S.)." Woolf, *Diary Vol. III*, 3. Entry for 6 January 1925.

[21] Ibid., 37. Entry for 30 July 1925.

[22] Ibid., 61. Entry for 24 February 1926. Upon reflection years later, Woolf described the process of writing the novel in a "A Sketch of the Past" as a kind of catharsis, using the language of psychoanalysis to describe the breakthrough regarding her relationship with her long-deceased parents: "I wrote the book very quickly; and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her. I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and laid it to rest" (81). Alex Zwerdling casts considerable doubt on Woolf's claim. He writes that 1928 "begins a decade in which she wrote with concentrated energy about women's lives under patriarchal power, a decade that produced *A Room*, *The Years*, and *Guineas*, all of which indicate that the subject matter of *To the Lighthouse* returned to haunt her. And toward the end of her life, in 1939-40, she goes back directly to the facts concerning the Stephen family in writing her memoirs and sees some of the same characters and events in a startlingly different way. The apparent poise and decisive finality suggested by the ending of *To The Lighthouse* turned out, in her own career at least, to be only a ceasefire." Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 209.

[23] Woolf, *Diary*, *Vol. II*, 7. Entry for 10 January 1920.

All this being said, Woolf does not write *To the Lighthouse* as autobiography, and the most obvious Woolf surrogate in the novel, Lily Briscoe, is not even a member of the Ramsay family. The novel certainly resonated with those who knew the Stephens—Vanessa, according to Woolf's diary, found "the rising of the dead almost painful"[24]—but it is does not aspire to the category of non-fiction. Years after the publication of *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf declared in a letter to Ethel Smyth that she "did not mean to paint an exact portrait of [her] father in Mr. Ramsay. A book makes everything into itself, and the portrait became changed to fit as [she] wrote."[25] Woolf's insistence on some distance between Leslie Stephen and his fictional counterpart, as well as her use of the word "character" to modify her earlier descriptions of Mr. Ramsay is telling. For Woolf, the development of character in fiction is a defining characteristic of the (good) novel; in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," it is what sets apart the superior "Georgians" (Forster, Lawrence, Joyce) from the "Edwardians" (Wells, Bennett, Galsworthy).[26] And the novelistic term "character" is bound up in Woolf's notion of the broader sense of "character" as one's personality or nature. In the essay, she uses the word "character" both ways. Woolf writes that if:

> you think of the novels which seem to you great novels…. you do at once think of some
>
> character who has seemed to you so real (I do not by that mean to life-like) that it has

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[24] Woolf, *Diary, Vol. III*, 135. Entry for 16 May 1927.

[25] Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Volume VI, 1936-1941,* ed Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 517. 20 August 1927. See also Woolf's letter to Vita Sackville-West, in which Woolf writes that Mrs. Ramsay is a "child's view" of her mother. She continues: "She has haunted me, but then so did that old wretch my father…. I was more like him than her, I think; and therefore more critical: but he was an adorable man, and somehow, tremendous." Woolf, *Letters, Vol. III,* 374. 13 May 1927.

[26] Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" in *The Captain's Death Bed, and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950).

the power to make you think not merely of it itself, but of all sorts of things through its eyes—of religion, of love, of war, of peace, of family life, of balls in country towns, of sunsets, moonrises, the immortality of the soul.[27]

For Woolf, then, the defining aspect of a "character" is not whether he is "life-like," but whether he has a perspective on the world through which we can filter our own. By thinking of the Ramsays as Woolfian "characters" of Leslie and Julia Stephen, who, rather than acting mimetically, combine fiction with a distinctive and powerfully "real" worldview, we might come closer to understanding the way in which Woolf imagined the relationship between the Ramsays and her parents.[28]

This relationship has understandably fascinated scholars and has been the subject of scores of articles and books. The degree to which the Ramsays are like or are not like the Stephens, as well as *To the Lighthouse*'s degree of emotional indexicality (even more difficult to categorize) was of particular interest to scholars in the 1970 and 1980s, as Woolf's diaries and letters were making their way into print and thus becoming widely available.[29] Not only do we

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[27] Ibid., 103.

[28] Zwerdling argues that the Ramsays are "symbols" of the Stephens; see *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*, 182-183. Lily Briscoe uses this term herself in the novel; she calls the Ramsays "symbols of marriage, man and wife," in Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955), 80. See also Gillian Beer, who argues that *To the Lighthouse* is a "post-symbolist novel," in that "symbolism is both used and persistently brought into question." Gillian Beer, "Hume, Stephen, and Elegy in *To the Lighthouse*," *Essays in Criticism* 34.1 (1984): 33–55.

[29] John Bicknell takes the strongest stand against conflating Mr. Ramsay with Stephen. See his essay "Mr. Ramsay Was Young Once," in *Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury: A Centenary Celebration*, ed. Jane Marcus (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987,) 52-67. For other perspectives, on the relationship between the Ramsays and the Stephens, see Virginia R. Hyman, "Reflections in the Looking-Glass, Leslie Stephen and Virginia Woolf," *Journal of Modern Literature* 10.2 (1983): 197-216; Ellen Tremper, "In Her Father's House: *To the Lighthouse* as a Record of Virginia Woolf's Literary Patrimony," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 34.1 (1992): 1-40;

have access to Woolf's many tantalizing comments about the Ramsays and her parents, only

some of which are catalogued above, but we also know from *Hyde Park Gate News* that the

opening and inciting moment of the novel—in which the young James Ramsay wants to go to

the lighthouse, and Mr. Ramsay proclaims that the weather will be too poor for a trip—has its

basis in a real event. The *Hyde Park Gate News* issue of 12 September 1892 tells us that:

> On Saturday morning Master Hilary Hunt and Master Basil Smith came up to Talland
>
> House and asked Master Thoby and Miss Virginia Stephen to accompany them to the
>
> light-house as Freeman the boatman said that there was a perfect tide and wind for
>
> going there. Master Adrian Stephen was very much disappointed at not being allowed
>
> to go. On arriving at the light-house Miss Virginia Stephen saw a small and dilapidated
>
> bird standing on one leg on the light-house. Mrs. Hunt called the man and asked him
>
> how it had got there. He said that it had been blown there and they then saw it's eyes
>
> had been picked out.[30]

The young Adrian's disappointment would be mollified, when, as the *Hyde Park Gate News*

would report, "On Monday Mr Stephen with his youngest son and daughter went down to the

pier and there looked about for a boat. After a long time of waiting a man appeared. They were

soon out and sailing merrily along. There was a good breeze and it not being too calm the party

---

Shannon Forbes, "When Sometimes She Imagined Herself Like Her Mother": The Contrasting
Responses of Cam and Mrs. Ramsay to the Role of the Angel in the House," *Studies in the Novel*
32.4 (2000): 464-487; Mark Gaipa, "An Agnostic's Daughter's Apology: Materialism, Spiritualism,
and Ancestry in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 26.2 (2003): 1–41;
Elizabeth Abel, "'Cam the Wicked': Woolf's Portrait of the Artist as her Father's Daughter,"
Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury: A Centenary Celebration, ed. Jane Marcus (Basingstoke:
Macmillan, 1987), 170-194.
[30] Woolf, *Hyde Park Gate News*, 108-109.

was in high spirits."[31] While the criticism of Woolf has diverged from strictly biographical

readings in recent years, the historical and, hazy as it may be, emotional indexicality of *To the*

Lighthouse, especially in terms of Woolf's relationship with her parents, is still of interest to

critics today.

While the earliest biographical criticism of Woolf tended to focus on the issues

surrounding the trauma of Julia Stephen's death—she died in 1895, when Virginia was just 13

years old—Woolf's relationship with Leslie Stephen has also inspired a thread of criticism.

While he clearly held deeply patriarchal views of social relationships—he was, in Woolf's words,

"a typical Victorian"—Leslie Stephen was undoubtedly Woolf's literary progenitor. Katherine C.

Hill has argued that Stephen was the young Virginia's early advocate, that from a young age he

encouraged Woolf to write and gave her access to the intellectual tools to do so.[32] He saw his

daughter's potential from a young age, writing to Julia in 1893 that "[Virginia] takes in a great

deal and will really be an author in time. History will be a good thing for her to take up as I can

give her some hints."[33] Years after Stephen's death, Woolf described his attitude towards his

daughters' intellectual potential in a 1932 essay commemorating her father. Though it refers

more directly to Vanessa, the painter, Woolf makes Leslie Stephen's approach to his daughters

clear:

> If at one moment he rebuked a daughter sharply for smoking a cigarette—smoking was
>
> not in his opinion a nice habit in the other sex—she had only to ask him if she might

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[31] Ibid., 118.

[32] Katherine C. Hill, "Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen: History and Literary Revolution," *PMLA* 96.3 (1981): 351–362. For a discussion of the validity of Hill's argument, see the "Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen," a special section on Hill's controversial arguments by Louise deSalvo, Alice Fox, and Hill, *PMLA* 97.1 (1982): 103-106.

[33] Qtd. in Hill, 351.

become a painter, and he assured her that so long as she took her work seriously he would give her all the help he could. Freedom of that sort was worth thousands of cigarettes.[34]

Stephen encouraged the young Virginia to read, and offered her unlimited access to his library. He gave her the intellectual freedom that she needed and desired, and offered her a philosophy of reading that was deeply personal and instinctive. Even if his failures regarding Virginia's education were many—her lack of formal schooling was a lifelong grievance and the subject of *A Room of One's Own*—Leslie Stephen's philosophy of reading would influence Woolf's various literary practices (including reading, writing fiction, and reviewing) throughout her life:

> Even today there may be parents who would doubt the wisdom of allowing a girl of fifteen the free run of a large and quite unexpurgated library. But my father allowed it.... To read what one liked because one liked it, never to pretend to admire what one did not—that was his only lesson in the art of reading. To write in the fewest possible words, as clearly as possible, exactly what one meant—that was his only lesson in the art of writing. All the rest must be learnt for oneself.[35]

"Leslie Stephen" was published in 1932, decades after Stephen's death, and, if Woolf's perception of her father softened over time, as some have argued,[36] Woolf's relationship with

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[34] Virginia Woolf, "Leslie Stephen" in *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1950), 74.

[35] Ibid., 74-75. For more Leslie Stephen's approach to literature in his own words, see his essay "The Study of English Literature" in *Men, Books, and Mountains*, ed. S.O.A. Ullmann. (London: Hogarth Press, 1956), 17-44.

[36] Virginia Hyman has suggested that Woolf wrote this piece as a deliberate "corrective" to her portrait of Stephen as Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*. See Hyman, "Reflections in the Looking-Glass, Leslie Stephen and Virginia Woolf," 207.

relationship with her father, was always, as she would put it in "A Sketch of the Past," deeply

deeply "ambivalent."[37]

The problematic aspects of Woolf's relationship with her father are legion. In 1928, for

example, she wrote in her diary the now oft-quoted lines:

Father's birthday. He would have been 96, yes, today; and could have been 96, like

other people one has known; but mercifully was not. His life would have entirely ended

mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books; —inconceivable. I used to

think of him and mother daily; but writing The Lighthouse, laid them in my mind. And

now he comes back sometimes, but differently. (I believe this to be true—that I was

obsessed by both of them, unhealthily; & writing of them was a necessary act.)"[38]

In this passage, Woolf supposes that, despite Stephen's encouragement of her writing, she

could not have lived with the emotional burdens placed on her; in "A Sketch of the Past," she

describes Stephen as "the tyrant father—the exacting, the violent, the histrionic, the

demonstrative, the self-centered, the self pitying, the deaf, the appealing, the alternatively

loved and hated father—that dominated [her]."[39] I do not want to discount the burden that

Leslie Stephen placed on the young Virginia; the strain that he placed on her mental health was

spectacular and has been well-catalogued. In particular, his behavior towards both Virginia and

Vanessa after the deaths of Julia Stephen and their half-sister Stella Duckworth was emotionally

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[37] Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," 108.
[38] Woolf, *Diary Vol. III*, 208. Entry for 28 November 1928.
[39] Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," 116. See 107-116 for more of Woolf's description of her father.

devastating.[40] But, as I go on to explore Woolf's relationship to the past by way of her use of

the alphabetic sequence in her work, I want to follow more along the path of Hill and see the

ways in which Leslie Stephens' literary influence, an influence that as we have already seen is

both intellectual and personal (and much of it established in Woolf's childhood, before Julia's

early death, and before Stephen's worst behavior) is negotiated in Woolf's portrayal of Mr.

Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*.

Leslie Stephen was born into a middle class family in 1832, and was educated at Eton

and Cambridge. After resigning from his priesthood at Trinity Hall Cambridge because of his

growing agnosticism, he remained a Fellow at the college and began gaining a voice in Victorian

intellectual culture. He wrote several books, including the deeply influential *The History of*

English Thought in the Eighteenth Century, and served as the editor *of Cornhill Magazine*. His

first wife was Harriet Thackeray, daughter of famed author William Makepeace Thackeray, and

he became known for his mountaineering. But Leslie Stephen is perhaps best remembered as

the first editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, the massive biographical encyclopedia

of English personages—deemed "a monument to the Victorian age"[41]—that still exists today,

now under the title of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.[42] As it is this linear,

encyclopedic undertaking which finds its way into *To the Lighthouse* in the form of Mr.

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[40] The first ten chapters of Lee's *Virginia Woolf*, describe Woolf's childhood in detail; see in particular Chapter 7 "Adolescence" (127-143), and Chapter 8, "Abuses" (144-156) for an account of the period after Julia Stephen's and Stella Duckworth's deaths.

[41] Noel Annan, *Leslie Stephen: The Godless Victorian* (New York: Random House, 1984), 87.

[42] For more on Leslie Stephen's personal and intellectual history, see Noel Annan's intellectual biography *Leslie Stephen: The Godless Victorian*, and Gillian Fenwick, *Leslie Stephen's Life in Letters: A Bibliographical Study* (Aldershot, England: Scolar Press, 1993).

Ramsay's alphabetic fixation, Stephens' work on the *Dictionary* will be the subject of the rest of this section.[43]

In 1882, the year of Virginia's birth, Stephen was approached by publisher George Smith and asked to serve as the editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Stephen eventually accepted the position and worked on the *Dictionary* as lead editor until 1891. The *Dictionary* was a constant source of struggle for Stephen. His letters from the time, collected by Frederick Maitland, give us a clear view of the many difficulties of assembling a massive encyclopedic work. At the beginning of the project, he writes that, "I have given up the Cornhill, and taken to the biographical dictionary, which will last me the rest of my life—if, that is, it succeeds in living at all. It is of British names exclusively, but I find that there are 900 A's to begin with, and God knows how many more."[44] The *Dictionary* was published alphabetically, with the first two volumes (Abbadie—Anne, and Annesley—Baird) appearing in 1885. Stephen served as both general editor and writer, and he reportedly penned 378 of the entries himself, including most of the entries on major writers.[45] The labor required to assemble an encyclopedic text was overwhelming; over the years, Stephen calls the dictionary "rather a humbug,"[46] refers to it as "the infernal dictionary,"[47] and describes his work on it as "drudgery."[48] In 1888, he writes to

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[43] For a history of the reference text and the conflation of the terms dictionary and encyclopedia, see Tom McArthur, *Words of Reference: Lexicography, Learning and Language from the Clay Table to the Computer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). See in particularly Chapter 3, "Reference and Revolution," 102-109.

[44] Leslie Stephen to Charles Eliot Norton, 25 December 1882, in *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*, ed. Frederick William Maitland (London: Duckworth and Co., 1910), 375-376.

[45] Annan, *Leslie Stephen*, 86.

[46] Stephen to Norton, 4 March 1883, in *Life and Letters*, 376.

[47] Stephen to G. Croom Robertson, 5 August 1883, in *Life and Letters*, 378.

[48] Stephen to Robertson, 4 April 1887, in *Life and Letters*, 391. In referring to his work as "drudgery," Stephen was likely referencing Samuel Johnson's famous definition of

his friend Charles Eliot Norton that "That damned thing goes on like a diabolical piece of machinery, always gaping for more copy, and I fancy at times that I shall be dragged into it and crushed out in slips."[49] It seems that for Stephen, the writing itself was not the most laborious part of the work; it was the intense, ongoing, editorial work of organization, choice, and negotiation with writers that would come to define his work on the dictionary.[50]

While working on the *Dictionary*, Stephen suffered several breakdowns from overwork; in 1888, he took on Sidney Lee as co-editor, and resigned from editorship completely in 1891. He later describes his work on the *Dictionary* in the *Mausoleum Book*, a private memoir written weeks after Julia Stephen's death for the audience of the Stephen children. Though the *Mausoleum Book* is focused mostly on Stephen's relationship with Julia—much of the book is practically hagiography—Stephen also addresses his work on the *Dictionary*: "it was a very laborious and what for me in particular was much worse, a very worrying piece of work." He goes on to explain: "It is one of my weaknesses that I cannot work slowly; I must, if I work at all, work at high pressure.... The dictionary refused either to die or to flourish. It became a burthen and yet, as I must confess, I took a pride in it and had a kind of dogged resolution to see it through as far as I could."[51] Stephens' self-proclaimed "dogged resolution" to make it through to the end of the *Dictionary* chimes with Mr. Ramsay's alphabetic quest in *To the Lighthouse*.

"lexicographer" in his *Dictionary of the English Language* as "a writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge." Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language...* Volume 2. (London: W Strahan, 1755), 37. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale.

[49] Stephen to Norton, 11 January 1888, in *Life and Letters*, 394.

[50] Annan, echoing Stephen, calls the process of choosing the dictionary's subjects a "nightmare;" for example, one clergyman wrote to Stephen with a list of 1400 hymn writers to include in the *Dictionary*. Annan, *Leslie Stephen*, 84.

[51] Leslie Stephen, *Sir Leslie Stephen's Mausoleum Book* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 86-87.

But whereas Mr. Ramsay gets stuck at his metaphorical Q, unable to make it to R, Leslie

Stephen resigned from his real-life alphabetic quest somewhere in the middle of H.[52]

As I have already noted, the *Hyde Park Gate News* reported on Leslie Stephen's

resignation from the *Dictionary*. The Stephen children were very much aware of their father's

work, and were particularly attuned to the toll it took on his mental and physical health. Years

after her father's death in the 1930s, Woolf blamed the *Dictionary* for her father's problems,

and located in it the cause of her own. In a letter to Ethel Smyth, Woolf describes a recent bout

of illness, and then writes: "Lord! What a bore! To think that my father's philosophy and the

Dictionary of National Biography cost me this! I never see those 68 black books without cursing

them for all the jaunts they've lost me."[53] The Stephen fondness for overwork has been well-

recorded, but that Woolf figures her mental illness specifically as an effect of the dictionary is

telling. The work that solidified her father's reputation and that informed her own for so many

years to come, that sparked her lifelong interest in biography and life-writing, Woolf also

figures as the root of her many illnesses.[54] In the *Dictionary of National Biography*, then, we

find both the impetus of some of Woolf's very earliest writing, but also the perceived catalyst of

her enduring struggles with mental illness. Woolf's figuration of the *Dictionary* here is

metonymic; its many volumes stand in for her father and his "tyrannical" ways more generally.

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[52] For more on the history of the *Dictionary,* see Robert Faber and Brian Harrison, "*The Dictionary of National Biography*: A Publishing History" in *Lives in Print: Biography and the Book Trade from the Middle Ages to the 21st Century*, ed. Robin Myers, Michael Harris, and Giles Mandelbrote (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2002), 171-192.

[53] Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Volume IV 1929-1931*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautman (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 145. Woolf seems to be counting the original 60 volumes (which finished publishing in 1900), along with the index and supplements that were published in later years, comprising 68 in total.

[54] See Zwerdling, "Mastering the Memoir," for more on the tradition of biography and autobiography in the Stephen family.

The *Dictionary* is thus a figure of ambivalence for Woolf—it is both the root of her own earliest

writing, and the (figurative) root of her illnesses, both a representation of her intellectual heir

and an emotionally over-determined object (or, more accurately, a series of objects). In the

following section, I will consider how this ambivalence, expressed particularly through the

alphabetic sequence, is played out through Mr. Ramsay's alphabetic fixation in *To the

Lighthouse*.

Mrs. Woolf and Mr. Ramsay

Mr. Ramsay, the patriarch and deeply frustrated philosopher of *To the Lighthouse*, uses the

alphabetic sequence as a metaphor for thought; "reaching" the end of it is his measure of

genius. In "The Window," the first of the novel's three sections, the narrative focalizes on Mr.

Ramsay as he departs from his wife and son James and goes out into the garden. Once he is

outside, Woolf writes that "he was safe, he was restored to his privacy."[55] The narrative voice

then comments on Mr. Ramsay's mind and engages what we will soon discover is the

character's private metaphor to describe his thought. Woolf writes:

> It was a splendid mind. For if thought is like the keyboard of a piano, divided into so
>
> many notes, or like the alphabet is ranged in twenty-six letters all in order, then his
>
> splendid mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly
>
> and accurately, until it had reached, say, the letter Q. He reached Q. Very few people in
>
> the whole of England ever reach Q. Here, stopping for one moment by the stone urn
>
> which held the geraniums, he saw, but now far, far away, like children picking up shells,

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[55] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Harvest Books, 1978), 53. Hereafter cited in
text.

divinely innocent and occupied with little trifles at their feet and somehow entirely

defenseless against a doom which he perceived, his wife and son, together, in the

window. They needed his protection; he gave it them. But after Q? What comes next?

After Q there are a number of letters the last of which is scarcely visible to mortal eyes,

but glimmers red in the distance. Z is only reached once by one man in a generation. Still,

if he could reach R it would be something. Here at least was Q. He dug his heels in at Q.

Q he was sure of. Q he could demonstrate. If Q then is Q—R—Here he knocked his pipe

out, with two or three resonant taps on the handle of the urn, and proceeded. "Then

R..." He braced himself. He clenched himself. (53-54)

This is only the introduction to Mr. Ramsay's alphabetic thinking; this passage in the garden

continues as Mr. Ramsay distinguishes between men like himself, "the steady goers of super-

human strength who, plodding and persevering, repeat the whole alphabet in order, twenty-six

letters in all from start to finish" (55) and the men of genius. Mr. Ramsay knows that he is not a

genius, that "he would never reach R" (55). But after all, only "one perhaps. One in a generation"

will ever make it to Z (56).[56] While at the beginning of this passage we might be unclear as to

whether this alphabetic metaphor belongs to the narration or to the character—whether it is

an instance of third person narration or free indirect discourse—by the passage's end, it is clear

that the metaphor has been generated by Mr. Ramsay himself; the quotation "Then R..." marks

it clearly as his own. And as the narrative continues, we have further access to Mr. Ramsay's

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[56] This aspect of Mr. Ramsay aligns quite closely to her view of her father. Woof writes of
Stephen "But was he a man of genius? No; that was not alas quite the case. 'Only a good
second class mind,' he once told me, as we walked around the croquet lawn at Fritham. And he
said he might have done well to be a scientist. This frustrated desire to be a man of genius, and
the knowledge that he was in truth not in the first flight.... these are qualities that break up the
fine steel engraving of the typical Cambridge intellectual." Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," 110.

mental stumbling through Woolf's continual use of free indirect discourse; "R is then—what is R?" (54); "in that flash of darkness he heard people saying—he was a failure—that R was beyond him. He would never reach R. On to R, once more. R—" (54). The alphabetic metaphor is thus generated by the character and authorized by the novel's narration.

The end of this passage is not the end of Mr. Ramsay's alphabetic pondering; he will continue to refer to alphabetic sequence throughout "The Window." Even when, late in the section, he comes to the conclusion that "it didn't matter a damn who reached Z" (179), that the world can be understood via this metaphor is never in doubt for the character. Mr. Ramsay's alphabet, then, is a metaphor for understanding the world through logical means. The alphabetic sequence is a linear, metonymic, and teleological model for thinking through and organizing a closed set of information; the alphabet has a clear beginning and an anticipated, if (for Mr. Ramsay) rarely-reached endpoint. The alphabetic sequence is also a widely agreed-upon, and, as far as Mr. Ramsay is concerned, a universal and impersonal structure. In Susan Stewart's words, it is the "convention of conventions;[57] in Marshall McLuhan's it is "the technology that has been the means of creating 'civilized man.'"[58] Mr. Ramsay's "plodding and persevering" through the alphabet confirms the implicit belief of the encyclopediaist: that the world is ripe for organization and is wholly comprehendible, and thus civilizable, if one can only get to Z—whatever Z may be.

Mr. Ramsay's quest is thus Leslie Stephen's metaphorized. In this strange move, Woolf abstracts her father's lifework. Mr. Ramsay never tells us what the letters of his alphabet stand

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[57] Susan A. Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 190.
[58] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet, 1966), 86.

for; in fact we know very little about the content of his actual work—just that he sees himself as

a second class thinker, and that, in the words of his son Andrew, he's interested in "subject and

object and the nature of reality" (38). Andrew's understanding of his father's work, which

comes to us by way of Lily, is summed up in an enigmatic example which gestures towards

epistemological questions: "think of a kitchen table," he tells Lily, "when you're not there" (38).

While a number of critics, most notably Ann Banfield, use this moment as a jumping off point

for an investigation of the novel's philosophical concerns—Banfield will suggest that *To the*

Lighthouse has a "philosophically inflected aesthetic"[59]—it is notable that Mr. Ramsay's

alphabetic metaphor remains an abstraction. Though we can surmise from Andrew's comment

that Mr. Ramsay is interested in questions of phenomenology and epistemology, the content of

his philosophy is barely is a concern of the novel. Indeed, we only ever hear about the content

of Mr. Ramsay's philosophy indirectly by way of Lily, who remembers touching on it in an

earlier conversation with Andrew. We are thus at a remove from Mr. Ramsay's actual

philosophy in *To the Lighthouse*, which is to say that we never discover what A, B, and C mean

to the character. We know much more about his frustration regarding his philosophical career

and his status as a non-genius than we do about his actual philosophy. What is of interest to the

novel, then, is not the content of Mr. Ramsay's philosophy, but the form that his thinking

takes.[60]

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[59] Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 54. For Banfield's reading of Andrew's comment about the table, see pages 49-55.

[60] See also: Paul Tolliver Brown, "Relativity, Quantum Physics, and Consciousness in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse,*" *Journal of Modern Literature* 32.3 (2009): 39–62. For a contrasting perspective, see Michael Lackey, "Modernist Anti-Philosophicalism and Virginia Woolf's Critique of Philosophy," *Journal of Modern Literature* 29.4 (2006): 76-98. Lackey argues that "using

Mr. Ramsay's alphabetic quest has drawn the attention of a number of critics, many of whom have proposed gendered readings of Mr. Ramsay's alphabetic fixation. All who have produced these readings see it as a particularly masculine endeavor.[61] Rachel Bowlby, most notably, has described Mr. Ramsay's sequential, linear fixation by opposing it with Mrs. Ramsay's frequent knitting in the novel. Mrs. Ramsay's way of understanding the world, as well as the novel's, Bowlby argues, is different than Mr. Ramsay's "single line" of the alphabetic sequence; Mrs. Ramsay and the novel both see the world through "multiple layers and complex crossings and intersections" and "without a place of mastery, and resembling a network or imbrication of many times, places, memories, and fantasies.[62] Though she doesn't use the term, Bowlby sees knitting as a kind of networked way of thinking, which she opposes to the linearity of Mr. Ramsay's alphabetic sequence. For Bowlby, this difference is explicitly gendered; she even uses it to make a greater claim about "what makes modernism in a sense 'feminine.'"[63] A number of other critics have also read Mr. Ramsay's quest in gendered terms. Sandra M. Donaldson, for example, reads it through the terminology of symbolic logic, which, she argues,

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philosophy to analyze and interpret [Woolf's] corpus places the critic at odds with Woolf s political and aesthetic agenda." (76).

[61] Joan Retallack provides a useful gloss on the kind of masculine and feminine modes that many critics see at work in *To the Lighthouse*. She writes: "Masculine and Feminine have long been agonistically defined. In the Möbius comic strip that seems to be our cultural default mode, irrational Feminine is the swerve (or swish) away from stolid Masculine rationalism; Masculine is heroic resistance to the Feminine." She goes on to argue (and it is this statement that is useful in the context of Mr. Ramsay), that the fact that the masculine/feminine binary is "an agonistic, dynamical attractive/repellent system means that it's fluid. It can quiver if not quake at the slightest provocation. Its patterns are subject to startling rearrangement." Joan Retallack, *The Poethical Wager* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 104-105.

[62] Rachel Bowlby, *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf.* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 67. For another reading along these lines with psychoanalytic inflections, see Elizabeth Abel, *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 56-57.

[63] Ibid.

Woolf sets in opposition to Lily Briscoe's more feminized painting.[64] More recently, Allyson

Booth has related Mr. Ramsay's symbolic trek through the alphabet to the discourse of heroism,

and in particular to the tragic deaths of Antarctic explorers Robert Falcon Scott and his team,

whom she argues Mr. Ramsay references in the alphabet passage.[65] What remains constant in

all of these pieces is the insistence on the masculine nature of Mr. Ramsay's metaphorical quest,

as well as its opposition to other, more feminized modes of approaching the world, manifested

through Mrs. Ramsay's knitting, or through Lily Briscoe's wholeness of vision at the end of the

novel.[66]

While I do not deny that Mr. Ramsay's alphabetic quest is masculinized, I do wish to

suggest that it is not *only* thus, for Mr. Ramsay's alphabetical metaphor for understanding the

world is analogous to what Woolf will set out as her "philosophy" in "A Sketch of the Past."

While many critics have compared and contrasted members of the Ramsay and Stephen

families, the particular pairing of Woolf and Mr. Ramsay is territory less well-tread. Instead of

aligning Woolf with Lily or Mrs. Ramsay, and thus with a "feminine" worldview akin to the

networks of Mrs. Ramsay's knitting, or to an idea of aesthetic wholeness achieved by Lily, we

might align Woolf with the philosophy exemplified by Mr. Ramsay's alphabet, which I will go on

to argue is not simply the philosophy of the sequence, but the philosophy of a *totality*. As I

continue, I will argue that the alphabetic sequence itself is not evidence of Mr. Ramsay's

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[64] Sandra M. Donaldson, "Where Does Q Leave Mr. Ramsay?," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 11.2 (1992): 329–336.

[65] Allyson Booth, "Mr. Ramsay, Robert Scott Falcon, and Heroic Death," *Mosaic* 40.4 (2007): 135-150.

[66] See also Banfield's reading of this passage, in which she argues that "it is the female mind which leaps and lumps." This is a reference to Mr. Ramsay's position that it is only the genius who can "lump all the letters together in one flash" (55) and comprehend the totality of the alphabetic sequence. Banfield, *The Phantom Table*, 191.

narrow-minded model of the world, as has so often been suggested, but that the alphabet is as much a trope of wholeness as it is an exemplar of sequentiality. The alphabet is a closed form and may on the surface seem restrictive—it will always begin at A and end at Z—but even so, it has more in common with the more "feminized" models of thought in the novel that critics have held up in opposition to it. The alphabet is not just about sequence; it's about a gestalt of order, and in this sense, the alphabet has much more in common with Mrs. Ramsay's knitting and Lily's painting than has been previously suggested.

Woolf's investment in the abstract idea of order is most notable in her autobiographical writings. Perhaps her most well-known moment exploration of order comes in "A Sketch of the Past," in which she lays out her theory of "some real thing behind appearances." Woolf's begins by explaining that "shock" is what impels her to write. She continues:

> And so I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not, as I thought as a child, simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character together. From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at

any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern;

that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a

work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the

truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is

no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the

music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock.[67]

This passage tells us a few important things about Woolf's "philosophy," a philosophy that, I

would argue, is more akin to Mr. Ramsay's than many critics would like to admit. In it, we see

that Woolf imagines a kind of binary world that is split between appearances and reality,

between "the cotton wool of daily life" and "some real thing behind" it. This "real thing" turns

out to be order or pattern—Woolf uses the words interchangeably—and the way for Woolf to

"reveal" this order is to "put it into words," to articulate it in language. Woolf does not believe

in creation *ex nihilo*; for her, writing is a mode of revealing something that already exists.

Writing, indeed art more generally, is about exposure, articulation, arrangement, rather than

creation from nothing.

In slightly different terms, then, order is *a priori* for Woolf. She doesn't create order; she

reveals it. Order is not personal; it is outside of the self, but the "revelation" of order is a deeply

personal affair. There may be an *a priori* reality, but Woolf writes that "it is only by putting it

into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it

gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed

parts together." The revelation of order that comes from constructing a character, for example,

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[67] Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," 72.

involves the creation of a whole, not just the exposure of "severed parts." The aesthetic act, for

Woolf, is an ability to see past parts, toward a whole, to see the larger patterns that account

not just for a scene or character, but to make visible that "real thing" behind appearances. And

this process is not easy, as Woolf's articulation of her philosophy is steeped in the language of

bodily pain. Interestingly, however, the pain dissipates when the aesthetic totality has been

achieved; the creative act is, for Woolf, a sublimation. The stakes of art for Woolf are thus high:

in the face of pain, the artist's job is to assemble and fuse severed parts into a totality, to reveal

the "pattern"—the order—from "behind the cotton wool of daily life."

While Woolf doesn't use the alphabetic sequence to lay out her philosophy of order in

"A Sketch of the Past," of course, Mr. Ramsay's much-maligned metaphor may help bring

together the forms of the philosopher's fictional quest and Woolf's actual one. Though Mr.

Ramsay may get stuck at Q, and though he may never reach the R that begins his own name, his

idea of the world as a collection of letters—of separate (we might even say "severed") parts—

chimes with Woolf's own statements about order and wholeness. As we can see in "A Sketch of

the Past," for Woolf, order is not the unending sequentiality of, say, the number line that

stretches on until infinity. Woolf's idea of order—the pattern that she reveals behind the cotton

wool of everyday life—is limited, determined; it's a closed, not an open set, and it can be

assembled by the ordering of its parts. The alphabetic sequence always consists of twenty-six

parts, always in the same order, and we can see it both as a sequence of disparate entities—A,

B, C and so on—but also as a figure of aesthetic wholeness. The sequence, when materialized

as aesthetic form, whether in a children's poem such as "An Easy Alphabet for Infants," or as

the organizing system of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, always asks: what is the relationship of part to part? Of part to whole?

Mr. Ramsay is condemned to see the world as a series of severed parts; he sees the individual letters, and not the sequence as a whole structure. But the genius, in his estimation, can "lump all the letters together in one flash" (55), and not only "reach Z," but comprehend the alphabet—and the world—as a totality. And when we consider Woolf's statements in "A Sketch of the Past," in Mr. Ramsay's terms, what becomes clear is that Mr. Ramsay's philosophy—or, more accurately, the *form* of Mr. Ramsay's philosophy—is akin to Woolf's own. The fusing of parts to make a whole, an orderly approach to understanding and revealing reality, a sense that the world is comprehendible if one can get to Z (or put the severed parts together): this is not just Mr. Ramsay's approach to understanding the world, nor is it only the foundation of Leslie Stephen's encyclopedic undertaking. This philosophy is Woolf's as well as theirs.

This being said, there are some important distinctions to draw between Woolf and her character. In her essay "Modern Fiction," Woolf is against what we might call simplistic sequential thinking; she famously writes that "life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end."[68] As we see in "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf approaches the world through the idea of holistic patterning, but what the earlier essay reveals is that she doesn't conceive of pattern in terms of the linear form of the sequence—pattern is not the gig lamps, symmetrically arranged. Woolf draws a distinction between pattern and sequence in these essays, but what I want to suggest is that the alphabetic sequence is not any

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[68] Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction" in *The Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt, 1984), 150.

old sequence, that it is not a series of gig lamps, or, at the very least, that it is not only thus. The

alphabetic sequence is a closed aesthetic form that functions as much as a symbol of totality as

it does as a symbol of sequence. The alphabet is not the infinite number line; the alphabet is a

culturally resonant figure that stands in for the sum total of everything—just think of the

connotations of the phrase "from A to Z." Woolf may resist the idea of easy sequentiality in

"Modern Fiction," but to read this resistance into her characterization of Mr. Ramsay is to miss

the complexities of the alphabetic sequence as it operates both as a form and metaphor in *To

the Lighthouse*.

What has been overlooked in the case of Mr. Ramsay, then, is that the alphabetic

metaphor functions dually: it is a figure of both sequence *and* totality, of ordered parts *and* a

whole, and this is as true of Mr. Ramsay's personal alphabetic metaphor as it is for the abstract

idea of the alphabetic sequence in general. Mr. Ramsay, who is explicitly not a genius, knows

that he cannot comprehend both aspects of the alphabet. He has "no sort of difficulty in

running over those letters one by one, " but cannot comprehend the alphabet as totality—he is

stuck seeing the alphabet as if it were only a series of gig lamps, symmetrically arranged. But

Woolf, by "putting into words," by "put[ting] the severed parts together"—in other words, by

articulating her aesthetic vision—aims to achieve the kind of wholeness that is not available to

a second-class thinker like Mr. Ramsay. The alphabetic sequence, an *a priori* sequence of

severed parts ripe to be made whole (by an artist, writer, composer, philosopher), is not just a

metaphor for the way Mr. Ramsay thinks about the world; it is Woolf's philosophy as well. The

difference between Woolf and her fictional character, then, lies not in their outlook or

philosophy—it lies in their *capacity*. In Mr. Ramsay's terms, Woolf is the "genius" who can

apprehend the whole alphabetic sequence in "one flash," while Mr. Ramsay remains the poor

man who must trudge through the alphabet, "plodding and persevering" sequentially with what

Leslie Stephen once referred to as "dogged resolution." Woolf doesn't disdain Mr. Ramsay's

alphabet; through the writing of fiction, she aims to surpass him at his own game—to articulate

the totality of the alphabet "in one flash," rather than to plod through the sequence of A, B, C.

Woolf and Historical and Literary Order

Woolf's concern with order and her sense that she is part of a totality is not limited to her

abstract "philosophy" in "A Sketch of the Past." In fact, this sense of an order "behind

appearances" undergirds much of her non-fiction writing, especially her writing about literature.

However, much of the criticism on Woolf and her conception of order erroneously focuses on

one of Woolf's statements about the *disruption* of historical order: that "on or about December

1910 human character changed."[69] This declaration from "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" has

become one of the axioms of modernism, and it has been used by many critics as a kind of

shorthand for the (mistaken) idea that Woolf saw herself as a radical innovator. Lumping Woolf

in with Eliot and Pound, Carola M. Kaplan and Anne B. Simpson, for example, suggest that

Woolf's "brazen proclamation" is a sign of the modernists' desire to "start afresh—free of the

legacy of their Victorian forebears, free of the unfulfilled doctrine of social progress, free of the

anxiety and unrest at the beginning of the new century."[70] While Kaplan and Simpson cast

doubt on the *ability* of the modernists to break free, that they desire to do so is never in

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[69] Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" in *The Captain's Death Bed, and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950), 96.
[70] Carola M. Kaplan and Anne B. Simpson, introduction to *Seeing Double: Revisioning Edwardian and Modernist Literature* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), xiii.

question. In recent years, modernist criticism has challenged this assumption and others like it, and critics have paid particular attention to Woolf and her "Victorian forebears." Steve Ellis, most notably, has contested assumptions about Woolf's aesthetic radicality, and disputed the power of Woolf's claim about December 1910, calling it "notorious."[71] The line actually comes from a moment of "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" concerned not with art, but with social relations between homeowners and servants, and Woolf undercuts the drama of the statement in the following sentences.[72] The change that Woolf sees is gradual, not eruptive, and her time scheme is arbitrary, not exact. The statement that is so often held up as a modernist desire for rupture—along with other modernist dicta such as Pound's "make it new"—proves to be anything but.[73]

By building on the previous section's argument about Woolf's philosophy, which I suggest we see metaphorized in the figure of Mr. Ramsay's alphabet, this section will consider Woolf's insistence on a kind of historical order, and expose the ways in which her philosophy manifests itself in her theories of literature. I will go on to argue that for Woolf, literature never exists in a vacuum, and that, though she was very much aware of her innovations, the idea of aesthetic rupture—or "start[ing] afresh" for Woolf was impossible, not to mention undesirable. While the alphabet itself will not come into play in this section, I will suggest that the *structure*

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[71] Steve Ellis, *Virginia Woolf and the Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5.

[72] She continues: "I am not saying that one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered, or that a hen had laid an egg. The change was not sudden and definite like that. But a change there was, nevertheless; and, since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910." Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," 196.

[73] For a history of the idea of novelty, as well as the history behind the "make it new" axiom, see Michael North, *Novelty: A History of the New* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), particularly Chapter 6, "Making it New: Novelty and Aesthetic Modernism."

of the alphabetic sequence—a totality built of sequential parts—undergirds Woolf's thinking

about literature and historical continuity, and that the logic of the *a priori* pattern structures

not just her literary criticism, but her novels as well. Woolf may declare that "life is not a series

of gig lamps symmetrically arranged" in "Modern Fiction," but much of her other writing

reveals a deep investment in historical order. In particular, I will build on Steve Ellis's work on

Woolf's relationship with her Victorian past—a past that manifests in her work as literary,

societal, and personal. Ellis labels Woolf a "Post-Victorian," and uses this term to mark her

"complex relationship of difference and debt" with her Victorian past.[74] I began in earlier

sections to trace Woolf's ambivalent relationship to her Victorian past via her relationship with

her father, but in this section, I will build on Ellis's work, and consider how Woolf conceives of

the literary past in aesthetic terms in her criticism and novels.

In her non-fiction writing, Woolf frequently uses linear metaphors to describe her

relationship with the past in terms of her personal and literary history; avenues and rivers make

many appearances in her work. In "A Sketch of the Past," for example, Woolf writes that "I see

it—the past—as an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes, emotions."[75] Here she figures

her personal past as a linear whole made up of sequential parts—scenes, emotions—all leading

up to the present moment. But Woolf's metaphors for the past are even most potent in her

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[74] Ellis, *Virginia Woolf and the Victorians*, 1. For other recent books about Woolf's relationship with the past, literary and otherwise, see Emily Blair, *Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002); Jane De Gay, *Virginia Woolf's Novels And the Literary Past* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006); Andrea Zemgulys, *Modernism and the Locations of Literary Heritage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Older considerations of Woolf and literary heritage include Perry Meisel, *The Absent Father: Virginia Woolf and Walter Pater* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) and Janis M. Paul, *The Victorian Heritage of Virginia Woolf: The External World in Her Novels* (Norman: Pilgrim Books, 1987).
[75] Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," 67.

descriptions of literary history. In the essay "Reading" from 1919, written many years before "A Sketch of the Past" and before all of her major novels, Woolf describes her sense of literary history with the metaphor of the avenue:

> There were circumstances, perhaps, to turn one's mind to the past. Always being the voice, the figure, the fountain, there seemed to stretch an immeasurable avenue, that ran to a point of other voices, figures, fountains which tapered out indistinguishably upon the furthest horizon. If I looked down at my book I could see Keats and Pope behind him, and then Dryden and Sir Thomas Browne—hosts of them merging in the mass of Shakespeare, behind whom, if one peered long enough, some shapes of men in pilgrims' dress emerged, Chaucer perhaps, and again—who was it? some uncouth poet scarcely able to syllable his words; and so they died away.[76]

This remarkable passage figures not just the past, but the specifically literary past, as an "avenue"—a linear, and, as Jane de Gay has argued, a spatial and non-hierarchical figure.[77] For de Gay and for Woolf, sequentiality is not a form of hierarchy, and even this (seemingly) "immeasurable avenue" has an endpoint. Woolf imagines the beginning of literary history by way of the figure of the "uncouth poet scarcely able to syllable his words," and thus begins her version of literary history with the birth of metrical, which is also to say, patterned, language. This originary figure may be shadowy, but he exists for Woolf nonetheless. She sees literary history as non-hierarchical but sequential, as having a hazy but real beginning.

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[76] Virginia Woolf, "Reading," in *The Captain's Death Bed, and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950), 152-53.
[77] Jane de Gay, *Virginia Woolf's Novels And the Literary Past* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 10.

Woolf's conception of literary history changes in some ways throughout her career, though the idea of an ordered and comprehendible whole remains. While she may avoid creating hierarchies between the writers of the present and the past based solely on their location in literary history, she nonetheless traces a theory of influence between them.[78] In the late essay "The Leaning Tower," Woolf writes that "books descend from books as families descend from families. Some descend from Jane Austen; others from Dickens. They resemble their parents, as human children resemble their parents; yet they differ as children differ, and revolt as children revolt."[79] The image of the single avenue from "Reading" is morphed here into multiple avenues—into generational lines of descent. But later in the essay, Woolf will describe the group of writers whose careers were underway before World War I whom she calls the "unconscious inheritors of a great tradition."[80] These are writers who, if we "put a page of their writing under the magnifying glass and you will see, far away in the distance, the Greeks, the Romans; coming nearer, the Elizabethans; coming nearer still Dryden, Swift, Voltaire, Jane Austen, Dickens, Henry James."[81] Though Woolf's view of literary history morphs in the twenty years or so between "Reading" and "The Leaning Tower," the idea of an orderly tradition of

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[78] This is not to say that Woolf never creates hierarchies in her criticism; in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," she famously distinguishes between her contemporaries, holding the "Georgian" writers above the "Edwardians." Woolf, "Modern Fiction," 150.

[79] Virginia Woolf, "The Leaning Tower" in *The Moment, and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 130.

[80] Ibid., 139.

[81] Ibid. Woolf goes on to suggest that the next generation of writers—naming poets such as Auden, MacNeice, and Spender—have had similar educations as the "unconscious inheritors of a great tradition—but that they have always had "the threat of war" (140) in their writing. As such, she argues, these poets may aim to "destroy bourgeois society," (145) but they will never undo their bourgeois learning—nor their knowledge of great traditions. In Woolf's words: "They are flogging a dead or dying horse because a living horse, if flogged, would kick them off its back" (145). Ibid.

influence does not. Even in the second, more-committedly familial (which is also to say,

generative) model of literary history, "revolt[s]" are part of the sequence. Woolf figures literary

influence not just in terms of sameness, but in terms of difference, and the larger sequential

structure of literary history is, for Woolf, continuous. The sequence is a structure—or totality—

that incorporates ambivalence.

What we find in both of these passages, then, is a sense of what Steve Ellis calls "the

pervasive Woolfian insistence on historical continuity."[82] Rather than seeing herself as a

(would-be) overturner of aesthetic tradition as some critics have suggested, Woolf sees herself

as a part of tradition. Innovation—or "revolt"—for Woolf is built into the sequential structure

of literary history, and it is what distinguishes newer books from their forbears, while not

necessarily connoting value or hierarchy. Thus we find in Woolf's conception of literary history

an anticipation of the theories of critics of the avant-garde such as Pierre Bourdieu, who argues

that "for bold strokes of innovation or revolutionary research to have some chance of even

being conceived, it is necessary for them to exist in a potential state at the heart of the system

of already realized possibles, like structural lacunae, which appear to wait for and call for

fulfillment, like potential directions of development, possible avenues of research."[83] While

Woolf in these essays is clearly working with a different vocabulary, her idea that there is a

system or totality—what she calls a "pattern"—that structures the world (and in these essays in

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[82] Ellis, *Virginia Woolf and the Victorians*, 5.
[83] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford University Press, 1996), 235.

particular, the thrust of literary history) aligns with later sociological critiques of the system of art by Bourdieu and other critics of the avant-garde such as Peter Bürger.[84]

Woolf's idea of an *a priori* order that needs to be revealed rather than created is not just an abstract theory. In fact, this structure of an ordered totality undergirds much of her fiction, especially the works for which she is best known. These novels are deeply schematic, and not only are many interested in sequence in and of itself, they are also particularly interested in figuring the relationship between part and whole. When Woolf was in the planning stages of writing *To the Lighthouse*, for example, she conceived of the novel's form schematically. She began envisioning the novel in 1924 and commenced writing in the summer of 1925. As she was sketching her ideas for the novel in her diary during that July, she wrote:

> It might contain all characters boiled down; & childhood; & then this impersonal thing, which I'm dared to do by my friends, the flight of time, & the consequent break of unity in my design. That passage (I conceive the book in 3 parts: 1. at the drawing room window; 2. seven years passed; 3. the voyage:) interests me very much. A new problem like that breaks fresh ground in one's mind; prevents the regular ruts.[85]

For Woolf, the "problem" of *To the Lighthouse* was how to assemble these severed parts into a novel, how to subsume a "break of unity" into a greater whole. In August of 1925, Woolf described the novel's structure in spatial terms in her notebook, writing that it consisted of "two blocks joined by a corridor," and drew an accompanying image that resembles a barbell.[86]

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[84] See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis, MN; University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

[85] Woolf, *Diary, Vol. III,* 36. Entry for 20 July 1925.

[86] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse: The Original Holograph Draft*, ed. Susan Dick (London: Hogarth Press, 1983), 48.

By thinking of "Time Passes" not as a break between two days, but as a years-long, narrow corridor connecting them, Woolf was able to, in her own words "put the severed parts together," and to "discove[r] what belongs to what."

This is evidence of schematic thinking in but one of Woolf's novels. We might think of her other novels in these terms as well, and see patterns across her oeuvre: the parallel characters Clarissa and Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the tripartite structure of *To the Lighthouse* (which also features the triangular relationship of the Ramsays and Lily Briscoe), the characters of *The Waves* arranged as if six spokes of a wheel around the empty center of Percival, the bifurcation in and of *Orlando*. For Woolf, order is a virtue, and it is this patterned totality—what Woolf calls the "wholeness," that she makes out of "severed parts"—that aligns her both with her father's lifework and the metaphor of her fictionalized Mr. Ramsay. I suggested earlier that we try to understand Mr. Ramsay in light of his whole philosophy, not just in light of his getting stuck at R. Mr. Ramsay admires "the genius" who can move past rote sequentiality, and who can "lump all the letters together in one flash" (55) and see the alphabet for the totality that it is. I have already suggested that we might see Woolf as Mr. Ramsay's genius, but now I want to now be more specific: comprehending the alphabet "in one flash" means understanding not just knowledge itself, but the system of knowledge, whether that system is as small as a novel's schema, or as large as the breadth of literary history. What Mr. Ramsay and Woolf ultimately value is not so much slogging through the knowledge contained from A to Z, but understanding the larger system that contains them all.

Vita's "Alphabetical System"

In the years 1924-1927—in the period before, during, and just after Woolf's writing of *To the Lighthouse*—the alphabetic sequence took on another valence in the author's life. During this time, Woolf was involved in a romantic relationship with Vita Sackville-West, one of Hogarth Press' authors. For years Woolf and Sackville-West maintained a long and intimate correspondence, and Woolf's letters to Sackville-West during their separation of 1926 while Sackville-West was travelling abroad with her husband, the diplomat Harold Nicolson, are some of the most revealing of all of her personal writings.

As is clear to even a casual reader of their correspondence, Sackville-West enjoyed writing in list form. A number of her letters from different points in her relationship with Woolf include alphabetically-ordered and/or numbered lists, which cover topics ranging from the mundane to the exceptional. For example, see this representative letter from Sackville-West to Woolf from the beginning months of their friendship, dated November 6, 1924:

My dear Virginia,

I came to Tavistock Square today. I went upstairs and rang your bell—I went downstairs and rang your bell. Nothing but dark inhospitable stairs confronted me. So I went away disconsolate. I wanted

(a) to see you

(b) to ask you whether any copies of our joint progeny had been sold, and if so how many.

(c) to ask you for some more circulars.

(d) to ask you to sign two of your books which my mother had just been out to

buy.

(e) to be forgiven.

I came away with all these wants unappeased.

Now I am going back to my mud til December 1st when I remove to Knole.

I await reviews in some trepidation.

I got a nice letter from Raymond Mortimer.

Yours ever

Vita[87]

Woolf and Sackville-West had met earlier that year, and this letter from early on in their

relationship deals in both business and flirtation. Sackville-West's references to their "joint

progeny"—her book *Seducers in Ecuador*—and her "unappeased" wants are coyly sexual.[88] Far

from an ordered list of cold determinism, the alphabetic sequence in Sackville-West's letter is a

generative and playful form. It is convention means of organizing thought, but there is no sense

of grim teleology in her lines; in this personal alphabet used for personal causes, there is no

need to reach Z. The entries on Sackville-West's list are anaphoric, each beginning with the

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[87] Vita Sackville-West, to Virginia Woolf, 6 November 1924, in *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Louise DeSalvo and Mitchell A. Leaska (London: Hutchinson, 1984), 61.
[88] In an earlier letter, Woolf expresses her excitement about publishing *Seducers in Ecuador*: "I am very glad we are going to publish it, and extremely proud and indeed touched, with my childlike dazzled affection for you, that you should dedicate it to me." Woolf to Sackville-West, 15 September 1924, *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*, 59.

construction "to [verb]," and these repetitions lend the list a sense of momentum-building jocularity, rather than the "dogged resolution" that Mr. Ramsay experiences.

Sackville-West's lists became a running joke between the two writers; in September 1925, Woolf wrote a note to Sackville-West that mentions and then mimics her "alphabetical system":

My dear Vita,

For a famous novelist, I don't think you show much acumen in dealing with the awful situation of Friday.

I may state categorically in your own alphabetical system that:

   (a) neither of the Wolves suspected you for a moment of wishing to put them off

   (b) far from being officious, they thought the offer the natural instinct of a generous heart which

   (c) they would certainly have accepted if

       (1) if it had been a fine day

       (2) or Mr Woolf had been unable to go by train.[89]

The sub-entries of the letter continue (up to 16) and the letter finally ends when Woolf questions whether this letter-writing style is "clearer than the other."[90] For Woolf, the "alphabetical system" is not neat or uniform; Woolf uses alphabetical, and then numerical order linearly, but not evenly or repetitively as does Sackville-West. Whereas Sackville-West's list from November 1924 is anaphoric, and each of its lines is a complete thought—an "unappeased" want—unto itself, Woolf's list, in contrast, is committedly narrative.

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[89] Woolf to Sackville-West, ? September 1925. *Letters, Vol. III,* 215-216.
[90] Ibid., 216.

As Woolf continues her letter, she even stops separating out the entries in list form and embeds them in continuous prose. The list ends: "(13) much affection from Virginia Woolf who thinks (15) Mrs Nicolson one of the nicest women she (16) has ever met."[91] As this point, the list is so integrated into the prose that it's barely a list anymore; the numbers don't even divide the sentence at its clauses. Woolf's use of Sackville-West's "alphabetical system," which in truth is really an alphanumeric system, is not an investment in linearity or clarity; it's a sign of intimacy, of playful ventriloquism. While both women's use of the alphabetic sequence in their letters shows their interest in the idea of order, their alphabetical lists are a far cry from the sort of rigid thinking that so many have seen in Mr. Ramsay's alphabetic fixation. While I do not want to suggest that we go as far as seeing Sackville-West, instead of Leslie Stephen, as a precursor to Mr. Ramsay based on an alphabetic in-joke, I do want to argue that reading Mr. Ramsay in the context of this private language between Woolf and Sackville-West helps us to understand the stakes of the character's alphabetic metaphor more fully.

As I have already noted, Woolf began writing *To the Lighthouse* in the summer of 1925. She became ill that August, and then worked on the novel only intermittently that fall. In December, she spent a weekend with Sackville-West at her home in Long Barn where their romance intensified. Woolf resumed working on *To the Lighthouse* in earnest in January 1926, and Sackville-West left London for a months-long trip to the Mediterranean, Egypt, India, and Persia on January 20th. This separation was a catalyst for some of the pair's most lovely, and most well-known love letters. While abroad, Woolf tells Sackville-West that she is writing her novel quickly; in a letter dated January 26, she writes that "to tell you the truth, I have been

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[91] This is not a typo; Woolf seems to have forgotten "(14)" in this list.

very excited, writing. I have never written so fast… I write quick—all in a splash then feel, thank God, that's over."[92] In the same week that Woolf writes this letter, she also writes the passages of *To the Lighthouse* that detail Mr. Ramsay's alphabetic fixation.[93] Meanwhile, Sackville-West, now arrived in Egypt, was writing another letter in her "alphabetical system" to Woolf.

Dated January 29, 1926, the letter begins:

The only way I can deal with Egypt is as Molly MacCarthy did with Christmas: alphabetically. Amon, Americans, alabaster, Arabs; bromides, buffaloes, beggars, Bronx; camels, crocodiles, colossi, Cook's; donkeys, dust, dahabeeahs, dragomen, dervishes, desert; Egyptians, Evian; fezzes, fellaheen, feluccas, flies, fleas; Germans, goats, granite; hotels, hieroglyphics, hoopoes, Horus, hawkes; Isis, imshi, irrigation, ignorance; jibbahs; kites, Kinemas, Kodaks; lavatories, lotus, Levantines; mummies, mud, millionaires; Nubia, Nile; opthalmia, Osiris, obsidian, obelisks; palms, pyramids, parrokeets; quarries; Rameses, ruins; sunsets, sarcophagi, steamers, soux, sand, shadoofs, stinks, Sphinx; temples, tourists, trams, Tut-ankh-amen; Uganda; vultures, Virginia; water-bullocks, warts; Xerxes, Xenophon; yaout; zest (my own).[94]

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[92] Woolf to Sackville-West, 26 January 1926. *Letters, Vol. III,* 232.

[93] Woolf did not date all of her writing in the manuscript of *To the Lighthouse*, so it is impossible to date the Mr. Ramsay alphabet passages exactly. However, the Mr. Ramsay passages are bracketed by other dated sections marked as January 24th and January 31st, so it's safe to say that Woolf wrote the Mr. Ramsay passages sometime during this week. See Woolf, *To the Lighthouse: The Original Holograph Draft*, 60-69.

[94] Sackville-West to Woolf, 29 January 1926. *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*, 102-103. Molly [Mary] MacCarthy was a writer and friend of Sackville-West and the Woolfs. For an article that considers this letter among references to Egypt in *To the Lighthouse*, see Heidi Stalla, "William Bankes: Echoes of Egypt in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*," *Woolf Studies Annual* 14 (2008), 21-34.

In this tour-de-force list, Sackville-West paints a picture of Egypt that is chock-full. This alphabetical list reminds us not so much of the lists in Sackville-West's correspondence with Woolf, but of children's books that employ the alphabet array form that the young Virginia used in "An Easy Alphabet for Infants." In this instance, M is for mummies and N is for the Nile. Though the letter is not a strict alphabet array (Sackville-West does not announce that "M is for" or "N is for" anything) there is a palpable sense of totality in this alphabetized list, which features at least one entry for each letter of the alphabet, even when it seems a bit of stretch (consider "Uganda"). It is this sense of totality that Sackville-West's list shares with the alphabet array, which, according to Patricia Crain, is marked by an "aesthetics of accumulation and accretion" and "produc[es] a world that is knowable, graspable, and most strikingly, attainable."[95]

By suggesting that "the only way" for herself to "deal" with Egypt is "alphabetically," which is also in this case to say, arbitrarily, Sackville-West is admitting an unfamiliarity with Egypt. She doesn't have a natural taxonomy or system for comprehending the country, so she chooses the non-hierarchical alphabetic sequence to organize and transmit her impressions to Woolf, her absent addressee. This system is not perfectly executed; all of the words may be grouped by their initial letters, but within these categories, the words are not alphabetized. "Nubia," for example, precedes "Nile," and "sunsets" precede "sarcophagi." This suggests that Sackville-West did not conceive of the list and then alphabetize it in her letter to Woolf; this list was most likely written (more or less) alphabetically, rather than written, alphabetized, and rewritten. Even if its adherence to alphabetical order is precarious, Sackville-West's list, like all

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[95] Crain, *The Story of A*, 93, 90.

alphabetical lists, has a leveling effect on that which it organizes. The sequence, even imperfectly and irregularly employed, refuses to create a hierarchy between items on the list, and thus Sackville-West effectively reduces Egypt to a series of arbitrarily-ordered, arbitrarily-valued, and ever-accumulating nouns.

The one item on the list that eventually escapes the arbitrariness of alphabetical order is "Virginia," though this only occurs in the later paragraphs of the letter and outside of the alphabetical system. After writing her list, Sackville-West goes on in the rest of the letter to explain that she spotted a copy of Woolf's *Common Reader* at the home of some American friends, and that it "gave [her] a shock." She then goes on to write that "the wish to steal Virginia overcomes [her]—steal her, take her away, and put her in the sun among the objects mentioned alphabetically above."[96] Sackville-West's inclusion of "Virginia" on the list turns out to be both hopeful fantasy, and in another sense, reality. While Sackville-West teasingly imagines reducing her lover to an object that she can steal away to Egypt and place "among the objects mentioned alphabetically," Woolf is indeed already in Egypt metonymically by way of her *Common Reader*.

Woolf acknowledges her receipt of Sackville-West's alphabetic letter in a letter dated February 17, 1926, a few weeks after Woolf had written the passages in *To the Lighthouse* that describe Mr. Ramsay's alphabetic fixation. Woolf begins this letter by writing: "You are a crafty fox to write an alphabet letter, and so to think you have solved the problem of dumbness."[97]

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[96] Sackville-West to Woolf, 29 January 1926. *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*, 104.

[97] Woolf to Sackville-West, 17 February 1926. *Letters, Vol. III*, 240.. Woolf and the rest of the Stephens habitually used animal names as terms of endearment; Woolf was "the goat" to her family, and references to animals appear all over her letters to Sackville-West.

While Woolf doesn't mention the alphabet again in her letter, which is both long and full of longing, her linking of the alphabet with Sackville-West's "craft[iness]" in this first line of the letter is telling. Once again, Woolf links the alphabet to playful skill, and we find an undercurrent of flirtation in this sentence, as the word "fox" brings out the sense of guile and deception connoted in the "crafty" of her phrase "crafty fox." Sackville-West is crafty in that she has both skill *and* guile. Even more interesting, however, is that Woolf explicitly posits the alphabetic form as a solution to "dumbness;" she suggests that her lover's alphabetical, even procedural, mode of writing is a method for overcoming her inability to speak. But it is not Sackville-West who brings up the issue of dumbness; this idea comes from Woolf, not Sackville-West, who makes no mention of being struck dumb in her letter, admitting only that "the only way [she] can deal with Egypt is… alphabetically." Woolf fills in some blanks for herself, and comes to the conclusion that Sackville-West experiences dumbness upon arriving in the unfamiliar Egypt. This leap reveals some of Woolf's implicit, or at least unspoken ideas about alphabetical writing. For Woolf, Vita's "alphabetical system" is not just playful, humorous, or flirtatious; it is also generative. It is a method to overcome dumbness.

By framing Mr. Ramsay's alphabetic quest with a broader context than Leslie Stephen's work on the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* alone, we can thus see the alphabetic sequence in Woolf's writing not just as a symbol of cool rationality and teleology, but as a generative form of possibility. The alphabetic sequence in literature turns out to be a wonderfully malleable form, and in Woolf's correspondence, an open one. While the alphabet will always run from A to Z, writers may fill, mutate, stretch, and alter the sequence in almost infinite ways while still retaining a sense of the alphabet's form and logic. In "An Easy Alphabet for Infants," the young

Virginia Stephen assigns each letter of the alphabet an historical personage, while in her letter

to Sackville-West, the adult Woolf makes use of only three letters of the alphabet, and then

expands the alphabetic sequence from within by adding 16 numeric subentries. In this instance,

the alphabetic sequence becomes dilative; section C effectively expands and takes on Woolf's

account of an entire day. Sackville-West's alphabet dilates too; though she riffs on the form of

the alphabet array in her letter, A does not stand for just "Amon," it stands also for "Americans,

alabaster, Arabs." The alphabetic sequence is a compliant structure that can contain any

number of parts and that can expand or contract at an author's will. While critics have tended

to see Mr. Ramsay's alphabetic fixation as prototypically masculine, other examples of the

alphabetic sequence actually in use (in literature and other types of writing) suggest the

limitations of this perspective. The alphabetic sequence is an extremely malleable form, and it

may be employed as loosely as Mr. Ramsay employs it rigidly.

We may consider, for example, the alphabetic sequence as the organizing system of the

Dictionary of National Biography. None of the volumes of the encyclopedia were published as

single letters; there are not twenty-six volumes of the *Dictionary* that range from A to Z. Instead,

volumes were published alphabetically but not consistently across the sequence; the first four

volumes of the encyclopedia were published in 1885, and ranged from Abbadie—Anne,

Annesley—Baird, Baker—Beadon, and Beal—Biber.[98] There are no volumes of the *Dictionary*

devoted to a single letter of the alphabet; the letters dilate to include as many entries as the

editors decided that they needed to include. There are, for example, six volumes of the

Dictionary that include C entries, and just one volume that covers all of the entries from

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[98] Faber and Harrison, "*The Dictionary of National Biography*," 190.

"Ubaldini" to "Wakefield." Leslie Stephen was in no doubt involved in an alphabetical task as editor of the *Dictionary*, but that the task was somehow neatly linear is a fantasy. When we look at the actual materializations of alphabetically-organized texts, as short and as minor as Sackville-West's alphabet letter, or as involved and historic as Stephen's *Dictionary of National Biography*, we see that alphabetical order is rarely as simply expressed as it is in "An Easy Alphabet for Infants." Alphabetical order, in fact, is a generative, expansive, and expanding form—a container waiting to be filled in almost infinite ways.

There is an ambivalence at the heart of the alphabetic sequence then; we may see it as the epitome of the closed, strict form, or as the epitome of formal malleability. And we may thus read Mr. Ramsay's alphabetic quest dually—as an expression of both linear rationality and as rationality's complete opposite. The alphabetic sequence, after all, is an arbitrary way of organizing information on the basis of signifiers alone. The sequence refuses hierarchy, and thus refuses to make meaning out of connections; there is no relationship between sequential entries in an encyclopedia other than their positions in alphabetical order. Susan Stewart goes as far as categorizing the encyclopedia as a form of nonsense, writing that "there is nothing that is so nonsensical as the dictionary, the telephone books or the encyclopedia—all of them texts that arrange the world within the hermetic surface of an arbitrary convention, a convention without the hierarchy or values of the everyday lifeworld."[99] The seemingly-rational pursuit of Mr. Ramsay seems, in this light, utterly irrational; the "convention of conventions" that is universally agreed upon is also a structure of ordered but empty signifiers.

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[99] Susan A. Stewart, *Nonsense*, 191.

By constellating Mr. Ramsay's alphabetic metaphor with other instances of alphabetic contemplation and play from across Woolf's writings and life, I mean not only to reveal the paradoxes of the alphabetic sequence itself, but also to insist that these paradoxes are important to our understanding of Woolf. As we see throughout her work, Woolf deploys this very same figure (sometimes as form, sometimes as metaphor) in the service of cold rationality *and* familial intimacy, in the service of a closed totality *and* as a generative, dilative method of writing. It is precisely because the alphabetic sequence can be used to signify so many different paradoxical positions—rationality and irrationality, order and disorder, universality and particularity, a totalized fixedness and almost infinite mutability—that the figure so resonates with Woolf. Always the schematic thinker, Woolf finds in the alphabetic sequence not just a figure for her expression of ambivalence towards her father, but a generative mode of writing—of "overcoming dumbness"—to reveal "some order." And as a figure of order, the alphabetic sequence dramatizes the relationship between part and whole, atom and totalizing system, a relationship Woolf is always working out, whether she is figuring her father in relationship to historical British personages in "An Easy Alphabet for Infants," her relationship to the writers of the past and the thrust of literary history, or the relationship of the first section of *To the Lighthouse* to the second and third sections. For Woolf, aesthetic creation is about bringing disparate—even paradoxical—parts together into a totalizing system that acknowledges complexity, and the alphabetic sequence is a key figure for understanding her investment in articulating the relationship between order and totality.

CHAPTER TWO

"Too Old for Children and Too Young for Grown-ups":

Gertrude Stein's *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays*

Stein and Children's Literature

In 2009, Simon & Schuster published *Gertrude is Gertrude is Gertrude is Gertrude* through their

Atheneum Books for Young Readers imprint. The book, written by Jonah Winter and illustrated

by Calef Brown, introduces children to the life of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas through a

canny pastiche of Stein's distinctive style. Gertrude writes, Alice cooks, they drive in their car

Auntie, they take their poodle Basket for walks, and they entertain writers and painters. One

day, Picasso stops by. Winter writes:

> And look who's here, in time for tea. It's Pablo Picasso the Spanish artist. Pablo Picasso
>
> looks so angry but no. Pablo Picasso is Pablo Picasso. He just invented Modern art which
>
> is not the same thing as being angry but then again maybe it is. Maybe it is and maybe it
>
> isn't. Then again maybe it is. It's so hard to invent Modern art. Maybe it is and maybe it
>
> isn't. Maybe.[1]

Winter gets a lot right about Stein's style here and throughout the book. He lovingly mimics her

repetitions, her syntax, her rhymes and rhythms, her puns, her lack of punctuation, her

simplistic vocabulary, and especially her playfulness. For decades, critics have commented on

the seeming childishness of Stein's writing, and Juliana Spahr has even argued that Stein

demands that we "abandon our fluency" when we read her—that we effectively put ourselves

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[1] Jonah Winter, *Gertrude is Gertrude is Gertrude is Gertrude*, illus. Calef Brown (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 12–13.

in the position of the not-quite-yet-literate child when reading her works.[2] Winter's pastiche,

though it clearly lacks the sophistication of Stein's writings, shows just how suited some of

Stein's stylistic trademarks—especially her repetitions, rhymes, vocabulary, and playfulness—

are for an audience of children. And as Winter writes, "You can write whatever you want to too,

if you're Gertrude. A sentence can be whatever, if you're Gertrude. You don't have to make

sense (if you're Gertrude)."[3]

     Unfortunately for Stein, this turned out not to be the case. In 1938, Margaret Wise

Brown[4] and John McCullough, editors at the William R. Scott publishing house, approached

Stein about writing children's picture books.[5] Stein responded that she was already at work on

a manuscript,[6] and went on to publish *The World Is Round*, illustrated by Clement Hurd, with

William R. Scott during the next year. The publication process was not easy; the editors were

dismayed by the fact that the manuscript could not be "age-graded"—it was "accepted" by

children ranging from three to thirteen years old.[7] Furthermore, the editors were very

concerned about Stein's characteristic lack of punctuation, and Brown took on the task of

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[2] Juliana Spahr, *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2001), 46. Stein was also often criticized by her contemporaries not for writing *for* children, but *like* children. Wyndham Lewis, for example, claimed that Stein was "not simple at all" but that she chose to write "like a confused, stammering, rather 'soft' (bloated, acromegalic, squinting and spectacled, one can figure it as) child." Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957) 49.

[3] Winter, *Gertrude is Gertrude is Gertrude is Gertrude*, 26.

[4] Brown, who was also a children's book author at the time, would go on to publish the massively popular children's books *The Runaway Bunny* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942) and *Goodnight Moon* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947), both illustrated by Clement Hurd.

[5] Leonard S. Marcus, *Margaret Wise Brown: Awakened by the Moon* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 99.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., 105.

adding commas into the book.[8] While *The World Is Round* garnered a number of good reviews

upon its publication in the fall of 1939, it was not a financial success,[9] and William R. Scott

(along with several other publishing houses) rejected the children's books that Stein wrote

during the early 1940s.[10] None of these texts—*To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays*, *The*

Gertrude Stein First Reader, or *Three Plays*—were published until after Stein's death in 1946.

Though Winter jokingly writes that "you can write whatever you want to too, if you're

Gertrude," he forgets to add the caveat: as long as you're not writing for children.

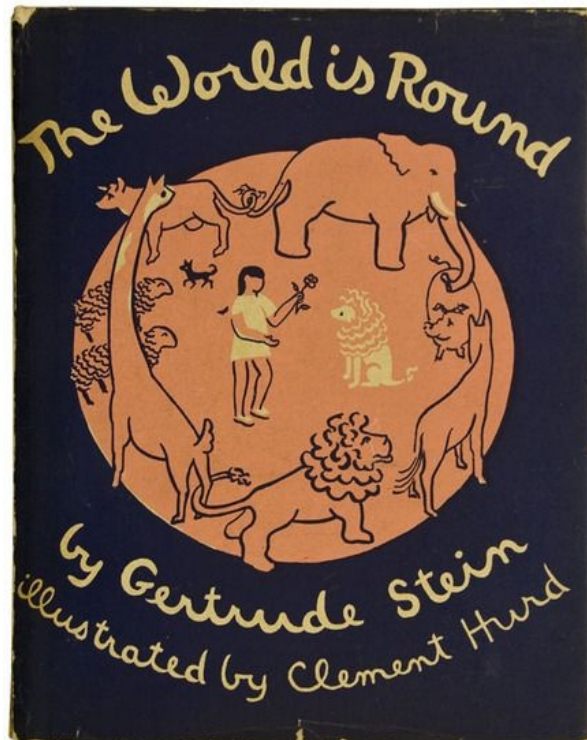Figure 2.1: Original cover for *The World is Round*, by
Gertrude Stein, illustrated by Clement Hurd, 1939

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[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid., 100–1, 105–6, 108–9, 111–14, 118–20.
[10] Donald Gallup, introduction to *Alphabets and Birthdays*, by Gertrude Stein, vol. 7 of *The Yale Edition of the Unpublished Works of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Carl Van Vechten (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957), viii–ix.

While *The World Is Round* has received a small amount of critical attention in recent years, Stein's other children's books have been largely ignored by scholars.[11] Critical interest in *The World Is Round* is likely due to the book's (comparatively) successful publication history, its prominent intertextual references, and its straightforward narrative, which easily lends itself to feminist readings. The book tells the story of Rose, a young girl who goes on a long journey up a mountain to find herself; in the chapter "Rose Does Something," she carves "Rose is a Rose is a Rose is a Rose is a Rose" into a tree, thereby elongating and playing on Stein's famous dictum. The book is easy to assimilate into Stein's oeuvre and is fairly easy to read. The editor of a 1993 Barefoot Books edition of *The World Is Round* even makes this point by aligning a paragraph of Stein's with the text of a "tale" told by a not-quite-three-year-old boy.[12] Stein's other works for children, however, are much thornier reads and have been overlooked by the reading public and scholars alike. The book *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays*, which was first published in 1957 as part of the eight-volume *Yale Edition of the Unpublished Works of Gertrude Stein,* is, I submit, the most challenging of Stein's children's books, even as it takes on one of the simplest of children's forms—the alphabet book.

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[11] Barbara Will and Dana Cairns Watson are the exceptions to this statement. Will's "'And Then One Day There Was a War': Gertrude Stein, Children's Literature and World War II" supplies a useful introduction to all four of Stein's children's books. She focuses mostly on *The World Is Round*, but the connections she makes between the texts and Stein's political affiliations—she argues that the books "explore [Stein's] own fraught and even contradictory personal and political tendencies" (352)—seem overstated. See Barbara Will, "'And Then One Day There Was a War': Gertrude Stein, Children's Literature and World War II," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (Winter 2007), 340–53. Wilson's more recent article focuses on Stein's *The Gertrude Stein First Reader and Three Plays,* and argues through a close reading of the text that Stein "teaches future readers to read the way she writes." Dana Cairns Watson, "Building a Better Reader: *The Gertrude Stein First Reader and Three Plays*," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 35.3 (September 2011), 245-266.

[12] Jonathan Cott, introduction to *The World Is Round*, by Gertrude Stein, illus. Roberta Arenson (Boston: Barefoot Books, 1993), xi–xii.

In this chapter, I focus my attention on *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays* and consider it across several literary genres. Stein herself categorized *To Do*, along with her three other children's books, as poetry; in a 1946 interview with Robert Bartlett Haas, she said that "what poetry I have done has been in the children's books. . . . My poetry was children's poetry, and most of it is very good, and some of it as good as anything I have ever done."[13] As Joseph T. Thomas Jr. notes in his book *Poetry's Playground: The Culture of Contemporary American Children's Poetry*, there has long been a divide in scholarship between literature written for adult and child audiences, especially when it comes to poetry. In his words:

> Most critical treatments of children's poetry, particularly U.S. children's poetry, divorce the object of their study from its larger, poetic context. That is, children's poetry is usually treated in isolation, as something wholly apart from the poetic traditions of adult poetry. . . . [T]hese studies, though they are of high quality, are somewhat insular, referring largely to other studies of children's poetry or, more broadly, to other studies of children's literature, drawing only infrequently on the critical and historical conversations surrounding adult poetic texts. . . . When it comes to poetry criticism, stark lines are drawn between the child world and its adult counterpart.[14]

The scholarly ignorance of Stein's work for children, is, then, a systemic one. The fact that these works straddle two genres—avant-garde literature and children's literature—has led not to a proliferation of work on them by both brands of critics, as we might imagine, but instead to a dearth of criticism; a group of children's literature critics recently referred to *To Do* as

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[13] Gertrude Stein, "A Transatlantic Interview—1946," in *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Robert Bartlett Haas (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1971), 23.
[14] Joseph T. Thomas Jr., *Poetry's Playground: The Culture of Contemporary American Children's Poetry* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2007), xiii.

"Gertrude Stein's unforgivably neglected children's book."[15] This chapter, seeking to redress

this neglect, traces the publication history of *To Do*, outlines its elaborate structure, and places

it in the context of Stein's other works and of recent criticism on the genre. I argue that *To Do*'s

problems are not only due to its difficult categorization but also to its formal inconsistencies;

the book, though structured by the alphabet, deviates from the long history of the abecedarian

form and seems to have very little interest in teaching the alphabet at all. *To Do* is didactic, but

Stein's quiet investment in the text is in teaching (and justifying) a particular brand of Steinian

writing, not in aiding the acquisition of language or letters. The structure of the alphabet

becomes, for Stein, a means to her (un-elaborated) end.

Stein wrote *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays* rather quickly in May of 1940.[16]

She sent the manuscript off to McCullough at William R. Scott; his copy never arrived and he

would later borrow the copy that Stein sent to Carl Van Vechten. McCullough thought that the

book "lack[ed] episode" and that its "characters [did] not recur with sufficient frequency to

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[15] Michael Heyman, Angela Sorby, and Joseph T. Thomas Jr., "Lively Rigor: The 2009 *Lion and the Unicorn* Award for Excellence in North American Poetry," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 33.3 (2009): 377.

[16] Gallup, introduction to *Alphabets and Birthdays*, vii-viii. Stein's *To Do* was not her first foray into the topic of birthdays; in 1924, she wrote *A Birthday Book* for Pablo Picasso's son Paulo. Picasso agreed to do the illustrations but eventually backed out, and despite Stein's efforts, the book was never published. Stein's *A Birthday Book* follows the form of other popular birthday books by Longfellow and Whittier (xiv–xv). Gallup explains the form thusly: "[E]ach day of the year appeared on a separate page, with a blank space for the insertion of the name of a baby born on that day under an appropriate quotation chosen from the writings of the particular poet" (xv). Stein's birthday book provides, not surprisingly, a strange twist on the form. She writes, for example, in the January section: "January the twenty-eighth and August. // January the twenty-ninth as loudly. // January the thirtieth to agree, to agree to January the thirtieth. // January the thirty-first usually. Used. Usually. Usually. Used" (131). Clearly, Stein's is not an ordinary birthday book filled with inspirational quotations; Gallup deems it characteristically "hermetic" (xv). For more, see Gertrude Stein, *A Birthday Book* in *Alphabets and Birthdays,* vol. 7 of *The Yale Edition of the Unpublished Works of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Carl Van Vechten (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957), 127–154.

hold children's interest."[17] Stein, however, was determined to see *To Do* in print, and, with the

help of Van Vechten, sent the manuscript to a number of other publishers over a two-year

period. The feedback was largely negative. Editors at Random House were "cold as a slab of

alabaster" about the book,[18] while Alfred Harcourt himself wrote that "[n]ot only is it

somewhat in her difficult style, but it seems to me the idea isn't sufficient to carry a book."[19]

Though Stein insisted to Van Vechten again and again in letters that *To Do* was a "child's

story,"[20] the main problem that publishers seemed to have with it was its very classification *as* a

children's book. McCullough had tested the manuscript on children and found that it was "far

too adult for a first reader."[21] Margaret Wise Brown, a Stein enthusiast, was intrigued by it, but

suggested to Stein that the book was appropriate only "for adults and an occasional child."[22]

Even the members of Stein's inner circle agreed. After months of difficulty finding a publisher,

Van Vechten wrote to Stein "I Love this book, but I have never thought it was a children's

book."[23] And early on, Stein reported that Toklas said that "it is too old for children and too

young for grown-ups."[24] In December of 1940, frustrated with McCullough, Stein wrote the

following to Van Vechten:

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[17] Gallup, introduction to *Alphabets and Birthdays*, viii.

[18] Bennett Cerf, quoted in note to vol. 2 of *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten 1913–1946*, ed. Edward Burns (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 678; hereafter cited in as *Letters*.

[19] Van Vechten quoting Harcourt to Stein, 10 February 1941, in *Letters*, 701.

[20] Stein to Van Vechten, 3 June 1940, in *Letters*, 676.

[21] McCullough, paraphrased by editor, note to letter Van Vechten to Stein, 16 June 1941, in *Letters*, 727.

[22] Stein to Van Vechten, 13 January 1941, in *Letters*, 694.

[23] Van Vechten to Stein, 23 November 1940, in *Letters*, 689.

[24] Gallup, introduction to *Alphabets and Birthdays*, viii.

About To Do I think you are perfectly right, but then you know I am not at all stuck on its

being a child's book, I called it a child's book, because it was about alphabets and

birthdays but children says Alice have not [sic] monopoly of these things so Mama

Woojums has always believed that Papa Woojums was right, and that people will love it

but not as a child's book so when you pass it on to Mr. Gilman Low III of Scribners we

won't tell him that it is a child's book since Papa Woojums who knows says it is not, and

Mama Woojums who knows that Papa Woojums knows says it is not, and Baby

Woojums wants everybody to like it, and is not at all keen on children's wanting it not at

all not at all.[25]

But Scribner's wasn't interested in publishing the book either. All in all, *To Do* was

turned down by eight publishers of both adult and children's literature before it was accepted

for publication by Harrison Smith in 1941.[26] But the book never made it into print. World War II

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[25] Stein to Van Vechten, 10 December 1940, in *Letters*, 691. In his introduction to *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten 1913–1946*, Edward Burns elaborates on the term "Woojums," which populates so many of the letters between Stein and Van Vechten: "It was often used by Van Vechten as a term of endearment for Stein and Toklas and other friends. Its origin may be a mixed drink described in his novel *Parties*. 'Woojums,' however, took on more meaning at the time of Stein's American lecture tour in 1934–35: it describes their sense of a family unit. . . . The family that emerged in 1934–35 is an organic outgrowth of the role each had assumed in the other's life. Gertrude became Baby Woojums (sometimes referred to by the pronoun *he*), Alice Toklas became Mama Woojums, and Carl Van Vechten became Papa Woojums. Part of Toklas' and Van Vechten's role as parents was to look after Baby Woojums— Gertrude. They established among themselves a family model that reflected the emotional importance each had come to assume for the other" (3–4). These pet names turn up in Stein's *To Do* in the section on the letter "V," and their appearance in the book speaks to the importance of this alternative family to Stein. Also interesting is Stein's positioning of herself as a child in the Woojums clan. Gertrude Stein, *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays* (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2001), 105–111.

[26] Gallup, introduction to *Alphabets and Birthdays*, ix. These publishers are William R. Scott, Scribner's, Random House, Atlantic Monthly Press, Funk and Wagnalls, Dutton, Simon and Schuster, and William Morrow.

cut off communications between France (where Stein and Toklas were living) and the United States, and Harrison Smith had problems with the illustrations and manufacturing of the book. These problems effectively killed the project.[27] Stein and Van Vechten, however, continued to correspond about *To Do* through and after the war; she was still inquiring about it in March of 1946,[28] even as she and Van Vechten focused their attention on bringing Stein's other projects into print, including the more recent *The Gertrude Stein First Reader*, which would eventually be published posthumously.[29] Despite her tireless efforts, *The World Is Round* is the only of Stein's children's books that she would ever see in print..

As we can see from her correspondence, one of the greatest problems with *To Do* was that it did not fall neatly into the category of children's literature. While *The World Is Round* may have been written in Stein's characteristic "difficult style," it had, at least, a familiar structure and narrative that featured a happy ending—"and they lived happily ever after and the world just went on being round"[30]—to bolster its children's-literature credentials. But Stein's *To Do*, which stands rightly accused of "lack[ing] episode" and of having too many characters, takes too many liberties to be easily palatable as a children's book. Likewise, *To Do*'s patent abecedarian form foreclosed the possibility of an exclusively adult readership. Most

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[27] Gallup, introduction to *Alphabets and Birthdays*, x.

[28] Stein to Van Vechten, 9 March 1946, in *Letters*, 809.

[29] *The Gertrude Stein First Reader* and Stein's later work for children, *Three Plays*, were published in a single volume by Houghton Mifflin in 1948, with illustrations by Francis Rose. *Three Plays* was never intended for publication, and the plays were performed only once in 1943 (Will, "And Then One Day There Was a War," 346). Interestingly, the book's jacket states that "like *Alice in Wonderland* it is a juvenile for adults" and that "[i]n many ways it is the purest Stein extant." Gertrude Stein, *The Gertrude Stein First Reader & Three Plays*, illus. Francis Rose (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948).

[30] Gertrude Stein, *The World Is Round*, illus. Roberta Arenson (Boston: Barefoot Books, 1993), 145.

publishers were not concerned, then, with the quality of the book's content but with the ambiguity of its potential audience. Toklas's observation about *To Do*—that it was "too old for children and too young for grown-ups"—aptly summarizes this problem.

The genres that Stein traverses in *To Do*—those of children's and avant-garde literature—are not natural bedfellows and usually call for distinct audiences. And the audience for children's literature is always complicated by the fact that children, by and large, are not the buyers of children's books. Jacqueline Rose argues that children's literature "sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver)."[31] One of the ongoing problems of children's literature, she suggests, is that the young child has little to no say in what she reads; this, after all, is usually decided by her parent, who selects and often reads the book aloud to her. Books for children, Rose argues, are not about "what the child wants, but what . . . the adult desires."[32] Those writing, publishing, and buying children's books are not the intended consumers of children's books; the ultimate consumer of children's literature does not have buying power. The marketing of children's books is thus directed less at children and more at their parents. The fact that Stein's works for children could not be "age-graded" was a drawback for her editors at William R. Scott; that her work was "accepted" by children ranging in age from three to thirteen was considered a liability.[33] Part of the problem of *To Do*, as I see it, is one of marketing. How is it possible to sell

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[31] Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984), 1–2.
[32] Ibid., 2.
[33] Marcus, *Margaret Wise Brown*, 105.

a book when it's unclear to whom you should be selling it? The fact that *To Do* never made it

into print during Stein's lifetime suggests that there is no easy answer to this question.[34]

Though it has yet to be matched by critical scholarship, there has been an upsurge of

interest in *To Do* in the publishing world in recent years. In 2001, Green Integer Press (known

for publishing avant-garde and overlooked texts) released the first single-volume edition of the

book.[35] In 2011, Yale University Press published the first illustrated edition.[36] Timothy Young,

editor of Yale's edition, echoes the sentiment of many of Stein's contemporaries, writing in his

introduction that "one can easily appreciate the view of Stein's friends and potential publishers:

children are not the core audience for this book."[37] And in a recent review of the Yale edition,

NPR reviewer Heller McAlpin slyly suggests that "one quickly understands why the long-winded

To Do had difficulty finding a publisher" and that "*To Do* is more intriguing literary artifact than

delightful read."[38] The critical ambivalence about the text still persists, even when it comes to

the child-friendly Yale edition, which has been beautifully illustrated by Giselle Potter.[39]

There is, then, a constellation of issues surrounding both the publication and the critical

reception of Stein's work for children. We are faced with the divided market between books for

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[34] *PMLA* focused the "Theories and Methodologies" section of its January 2011 issue on the difficulties of delimiting the boundaries of children's literature. See in particular, Marah Gubar, "On Not Defining Children's Literature" *PMLA* 126.1 (2011): 209–216.

[35] Gertrude Stein, *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays* (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2001).

[36] Gertrude Stein, *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays*, illus. Giselle Potter (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

[37] Timothy Young, introduction to *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays*, by Gertrude Stein, illus. Potter, 7. Young provides a useful introduction to the book and notably traces a number of references in the text to other members of Stein's circle.

[38] Heller McAlpin, "Gertrude Stein's Silly—and Stilted—'*To Do*.'" NPR, June 1, 2011. < www.npr.org/2011/06/02/135852533/gertrude-steins-silly-and-stilted-to-do >

[39] The Yale edition is a large hardcover book (with dimensions of 8 x 9 inches) and features 28 color illustrations by Potter. The Green Integer edition is a small (6 x 4.25 inches) text-only edition, more useful for scholarship than for reading by children.

children and books for adults, and, within that, the divided market for children's books—books

for three-year-olds and books for teenagers are supposed to be different species. That Stein

managed to collapse all of these categories in *To Do* has not been a cause for celebration. This

text has always been categorized as the purview of the other—it's for the editor who publishes

children's books, the editor who publishes books for adults, the younger child, the older child,

the scholar of children's literature, the scholar of American literature, and so on. No one wants

responsibility for this strange book. Stein's exasperation with the reception of *To Do*, in which

she told Van Vechten that he might as well offer it to Scribner's as a book for adults, is telling. It

seems she just wanted *someone* to read, and to like, *To Do*. As she wrote to Van Vechten,

"please like the book, and think of all those funny stories in it, you do like them, please do."[40]

***To Do*'s Structure and Syntax**

Even though it falls into what may be the most simple of children's genres, the alphabet book,

Stein's disruptions and additions to the genre in *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthday*

expose the formal possibilities and complexities inherent in this form. Children's alphabet

books tend to be the most restrictive of alphabetic texts; part of what separates Stein from the

rest of the writers of the genre is her loose application of the form. For example, early

twentieth-century alphabet books tend to link a single letter of the alphabet with something in

the world in an "alphabet array."[41] C.B. Falls's popular and self-consciously modern *The Modern*

ABC Book, for example, announces "B is for Battleship," "C is for Crane," "I is for Irrigation," and

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[40] Stein to Van Vechten, 14 October 1940, in *Letters*, 685.
[41] This term was coined by Patricia Crain in *The Story of A: The Alphabetization of America from* The New England Primer *to* The Scarlet Letter (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000), 91.

"U is for U-Boat," while Walter Cole's *The ABC Book of People* begins with "A is for Arab" and ends with "Z is for Zulu."[42] While I will discuss *To Do* within the context of more traditional children's alphabet books later, for now, I will point out the ways in which Stein exploits the possibilities within the alphabetical sequence.
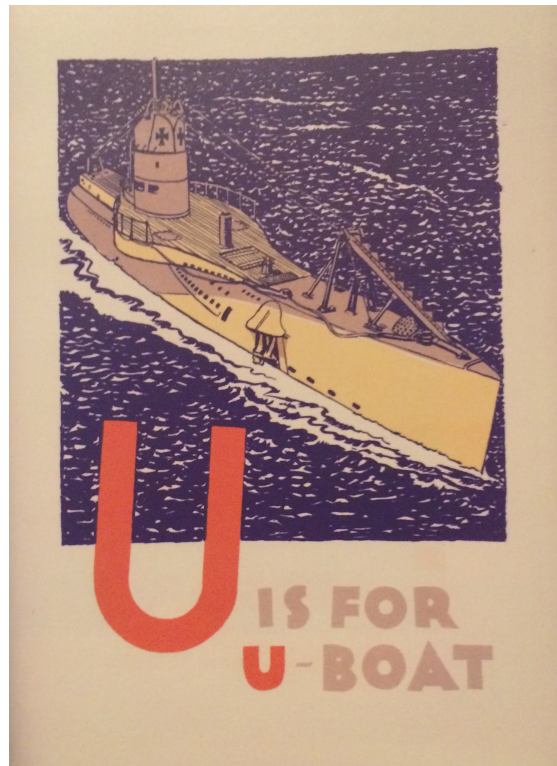
Figure 2.2: Illustration from C.B. Falls, *The Modern ABC Book*, John Day Company

To put it simply, *To Do* is very uneven. In the book, Stein assigns each letter of the alphabet four names and writes a short narrative about a character with those names. In some cases, she writes four distinct narratives about four different characters. In other cases, she

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[42] See C.B. Falls, *The Modern ABC Book* (New York: John Day Co., 1930); Walter Cole, *The ABC Book of People* (New York: Minston, Balch, & Co., 1932). For readings of these alphabet books, see Chapter 2 of Nathalie op de Beeck, *Suspended Animation: Children's Picture Books and the Fairy Tale of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2010), 53-118.

writes one narrative about four of the characters. And in other cases, she writes about some characters and ignores the others. There is no pattern of who gets a story and who doesn't, nor are the narratives the same length. Sometimes they are the length of a paragraph; at other times they take up ten pages. And there are aberrations in even this loose form; the section on the letter C, for example, only has one character. Moreover, the narratives in *To Do* are often, but not exclusively, about her characters' birthdays. Birthdays in *To Do* are not like birthdays outside of *To Do*: birthdays can be exchanged, stolen, multiplied, and lost. They can be taken away from children as punishment for bad behavior, and they can be split into pieces by sets of triplets who dislike sharing. Stein's book is thus both inconsistent in its own form and fantastical in its content.

Stein begins *To Do* by setting out the terms of the book:

Alphabets and names make games and everybody has a name and all the same they have in a way to have a birthday.

The thing to do is to think of names.

Names will do.

Mildew.

And you have to think of alphabets too, without an alphabet well without names where are you, and birthdays are very favorable too, otherwise who are you.

Everything begins with A.

What did you say. I said everything begins with A and I was right and hold me tight and be all right.

Everything begins with A.

A. Annie, Arthur, Active, Albert.

Annie is a girl Arthur is a boy Active is a horse. Albert is a man with a glass.[43]

Stein thus introduces her book within the framework of a game; alphabets and birthdays provide her with an opportunity for play. "The thing to do" here is to be imaginative. Stein's idea of the "continuous present,"[44] first introduced in her lecture "Composition as Explanation," seems at work in these opening paragraphs, as *To Do* begins at a scene of writing. It feels spontaneous and unedited, and as if Stein is speaking to herself and telling herself how to write the book that she is writing. Patricia Meyerowitz suggests that the "continuous present" that characterizes Stein's writing is "a realization of the thinking that goes on at the moment of writing," and not "a description of thinking that was done *before* the writing was written."[45] Stein thus manufactures a continuous present tense in which we imagine that we are reading her book as she writes it. She goes on to give herself directions for writing and suggests that "[t]he thing to do is to think of names," and then answers herself with "[n]ames will do." Then, instead of producing names, Stein produces a lighthearted rhyme of "Mildew" (with "will do"), thus taking her own advice poorly. She sees an opportunity for play and grabs it, even if this means deviating from her stated intention. The whole book, then, is framed by this "Mildew"— this disavowal of "the thing to do" by the person who ordered that we do it in the first place. The moment is, then, a rejection of instruction, and, more specifically, of self-instruction. Stein is as quick to abandon her rules as she as to make them in this text.

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[43] Gertrude Stein, *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays* (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2001), 5. All subsequent references are to this edition.

[44] Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation," in *A Stein Reader,* ed. Ulla E. Dydo (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 498.

[45] Patricia Meyerowitz, introduction to *How to Write*, by Gertrude Stein (New York: Dover Press, 1975), x, emphasis added.

The rhyme on "mildew" continues into the next paragraph, as Stein introduces a "you" who must "think of alphabets too." With this statement, Stein interpellates her reader into the text, and anticipates a certain resistance from him. When she declares "Everything begins with A," this imaginary reader interjects a skeptical "What did you say" that appears without quotation marks; there are, in fact, no quotation marks in the entire book. Stein's response begins aggressively ("I said everything begins with A and I was right") but ends on a playful note ("and hold me tight and be all right"). The end of the sentence can seem superfluous, as if the rhymes exist just for the fun in rhyming. But we can also read it as a warning of what is to come; *To Do* anticipates its difficulty in these imagined exchanges between author and reader and asks us to "hold on tight" to Stein for the journey ahead.

In these first short paragraphs, Stein sets out a schema for the book that she will break again and again. While the section on A begins "A. Annie, Arthur, Active, Albert," the section for B begins with a slight variation on this structure, with "B is for Bertha and Bertie and Ben and Brave and a birthday for each one" (8). The section for C begins "Then there is C for Charlie" (11), and the section for D begins "D is for Dora David Dove and Darling" (12). Instead of setting up a structure and keeping to it, as most alphabet books do (and I will discuss this in more detail later), *To Do* changes its form with each letter. The names for the A section are presented in list form with commas to separate them; the names for B are separated by the word "and." There is only one name for the letter C, and the names for D are presented in a list, without commas. Stein is similarly inconsistent throughout *To Do*, and she becomes as interested in sounds (and in variations of sounds) as she is in letters as the book progresses; thus, "G is George Jelly Gus and Gertrude" (22), and "K is Kiki, Katy, Cake and Kisses" (37). "Jelly" and

94

"Cake" do not begin with "G" or "K," of course. In these moments Stein privileges sound over letter and disrupts the linearity of the alphabet, just as the rhyme of "mildew" with "do" overrides all of the things that there are "to do." This is no way to teach the alphabet

Between these lists of characters and their narratives, Stein sometimes embeds additional narratives of the letters of the alphabet themselves. For example:

So D comes after C. Just after. C does not care whether D comes after C or not he just does not care. C is C. What difference does it make to C that D comes after C.

But D does care he cares very much that it is such that E comes after D. It makes all the difference to D that E comes after D. Sometimes D says bad words to E says don't come tagging after me, I have had enough of E, let me be. But there it is there is no use in making a fuss E is always there, it is better to be like C and not to care (14–15).

Stein thus personifies her letters and gives them thoughts and desires. Sometimes she comments on their value; she writes, "[A]nd after T well there are a lot of useless letters, just think of them all U V W X Y Z, just think of them all there they are pushed up at the end just like a ball" (89). We are particularly conscious of her role as writer in these moments, as she critiques the value of these letters as tools. She has particular trouble with X—"X is difficult, and X is not much use and it is kind of foolish that X should have been put into the alphabet, it almost makes it an elephant" (118). And the X characters certainly feel the same way that Stein's narrative voice does; Xantippe, Xenophon, Xylophone, and Xmas spend their narratives trying unsuccessfully to rid themselves of their Xs.

Stein's letter-centric narratives are not hermetic; they bleed into one another. The dogs

Never Sleep and Was Asleep, which first appear in the F section, reappear throughout the text.

We find out that Active, the horse of the A section, was once named Kiki, and sure enough, a

Kiki shows up in the K section. Stein also includes a Rose in the R section. This Rose has a dog

named Chilly (77); the Rose of *The World Is Round* has a cousin named Willie (and, for that

matter, a dog named Pépé).[46] Stein's focus in *To Do* is on singular letters in and of themselves;

they do not, for example, ever join together and form words. But these inter- and intratextual

references create a wide-ranging web that extends outside the covers of the text.

The birthdays in *To Do* are even more strange than the letters in it. They are similarly

unstable, and many of the birthday narratives involve exchanges, thefts, multiplications, and

loss. There is Brave, who "was a funny boy because he was not born on his birthday. Any day

could be his birthday because he was not born on his birthday" (9). Then there is Charlie, "and

January was his birthday, the whole month of January every day in it was his birthday" (12).

There is Edith, who "was born late, she was born a month too late. She should have been born

the fifth of June and she thought that was too soon so she was born the fifth of July oh my"

(15). For the Js—"James, Jonas, Jewel and Jenny,"—"there were only two birthdays for the four

of them and they quarreled more than before and pretty soon they tore the two birthdays in

pieces and now there were six without birthdays" (36–37). In what is perhaps the most striking

narrative in the book, a Mr. and Mrs. Quiet decide to take the birthday away from their big pet

rabbit, because he eats another smaller rabbit every year on his birthday. When he no longer

knows when his birthday is, he begins eating rabbits on every day of the year, "just as if every

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[46] Stein, *The World Is Round*, 3.

day was his birthday" (72). Mr. and Mrs. Quiet are understandably upset and then give away all of their other rabbits. Then:

> [A]ll of a sudden the big rabbit's red eyes burst out into flame, the big rabbit was on fire inside him and he and the cabbages and carrots he had not eaten were all flaming and the smoke and fire were coming out of him and the little house he lived in was burning and Mr. and Mrs. Quiet who were looking at him found it all terrifying, they were so frightened they could not do anything, they could not get any water to put the fire out they were so frightened they could not move about and so they just sat there watching and pretty soon it was over the burning there was nothing left of the big rabbit but a red cinder and that Mr. and Mrs. Quiet put out by dropping tears on him. And after that Mr. and Mrs. Quiet lived very quietly with their goats and everything but they never after had another rabbit. (73–74)

Figure 2.3: Mr. and Mrs. Quiet's rabbit, illustration
from *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays*, 2011.
Copyright © Giselle Potter

Birthdays in *To Do* are not just malleable; as the book progresses, they become more

and more dangerous. Stein begins the book with "Alphabets and names make games and

everybody has a name and all the same they have in a way to have a birthday" (5). The

operative phrase, here, is "in a way," and Stein exploits its ambiguity to the utmost degree. By

destabilizing the youth-oriented markers of language and time—the alphabet and the

birthday—Stein creates a frankly horrifying world of indeterminacy and unexplained

metamorphoses. As Richard Bridgman has briefly noted, the book is "dominated by acts of

aggression and disaster." Though he suggests that "the over-all effect is not morbid" because

"the fantasy distances the violence and cruelty,"[47] critic Barbara Will thinks otherwise. Will

writes of *To Do* that "acts of inexplicable violence occur without warning and without meaning,

'all of a sudden'; things happen, ominously, causing multiple deaths and sparing only a random

few. This unpredictable violence turns everyone, even adults, into frightened and submissive

children."[48] While I agree with Will, both she and Bridgman overlook the most interesting thing

about *To Do*—that its most serious violence does not take place in its narrative content, but in

its narrative framework. In other words, the violence that Stein does to the alphabet and to

time (via her representation of birthdays, which normally function, as Bridgman describes

them, as "one's particular anchor in the world of time" [49]) is much more interesting than the

violence of her cannibalistic rabbit. Stein begins by designating the alphabet as deterministic—

"without an alphabet well without names where are you, and birthdays are very favorable too,

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[47] Richard Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 311.
[48] Will, "And Then One Day There Was a War," 346–347. Drawing an historical connection between *To Do* and the climate of World War II, Will writes that *To Do* "remains shadowed by the dark realities of life in wartime in a way that *The World Is Round,* written just before the war, does not, or at least not entirely" (346).
[49] Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces,* 312.

otherwise who are you" (5)—but spends her entire text dismantling any sort of stable self that would come with a name and a birthday.

While the tale of Mr. and Mrs. Quiet is probably the most horrifying in *To Do*, the story of Active, with its metamorphosing names and birthdays, is more representative of the rest of the narratives in the text. Stein begins by introducing Active with a fairly straightforward series of sentence-length paragraphs:

> Active.
>
> Active is the name of a horse.
>
> Everybody has forgotten what horses are.
>
> What horses are.
>
> What are horses.
>
> Horses are animals were animals with a mane and a tail ears hoofs a head and teeth and shoes if they are put upon them. (5–6)

In this introduction, "Active," usually an adjective, is an unlikely name, and stands out among Annie, Arthur, and Albert in the earlier list of A characters. All we hear of these characters is that "Annie is a girl Arthur is a boy Active is a horse. Albert is a man with a glass" (5). Active the horse gets a three-page narrative; our human characters, delineated by the most basic of markers ("girl," "boy," "man"), don't get any. Stein thus privileges here the unusual and the unexpected. And when she introduces Active, she does so with a hint of nostalgia, anticipating that her young audience is unfamiliar with horses, and goes on to describe them in a blazon-like list of physical attributes. Her verbal slippage from "horses are animals" to "horses were

animals" confirms her belief that horses no longer matter in her world; this is, in fact, what the story of Active will confirm.

After Stein explains about "what horse-shoes are" (6) she continues:

He had a birthday he was born on that day so everybody knew just how old he was, he was born on the thirty-first of May on that day, and then he began to say he was not born on that day he was he began to say he was born on the thirty-first of June, and that was none too soon. He liked to be born later every day. Well anyway, there he was and Active was his name, it was his name now but it had not always been, it had once been Kiki, not that he ever kicked not he and he used then to pull a milk-wagon. Then the war came, Kiki was twenty, twenty is awful old for a horse but Kiki had always had plenty, so even at twenty he was young and tender and pretty slender. (6)
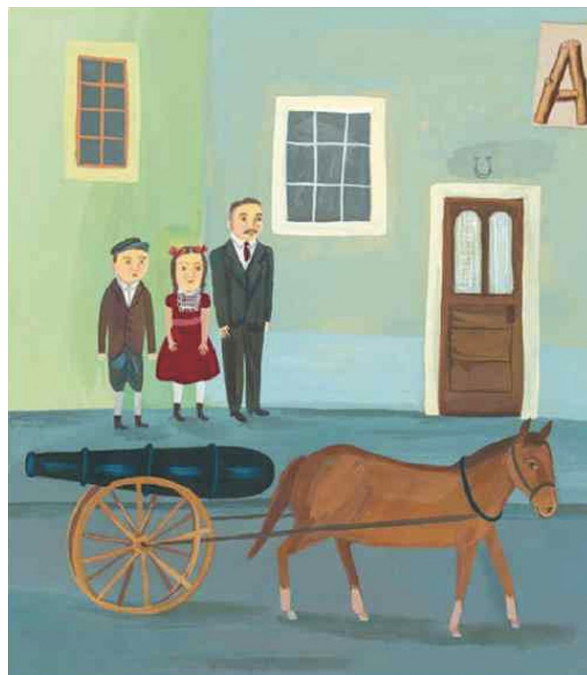

Figure 2.3: Active, illustration from *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays*, 2011. Copyright © Giselle Potter

Here Stein does several interesting things. We have the first instance in the text of a malleable birthday, changeable at will; Active decides "to be born later every day." But then we find out that Active has a stable age of twenty, which is "awful old for a horse," but then again that he was "young and tender and pretty slender." Stein thus continually undermines herself. Does Active change his birthday, or does he just wish that he could? How is he old for a horse but young and tender at the same time? Stein's characters throughout *To Do* dwell in uncertainties such as these. In the world of the book, a character can be both "awful old" and "young and strong" (6) at the same time, and, as often as not, making a wish about a birthday is a performative gesture. Active wants to be younger; thus, he *is* younger. And when the J characters, for example, threaten to take away each other's birthdays, their birthdays disappear, and unfortunately for them, "later on when they all wanted their birthdays back again they went out to find them but they were gone perhaps a duck or a lobster had eaten them anyway all four birthdays were gone not one of them had one" (36). Birthdays in the text lose their capacity to mark personal time, and, at the same time, morph into objecthood.

Names are just as troublesome as the pliant birthdays in *To Do*. We find out that Active used to be Kiki. He did not get this name, Stein tells us, in a moment of linguistic play. She explains the name change later:

So the soldiers came along and they thought he was young and strong and they took him along. . . . Then nobody knew where he was, and he was no he was not gone away nor did he stay but he was at the front where there was shooting and he was pulling a little cannon along, and they did not know his name but he was so young and strong they called him Active and he always came right along he and his little cannon. (6–7)

Active's name change is thus not his decision, as was his (possible) change of birth date.

Active's new name is an aptonym (unlike the earlier "Kiki," which was ill-fitting because he "was

never kicking"). And Active likes his new name; Stein writes, "I like being Active better than

being Kiki who was never kicking" (7). The ideal names for Stein, in *To Do*, are adjectival; she

insists that names are not arbitrary, but meaningful.[50] But Active's name change comes at a

moment of violence, in the middle of a war. Stein here sees violence as an opportunity for

changing the self. And the male horse's name change—from the feminine Kiki to the gender-

neutral Active—is also at play. War de-feminizes the horse, and gives him the opportunity to

reach his full potential.

When the war ends, Active is sent home, but he is no longer needed there because of

the rise of the automobile. "They" return to calling him by his original name:

> [A]nd they called him Kiki again but Active was his name and he said he would lose his
>
> mane if they took away his new name. Well they all cried like anything, they just all cried
>
> and cried and then Active forgot everything. . . . So he said he thought an automobile,
>
> just one day he said he thought he would be an automobile not a new one an old one
>
> and he was one, he was an automobile and an automobile never has a name and it
>
> never has a mane and it has rubber shoes not an iron one and finding rubber shoes does
>
> not mean anything like finding iron horse-shoes did and that was the end of everything.
>
> (8)

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[50] Stein's preference for aptonyms in *To Do* contrasts interestingly with the reservations she expresses toward names and nouns in her 1935 lecture "Poetry and Grammar." For more, see Gertrude Stein, "Poetry and Grammar," in *Toward the Open Field: Poets on the Art of Poetry, 1800–1950*, ed. Melissa Kwasny (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004) 288–310.

With the end of war, then, comes the end of Active and the return to Kiki. But in the world of *To Do*, characters can change at will, and thus Kiki/Active turns into an automobile because he'd rather be one than a horse, whose pre-war labor has been rendered obsolete. Stein provides no description of the metamorphosis whatsoever; it just happens. But this turn is not a happy one, and it ushers in "the end of everything," including the end of Active's narrative. The automobile, presumably the product of Fordist labor, "never has a name," and thus loses its signifying ability; Active no longer signifies in the postwar economy. And while finding iron horse-shoes used to bring luck (6), finding rubber shoes, or tires, now means nothing. In his transformation, Active loses what made himself himself, and he becomes a soulless product. While not all of Stein's narratives have similar endings, this unmooring of personhood (or, in the case of Active, of horsehood) is a common thread throughout *To Do*. The violence of this narrative is not in Active's experience at war; it's in his experience back home *after* the war. He is rendered useless, and, to combat this, he becomes a machine and thereby dissolves his identity.

Stein's Didacticism

As I've previously suggested, the violence of *To Do* works at both the level of content (as we have just seen) and at the level of form. In the book, Stein destabilizes the personal markers of names and birthdays throughout her text, and in the case of Active and many of her other characters, erases all possibility for establishing a sense of self. In this sense, the characters of *To Do* could not be more different than the Rose of the more conventional *The World Is Round*. But even more interesting is what Stein does to the generic forms of the alphabet book, which

Karen Coats suggests is "primarily didactic,"[51] and which George R. Bodmer suggests is "didactic almost by definition."[52] Stein's violence to the genre is more subtle than the violence in her narratives, and her refusal to conform to one of the many established forms within the genre undermines the potential didacticism of her text. Put simply, it's hard to imagine any child learning the alphabet by reading *To Do*. Why then did Stein choose one of, if not *the* most didactic of genres, to structure her book?

In her excellent book *The Story of A: The Alphabetization of America from* The New England Primer *to* The Scarlet Letter, Patricia Crain traces the long history of the alphabet book. She maps out the changes in the genre over time—the shifts from the image-less hornbooks of pre-Renaissance Europe to Comenius's phonologically focused *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (the first alphabet book with images) to *The New England Primer*'s "image-rhyme combination" that marks "a purposeful turn away from the alphabet's inherent meaninglessness."[53] In tracing this history, she delineates three types of alphabetical forms. The first are "swallow alphabets" in which letters "display tropes of consumption—letters eating other letters, letters being eaten by children, letters in the mouths of animals, letters pictured with, or as, food."[54] The second are "body alphabets," in which images of letters are anthropomorphized into human shapes, and imitate human bodily actions. This type of alphabet, for Crain, places emphasis "not on the

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[51] Karen Coats, "P is for Patriarchy: Re-Imaging the Alphabet," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 25.2 (Summer 2000): 90.
[52] George R. Bodmer, "The Post-Modern Alphabet: Extending the Limits of the Contemporary Alphabet Book, from Seuss to Gorey," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 14.3 (Fall 1989): 115.
[53] Crain, *The Story of A*, 18.
[54] Ibid., 85.

act of the consumption of the alphabet, but on the *result* of this internalization."[55] The third

type of alphabetical form, the "alphabet array" or "the worldly alphabet" which takes the

familiar "A is for . . . B is for . . ." form, "emphasizes the alphabet's function of ordering and

arbitrary arrangement."[56] In this category, we can place alphabet books such as C.B. Falls's *The*

Modern ABC Book ("U is for U-Boat") and Walter Cole's *The ABC Book of People* ("Z is for Zulu.")

Crain offers a reading of the alphabet array:

> With its apparent encyclopedism or scientism, its impulse towards organization and
>
> categorization, this is the alphabet most obviously a product of the Enlightenment.
>
> Whether objects, animals, or body parts, this alphabet represents, in words or images,
>
> the world at large, arrayed through the arbitrary but powerful order of the ABCs,
>
> forcefully producing a world that is knowable, graspable, and most strikingly,
>
> obtainable. . . . The alphabet array alerts you to the vast quantity of things in the world
>
> up for consumption.[57]

For Crain, alphabet books become over time a way of representing the capitalist world; through

consumption, internalization, and accretion, "the alphabet book posits the world of imperial

and capitalist enterprise as one that is already inside the language-learning child."[58] Learning

the alphabet is not just a step in learning to read, for Crain; it is a way of submitting to the

capitalist system.

Karen Coats, writing contemporaneously to Crain, offers up an alternative schema for

categorizing alphabet books. Borrowing terminology from the philosopher J. L. Austin, Coats

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[55] Ibid., 88.
[56] Ibid., 91.
[57] Ibid., 91.
[58] Ibid., 96

argues that alphabet books are either constative or performative. In constative alphabets, she

claims, "language is not material, it has no body; rather it is an epistemological tool, an abstract

way of 'knowing' the concrete world."[59] In performative alphabets, on the other hand, "the

letter itself . . . become[s] an *object* for representation rather than a transparent *instrument* for

representing. Letters become performers in and of reality rather than simply pointers to

something outside themselves."[60] She argues that in the twentieth century, "the view of

language as presented in alphabet books [changes] from a traditional, linear, epistemological,

masculine model, in which language is a way of knowing an existing reality, to a more

performative, ontological, integrated model, in which language is recognized as a vehicle for

actively constructing that reality."[61] Michael Heyman suggests that the shift that Coats charts is

not so much an innovation in the twentieth century, but is more accurately a "rebirth" of

performative forms, the likes of which Crain traces in swallow and body alphabets of the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and which he traces even further back into medieval

illuminated manuscripts.[62]

Despite their difference in terminologies and methodologies (Crain takes an historical

approach, Coats a theoretical one) both critics point towards a fairly rigid division between

types of alphabet books. In some, letters are referents or "epistemological tools" for knowing

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[59] Coats, "P is for Patriarchy," 90–91.
[60] Ibid., 95.
[61] Ibid., 88.
[62] Michael Heyman, "The Performative Letter, from Medieval to Modern," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 30.1 (Spring 2005): 100. It should also be noted that unlike the alphabet books that Crain and Coats discuss, indeed, unlike most alphabet books, the first edition of Stein's *To Do* was *not* illustrated. As discussed earlier, problems with its would-be illustrations were part of the reason it wasn't published even after it was accepted by Harrison Smith in manuscript form.

the world outside the text (in this category we can include Coats's constative alphabets and

Crain's alphabet arrays); in others, letters are material agents or material objects that either act

of their own volition or are acted upon (in this category we can include Coats' performative

alphabets and Crain's swallow and body alphabets). This divide is fairly clean; in the works that

both critics study, there seems to be no overlap. The letters of alphabet arrays don't suddenly

jump out of their referential roles and take action, nor do the letters of body alphabets

suddenly start referring to anything outside of themselves. When C.B. Falls write that "C is for

Crane," the letter C is fixed in its relation to the word "crane;" it does not begin acting of its

own volition. Letters in alphabet books are either a means of learning the world or an end in

and of themselves.[63]

One of the most generically transgressive things about *To Do*, then, is that Stein's letters

are both referential *and* material; they are epistemological tools, and they are also actors with

agency and volition. *To Do* is organized by an alphabet array of names—"D is for Dora David

Dove and Darling" (13)—but also includes letters acting, feeling, and speaking on their own

volition. Stein writes that "[s]ometimes D says bad words to E says don't come tagging after me,

I have had enough of E, let me be" (14).[64] Her alphabet is both constative, or referential, and

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[63] This divide between types of alphabet books (letters as material vs. letters as referential) gestures towards a long thread of atomistic philosophy concerned with the units of knowledge and representation that can be traced as far back as Plato and Lucretius. For more, see Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. Robin A. H. Waterfield (London: Penguin Books, 1987); and Lucretius, *The Nature of Things*, trans. A. E. Stallings (London: Penguin Books, 2007).
[64] Unlike her predecessors, Stein does not directly engage in the capitalistic enterprise that Crain argues is key to the form of the alphabetic array. Stein's letters correspond to names, and not to objects in the world that are available for consumption. Her focus, then, is not on knowing an exterior world, but on knowing an interior world that is shaped by its exterior. As we see in the narrative of Kiki/Active's metamorphosis into an automobile (surely a comment

performative, or material, and she will often draw on both possibilities within the same narrative.

For example, in her section on Y, Stein introduces, in referential mode, "Yvonne and You, Yes and Young. These are the Y's why not" (127). Like Comenius before her, she plays on the aural aspects of the letter, and perfectly rhymes "Y" and "why." This moment of play, soon to be repeated, accrues more meaning as the narrative progresses. Stein then begins the story of Yvonne Yet and Yes Young, a married couple, who are moderately happy until they hear a man singing "imagine if you can how much it would cost to get back a letter if it could be lost" (129). This reminds them that "they had put the letter Y in an envelope and now where was it" (129–130).[65] Yvonne and Yes get very nervous, and exclaim "Y Y Y Y oh why are we only Y oh why oh why" (130). In an oral reading of the text, the differences between "Y" and "why" are collapsed, and the letter and word become substitutable; the lament for "Y" can be heard at the end of the sentence as well as at the beginning, or we can hear a repetition of "why" at the beginning.[66]

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on capitalism), Stein is interested not in capitalism-qua-capitalism, but on the effects of the system on individual bodies and identities.

[65] In this moment, as in many others in *To Do*, Stein shifts into free indirect discourse and conflates the authorial voice with that of her characters. Since there are no quotation marks in the text (nor are there, for example, Joycean em-dashes), Stein's narrative is particularly fluid, and distinguishing the voices within it becomes particularly difficult.

[66] Stein plays with both the aurality and images of other letters in the same manner; in a transition section between the letters V and W, she writes, "V is V and W is W. . . . Double you. Double you is two for you. Very was V and double you is a double of you. You and You. But really not, what what, no really not, it is a trouble to think double and when double you makes double V and when double v makes double you it is better to be v than u and yet u could be v if it was a trouble to you" (111). Stein's exchanges of "you" for "u" make the passage almost nonsensical, but an aural reading of it unwinds some of her play. The passage thus works on an aural, but not visual, level of reading.

Stein further complicates the "Y" when we find out what has actually happened to the letter. She writes:

The letter Y you see the letter Y is in an envelope and when it falls into the fire it burns.

Now if a letter burns then it is not there. Believe it or not it is true.

Now the letter Y was put into an envelope they remembered that and the envelope was put into the fire, that is what happened to the letter Y. Of course that is what happened to the letter Y and that is because it is in cry and in Oh my, that is the reason why the letter Y was put into an envelope, and into the fire and the envelope was all burned up and in the ashes there were no sashes there was nothing at all, the letter Y was gone. (130)

There are several issues at work here. First, Yvonne and Yes, the referents of Y's alphabet array, are suddenly faced with the materiality of the letter, and they learn that the material object may be lost, or, more specifically, burned up. Second, Stein plays with homonyms once again and introduces the possibility of an epistolary letter along with the alphabetical letter. The "letter Y" in an envelope becomes a synecdoche for an epistolary letter, which can be burned, and thus the material Y becomes a referential Y. But this synecdoche is doubly complicated, because both sides of the equation are operating with the same term; the (alphabetic) letter stands in for an (epistolary) letter. This synecdochic logic is also at work when we hear why the letter has been burned—it's been burned because Y is "in cry and Oh my." The Y letter/letter must be burned because it is synecdochic of sadness.

Crain notes that the alphabet array form always works on the logic of synecdoche. She explains that "the synecdoche 'A is for apple' gives the alphabet a mouth and a voice, binding

the names of the letters to the names of things in the world . . . [In alphabet arrays,] synecdoche is the figure of non-mimetic representation: A stands for apple because A is *in* apple."[67] In the letter-burning narrative in *To Do*, the Y acts not just as a tropological reference to an epistolary letter or as a synecdoche for "cry," but also as a material letter and as a phonological substitute for "why." The letter is both referential and material, but it is interestingly non-performative. Stein uses the passive voice to describe the letter-burning incident; she avoids attributing the event to an agent in such passive phrases as "the envelope was put into the fire." Yvonne and Yes didn't do it; the only agent that we can implicate is Stein's authorial voice, which has the power to make letters of the alphabet, and thus her characters' identities, disappear. Indeed, after the letter is burned, Stein writes that "those are sad days when a letter the only letter that can make you know that you are you is burned away" (131), and Yvonne and Yes spend the rest of their narrative stealing signage and stealing names from newborns in an effort to get their Ys back. Though they succeed, and Stein tells us that "they lived happily ever after," they learned to be "very careful . . . of the Y's they never said Oh my and they never said cry and they never said try" (134). We also find out that they "had a great many children but they never gave them any name that began with Y not one" (134). Stein effectively cuts off the Y lineage, and thus ends any generative prospects of the letter, both in terms of the proliferation of children and the proliferation of language.

However, the loss of letters doesn't extend to Stein's narrative. Even though Yvonne and Yes lose their Ys, Stein is still able to refer to them by their names, which, of course, include the

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[67] Crain, *The Story of A*, 98. We might also look at this differently. While Crain suggests that "A" stands for "apple" because it is in the word "apple," we could instead see "apple" as a metonymic representation of the letter "A."

Ys. We could imagine, for example, that the loss of letters would turn her characters into "vonne" and "es"—at least until they regained their Ys in their narrative. But Stein does not write by the rules that she sets out for her characters. We see this most clearly in moments when Yvonne and Yes lament their losses; Stein writes, "Yvonne could not say to Yes what do you think Yes because there was no letter Y and Yes Young could not say to Yvonne I will take care of you Yvonne because the letter Y was burned away, away away away" (131). Stein, however, still has access to Y, and she can write "Yes" and "Yvonne" and "away away away." There is thus a major discrepancy in *To Do* between content and form. Stein tells us that Y has been burned away, but if that were true, wouldn't it be unavailable to Stein as well? How can it be burned away for the characters, but not for the authorial voice? While it may seem dogmatic to expect absolute consistency between narrative and form from most texts, the very fact that *To Do* falls into the category of didactic meta-discourse (as do all books of its genre), demands such consistency. If Y is a material object that can be lost, why can Stein still use it for its referential qualities? Why is Stein's personal alphabet different from *the* alphabet? What is Stein, writing in the most didactic of genres, trying to teach us in *To Do*?

In her aptly named "P is for Patriarchy," Coats argues that alphabet books take on the task of inscribing us into the patriarchal symbolic order. Following Lacan, she suggests that:

> To learn to read, to enter into a relationship with a written text, is to enter into a relationship of unequal power. The text is mute, unresponsive, and often resistant. That children embrace this relationship so willingly and exuberantly is largely because they are used to relationships of unequal power. Their job is to figure out what the Other wants of them, how they can make themselves desirous to those in power over them.

Learning to read is an acceptance of the arbitrary power structure of the dominant culture.[68]

For Coats, then, a child's reading of an alphabet book is an unknowing acquiescence to the symbolic order, to the "arbitrary power structure(s)" of language and social authority that are implicit in the alphabet. But Joseph T. Thomas Jr. argues that Coats leaves something out in her analysis. He writes that "the very purpose of an alphabet is to be rearranged; if it suggests linearity—if it, as Coats maintains, writes us into the symbolic order of the patriarchy, it simultaneously suggests this order's opposite."[69] In other words, learning the alphabet is not an end in and of itself. We learn the alphabet so that we can *use* the alphabet to build words, sentences, paragraphs, novels out of it. And it is the rare alphabet book that features only letters and images; most alphabet books, from Comenius's on to the present, supplement singular letters with words. In Kate Greenaway's influential *A Apple Pie*, A and "apple pie" aren't equated only pictorially; they are equated, by the author, through the words "A apple pie."[70] This may seem obvious, but previous studies of the genre, including Thomas's, have glossed over the fact that alphabet books are as engaged in using words as they are in presenting letters (whether referential or material).

This is not to say that Coats, Crain, and other critics ignore the words, phrases, sentences, or even the poetry of alphabet books. They pay them ample attention. What these

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[68] Coats, "P is for Patriarchy," 89. Coats here is building on Lacan's notion of the symbolic order, which embodies not just written and spoken discourse, but law, custom, tradition, and ideology. Lacan develops these ideas in texts such as "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," and "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious," in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004).

[69] Joseph T. Thomas Jr., "Letters to Children," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 30.1 (Spring 2005): 80.

[70] Kate Greenaway, *A Apple Pie* (New York: n.p., 1886), www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/15809.

critics do is sidestep the simple fact that reading the text of an alphabet book requires knowledge that the book presupposes doesn't exist. If a child can already read the text of an alphabet book, it's unlikely that she *needs* the alphabet book for any didactic purpose. If a child can read "U is for U-Boat," she's likely already familiar with the letter U. There is thus an inherent temporal problem in the genre; the alphabet book constitutes its audience retroactively. This problem is solved, however, by spatial reading practice. Many alphabet books, like many children's books in general, are read out loud to children by adults. This aural audience of "readers" is the actual intended audience of alphabet books; this is the audience that has something to learn from the text. The genre requires a community of readers/speakers to fulfill its didactic purpose, and the child who learns from it is not so much a reader as she is a listener. The child who reads an alphabet book on her own does not read to learn the letters of the alphabet; she reads for the sake of reading or for the sake of learning something other than the alphabet.

Toklas's response to *To Do*—that it was "too old for children and too young for grown-ups"—resonates, then, not just with Stein's work, but with alphabet books in general. And *To Do* makes an interesting intervention in the genre, as it privileges the process of reading and writing *over* the process of learning the alphabet. Stein assumes that the learning of the alphabet has already happened for her readers: from the early lines "[t]he thing to do is to think of names" and "you have to think of alphabets too, without an alphabet well without names where are you and birthdays are very favorable too, otherwise who are you" onward, she focuses not on the learning of letters, but on the process of writing. The book opens prescriptively, and Stein announces that her alphabet is meant to be rearranged, and that the

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rearrangement of letters leads to names and characters, and then to birthdays, as she builds a

narrative around individual identity, and often around the loss of identity. I contend that Stein's

strange turns in these arenas, which I've focused in on in my analyses of Active/Kiki and the Y

family, are ultimately about the power of the writer. Stein does not make Kiki's transformation

into an automobile realistic in any way; it occurs purely because of Stein's fancy and without

explanation. The narrative of the letter Y in the fire is similarly disconcerting; the only way we

know that the Y got placed in the fire is that Stein tells us. To Will's suggestion that "acts of

inexplicable violence occur without warning and without meaning," I want to counter that in *To

Do*, Stein is particularly conscious of the fact that *she* is the one who makes things happen and

that she is the only one who can provide meaning—through rhetoric and linguistic play—in the

metamorphosing world that she creates.

The book thus couples its instructive beginning with an acute awareness on Stein's (and

her readers') part that there is no logic, coherence, or causality in the world of *To Do* other than

that of the author. Consequently, there is an extreme tension between the overarching linear

(and should-be) didactic form of the text and its violent and chaotic content; Stein employs the

genre that is "didactic almost by definition" only to implode it. Indeed, Stein's interest in

didacticism was long coupled with disdain. In 1931, Stein published *How to Write*, quite possibly

the least useful writing manual every written. Even in this text, writes Marianne DeKoven in a

detailed study of Stein's most experimental works, "Stein violates the sanction of all literature

that the reader have some way to move from one word to the next. The prevention of reading

is, of necessity, the denial of literature."[71] Even though Stein embeds *How to Write* with

appealing dictums (such as "a sentence is not emotional a paragraph is"[72]), it often reads like a

list of playful non sequiturs: "Now all this is still sentences. Paragraphs are still why you were

selfish. // Shellfish are what they eat. This is neither a paragraph nor a sentence."[73] *How to*

Write also prominently features inscrutable, agrammatical passages that pose as instruction,

such as, "Grammar is made whether there has been a better whether it is alike are to be hand

in hand which is stitches a polite that is a dollar ball carried a mainly for only timely bother in

only begs legacy."[74] In the book's introduction, Patricia Meyerowitz states the obvious: *How to*

Write "certainly does not tell you how to write."[75]

Several years later, in 1936, Stein gave a lecture titled "What Are Master-pieces and

Why Are There so Few of Them, which was later published in 1940. In the lecture, Stein tells us:

> The thing one gradually comes to find out is that one has no identity that is when one is
>
> in the act of doing anything. Identity is recognition, you know who you are because you
>
> and others remember anything about yourself but essentially you are not that when you
>
> are doing anything. I am I because my little dog knows me but, creatively speaking the
>
> little dog knowing that you are you and your recognizing that he knows, that is what
>
> destroys creation. That is what makes school.[76]

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[71] Marianne DeKoven, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 120.
[72] Gertrude Stein, *How to Write* (New York: Dover Press, 1975), 24.
[73] Ibid., 28–29.
[74] Ibid., 43.
[75] Meyerowitz, introduction to *How to Write*, v.
[76] Gertrude Stein, "What Are Master-pieces and Why Are There so Few of Them," in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 412.

Stein's thoughts about identity here are interesting; she privileges action over identity and recognition, and insists any creative act is indeed an act—it consumes the individual and temporarily erases identity. She emphasizes the process of creating, not the product, and suggests that this is the only way to make a masterpiece. The masterpiece may in the end be about identity, but for the writer to achieve master status, she must empty herself. Later, when Stein writes that recognition "destroys creation" and that "this is what makes school," she links school, and thus learning, to the death of creativity. To learn is to recognize and to be recognized; it is to be conscious of the self, and this consciousness is exactly what Stein wants to erase in the writing process so that a masterpiece can be achieved. It is an ironically prescriptive moment; Stein instructs her audience to disavow instruction as a means to artistic production.

Stein revisits her uncomfortable relationship with instruction with the aptly titled and commanding *To Do*, written nearly a decade after *How to Write* and four years after her "What Are Master-pieces" lecture was first given. The sequence of these works helps reveal *To Do*, as I suggested earlier, as an instruction manual for writing rather than a primer on the alphabet. The letters of the alphabet are the building blocks of Stein's writing; instead of an arbitrary structure, the alphabet becomes a meaningful way for her to teach a (supposedly) youthful audience about the power of words.[77] From her preference for aptonyms, to her numerous and resonating puns on homonyms, Stein insists in *To Do* that words are meaningful. In this text,

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[77] In a similar vein, Dana Cairns Watson has recently argued that *The Gertrude Stein First Reader* (which is split into twenty "Lessons") is also committedly didactic. Watson writes: "Letters, phonemes, words, phrases, definitions, contextual meaning, genre, writing, time, the validation of personal feelings, and the exploration of identity: this array of topics demonstrates that Stein's primer is a serious attempt to address the needs of young children." Watson, "Building a Better Reader," 247.

she is wholly invested in the power of creation, and despite her insistence in "What Are Master-pieces" that identity must be erased in the writing process, Stein conjures a world in which her distinctive narrative voice is omnipresent, and in which things happen only at her will. Indeed, the entire book is framed by the command for imaginative play. The introduction of "Mildew," which both adheres to this instruction for play while undermining the command to begin a book by creating names and birthdays out of the alphabet, creates a push-and-pull in the text between authoritative power and an undermining of this power.

Stein's *To Do* thus exploits the inherent tensions of the alphabetic sequence, which is always, in a sense, at odds with itself. The sequence as a form is both rigid and loose, a symbol of rationality, linearity, and order, but also a symbol and means of nonsense, arbitrariness, and (children's) play. By playing both on the conventions of the children's alphabet book and on the literary abecedarian form, Stein is able to have her cake and eat it too. *To Do* is didactic, and it also resists didacticism. Its broad outline follows the linear alphabetic sequence, but each of its twenty-six sections is wildly uneven. Stein creates patterns, then breaks them. She creates rules, and breaks them too. By structuring her book with the alphabetic sequence, Stein both plays upon the alphabetic sequence as a symbol of power and authority, but also exploits its arbitrariness and its malleability. In this way, the alphabetic sequence is an ideal device for an author like Stein, whose ethos, in Juliana Spahr's words, "is as much one of building as of subverting."[78]

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[78] Spahr, *Everybody's Autonomy*, 42.

Sphar suggests that Stein's writing does "does not deny authority but instead advocates its dispersal,"[79] and goes on to suggest that Stein's slippery language puts interpretation on the side of her readers and encourages them "to be their own authors"[80] in the interpreting of her work. I want to present an alternative reading of Stein. When it comes to *To Do*, Stein instructs readers to be their own authors, not of her works (in an almost reader-response manner, as Spahr suggests), but of their own. *To Do* does not teach alphabet acquisition; it is instead a guide to *using* the alphabet. In the opening lines, Stein implores us to see how much can come out of just twenty-six letters—from the alphabet comes names, from names come birthdays, from names and birthdays come identities, from identities come hundreds of narratives. And Stein's consistent dismantling of these identities (and the narratives that contain them) is an acknowledgment that the author's power lies as much in her ability to destroy—a character, a form, even the alphabet itself—as it does in her power to create. *To Do*, which masquerades as a children's book, is then both a guide to and justification for her creative work. When Stein begged Van Vechten, "please like the book, and think of all those funny stories in it, you do like them, please do," she wasn't just asking for his approval on *To Do*; she was asking for wholesale recognition and affirmation of her creative process.

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[79] Ibid., 44.
[80] Ibid., 41.

The Alphabet in Video Art:

Baldessari, Rosler, and Pedagogical Form

The Cubies Take Manhattan

In response to the Armory Show of 1913, the first major exhibition of modern art in America,

Mary Mills Lyall wrote and published *The Cubies' ABC*, an equally delightful and strange

alphabet book in verse that pokes fun at the modern art movement. Lyall's small book, which

was illustrated by her husband, architect Earl Harvey Lyall, features three young triangular

creatures—"the Cubies"—who encounter (and often help to construct) the work of artists such

Brancusi, Braque, Duchamp, Kandinsky, and Picasso. *The Cubies' ABC* does not exactly admire

the art of the Armory Show; the book begins by announcing that "A is for Art in the Cubies

domain…. / They're the joy of the mad, the despair of the sane," and by its end, the book

determines that "X is the Xit, Xtremely alluring / When Cubies invite us to study their art."[1] The

book does not simply make blanket statements about modern art, however. Among these

playful dismissals are also pointed assessments of specific artists and works of the Armory Show.

Consider, for example, the stanza on Duchamp:

> D is for Duchamp, the Deep-Dyed Deceiver,
>
> Who drawing accordeons [sic] labels them stairs,
>
> With a lady who must have been done in a fever—
>
> His model won't see her, we trust it would grieve her!—

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[1] Mary Mills Lyall, *The Cubies' ABC*, illus. Earl Harvey Lyall (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1913), 6, 52. I wish to thank Donal Harris for introducing me to the Cubies.

(Should the stairway collapse, Cubie's good at repairs.)

—D is for Duchamp, the Deep-Dyed Deceiver.[2]
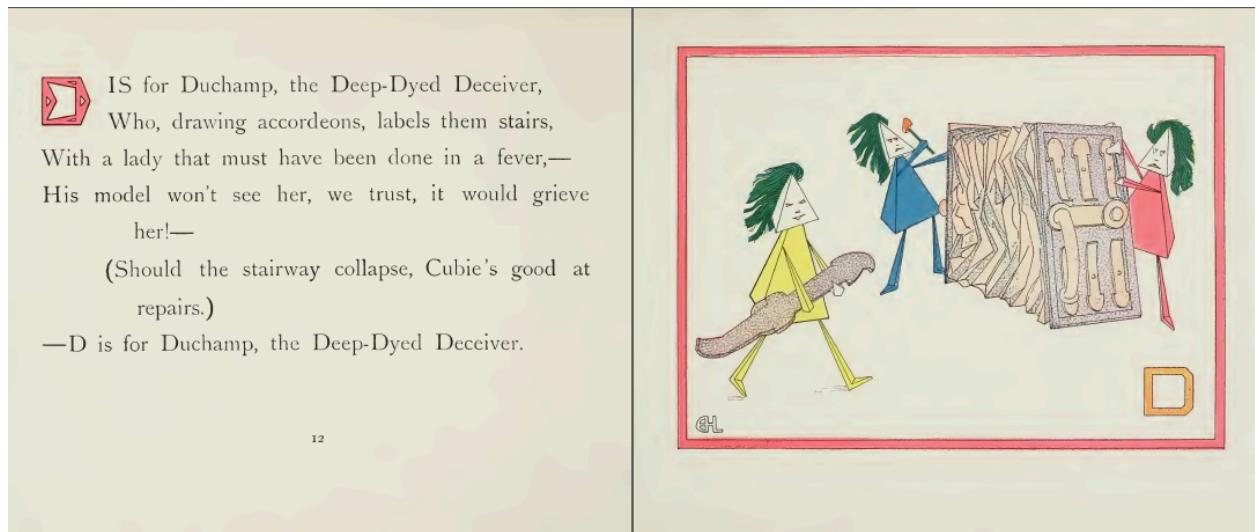
Figure 3.1: Illustration from *The Cubies' ABC,* by Mary Mills Lyall , illustrated by Earl Harvey Lyall

The object of derision here is Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2*, one of the most incendiary pieces of the Armory Show. Duchamp's piece renders in oil paint the movement of a figure walking down a set of stairs and is an attempt to portray time in a spatial medium; Duchamp has described the painting as "a static representation of movement."[3] Though *The Cubies' ABC* pokes fun at the painting by suggesting that its model would be aggrieved by her representation, and that the figure's shape resembles not movement but an object in and of itself—an accordion—Lyall's illustration displays a real engagement with the painting and imagines its assembly piece-by-piece. Throughout the book, Lyall smartly imitates the art of a

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[2] Ibid., 12.
[3] Qtd. in David W. Galenson, *Conceptual Revolutions in Twentieth-Century Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 39.

number of the artists under derision (Brancusi and Kandinsky are standouts) and even the

young Cubies themselves are angular, geometric figures, much more like than unlike the art

that they ridicule. *The Cubies' ABC* may playfully deride modern art, but its very design and

illustrations are clearly indebted to it. The book, then, inhabits a liminal territory. It is both

fascinated and aggrieved by modern art; it dismisses it in words, but engages with it in images

that often serves as guides to its creation.[4]

    The Cubies' ABC takes the form of a children's alphabet book, and though its parodic

elements would probably fly right over the heads of actual children, it hews closely to the

expectations of its genre. It is written in verse, it features both text and image, it takes on the

familiar "A is for…" "B is for…" form known as the "alphabet array," and it has the dual didactic

intent of introducing young readers to modern artists while also satirizing those artists for an

older and in-the-know reading audience.[5] And though it is a comment on modern art, and not

exactly an example of modern art, this strange little book from 1913 provides a framework for

thinking about the didactic impulse in modern art, particularly as it is mediated through the

form of the alphabetic sequence. The inherent tension in the sequence itself—it is both an

arbitrary form and a culturally-laden symbol—has provided the occasion for visual artists to

engage in a constellation of concerns throughout the century. Alphabetic works take on not

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[4] For more on *The Cubies' ABC*, see this article about the reprinting of the book on the centenary of the Armory Show: Alec Wilkinson, "Cubies," *The New Yorker*, March 4, 2013, < http://www.newyorker.com/talk/2013/03/04/130304ta_talk_wilkinson > For other parodies of modernism, many of which show a similar canny engagement with its art and literature, see Leonard Diepeveen, *Mock Modernism: An Anthology of Parodies, Travesties, Frauds, 1910-1935* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

[5] The term "alphabet array" is Patricia Crain's coinage in *The Story of A: The Alphabetization of America from* The New England Primer *to* The Scarlet Letter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). See Crain's Chapters 1 and 2 for more on the history of the alphabet book.

only the relationship between text and image, but also the dual semantic and visual registers of the written word and the larger system of symbolic discourse and the subjects embroiled in and/or oppressed by it. In doing so, these works often reveal the avant-garde's impulse toward—if not a whole-hearted commitment to—a kind of art-specific didacticism.

Broadly speaking, before the twentieth century, the alphabetic sequence was rarely deployed in art or literature outside of a didactic context; it almost always functioned as a tool for early language learning in texts such as children's primers. In the twentieth century, a century which saw a linguistic turn not just in visual art, but also in philosophy, the sequence became a means through which to explore language more generally while still retaining a connection to a didactic history, and even, more potently, to an ongoing didactic present. One cannot write—one cannot function in the world of symbolic discourse—without first learning her ABCs, and this is as true today as it was 100 years ago. The alphabetically-ordered text, whether a parodic alphabet book such as *The Cubies' ABC* or a painting such as Jasper Johns's *Gray Alphabets* always retains this connection to the initiation into symbolic discourse.[6]

Visual art's investment in language came to its apex in the late 1960s and 1970s in the heyday of conceptual art, a movement that explicitly valued concepts over aesthetics and ideas over execution. Conceptual art was committedly discursive, and it is perhaps no surprise, then, that two of the movement's canonical pieces take the alphabetic sequence as their form. This chapter will be concerned with these two time-based works—John Baldessari's *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet* (1972) and Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975)—works that

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[6] See Karen Coats, "P is for Patriarchy: Re-Imaging the Alphabet," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 25.2 (Summer 2000): 90, for a psychoanalytic reading of the work of the alphabet book.

meditate not just on the relationship between word and image, subject and linguistic system, but even more crucially on pedagogy and the avant-garde. While the videos have the structure of the alphabetic sequence in common, they are quite different. In *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet*, Baldessari is interested in the (im)possibilities of pedagogy in the studio art classroom after conceptual art's discursive turn, while in *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, Rosler is interested in the alphabetic sequence as a site of patriarchal over-determination exemplified by the late twentieth-century space of the cooking show. Despite these differences in subjects, for both artists the alphabet is a manifestation of a repressive order against which they can imagine non-oppressive pedagogical practices, practices which, I will go on to argue, ultimately share more with the alphabetic structure than the artists might care to admit.

In the sections that follow, this chapter will provide a historical context for Baldessari and Rosler's works by placing them in a lineage of twentieth-century visual art interested in didactic language, and then provide a short overview of the role of video, a medium inaugurated in the late 1960s, within this history. The chapter will then turn to *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet* and contextualize it with Baldessari's writings and interviews about teaching at CalArts in the early 1970s, and with a theorization of Baldessari's position at the helm of a self-consciously radical arts institution within the longer history of arts education. This section will ultimately argue that Baldessari's video isn't a condemnation of arts education in general, but that it is instead a dismissal of a traditional pedagogy invested in a sequential system of teaching studio art. *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet* paradoxically places language at the center of studio art education while skewering the alphabetic sequence—the foundational linguistic form—*as* an educational model. The fourth section of the chapter will consider Rosler's

Semiotics of the Kitchen, an avowedly feminist work, and focus on the alphabetic sequence's function as a form of oppression. For Rosler, the alphabetic sequence stands in for a patriarchal order that not only limits the roles of women, but that also demands that women teach and thus perpetuate that order. The chapter will conclude by considering Baldessari's and Rosler's works alongside each other and reflecting upon the ways in which both artists position themselves against what we might call alphabetic learning while unwillingly—or even unknowingly—enacting an alphabetic pedagogy in their own philosophies of didacticism. The conclusion will also suggest that what is at stake in both artists' decisions to employ the new medium of video in their explorations of the alphabet, pedagogy, and oppressive institutions is a concern with narrative form. Throughout the chapter, I will consider the alphabetic sequence as both form and content, as organizing system and object under investigation. In the McLuhan-esque terms appropriate to the time, the alphabet it is both the medium and the message.

Didactic Language in/and Modern Art

Art and language have never been completely separate domains; we can trace the co-occurrence of text and visual art back to the classical era.[7] This being said, the text-in-art trend undoubtedly accelerated in the modern period. In the late nineteenth century, artists such as Jacques Béraud represented language in its natural habitat in street scenes and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec got in on the advertising game and included text in his pieces as a direct

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[7] For an overview, see John Dixon Hunt, "The Fabric and the Dance: Word and Image to 1900," *Art, Word and Image: Two Thousand Years of Visual/Textual Interaction,* ed. John Dixon Hunt, (London: Reaktion, 2010), 35-86.

address to potential customers.[8] In the early twentieth century, Pablo Picasso and Georges

Braque began incorporating found textual materials such as newspaper clippings, advertising

labels, ticket stubs, and handbills in their collages, thereby questioning how, and even *if,* we

should read language semantically in visual art.[9] Though Baldessari's and Rosler's work would

be impossible without the innovations of these artists, the artists' use of language in their

videos—in both cases, via the alphabetic sequence—comes out of a more specific lineage. This

lineage, which includes René Magritte, Jasper Johns, and Joseph Kosuth, is concerned not only

with language, but with the *teaching* of language.

Unlike Picasso's collages, there is no doubt that Magritte's paintings are made to be

read. Take for example the Surrealist's 1927 painting *The Interpretation of Dreams* which

reminds us of a blackboard, or, perhaps, as David Sylvester has put it, as "a reading primer gone

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[8] For a reading of paintings such as Beraud's *Colonne Morris*, see Chapter 2, "Grand Bazar Universel: Impressionist Words," in Simon Morley, *Writing on the Wall: Word and Image in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[9] How to interpret the text in Picasso's collages has long been a subject of debate. Most critics agree that Picasso's language demands reading; Christine Poggi points out that Picasso's frequent punning in his collages is almost inescapable. His piece *Guitar, Sheet Music, and Wine Glass,* for example, features a clipping from the newspaper "LE JOURNAL" that has been shortened to read "LE JOU"—"the game." Underneath "LE JOU" is a headline "LA BATAILLE S'EST ENGAGE"—"the battle has begun"—which critics have read both read in its original context as a reference to the Balkan Wars, and also more figuratively, in Poggi's words, as "the challenge of collage itself as a new pictorial form." See Christine Poggi, *In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism, and the Invention of Collage* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), xx. Other critics, most notably Patricia Leighton and David Cottington, have argued that we must not just read the newspapers within the semiotic system of the painting itself (as Rosalind Krauss has suggested), but that we should read them as statements of Picasso's own politics. See Patricia Dee Leighten, *Re-Ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism, 1897-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); David Cottington, *Cubism in the Shadow of War: The Avant-Garde and Politics in Paris 1905-1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Picasso Papers* (New York: Diane Pub Co, 1998), particularly the chapter "The Circulation of Signs."

wrong."[10] This painting, separated into four fields, features four image/text combinations in which three of the four images have mismatched referents. Under an image of a handbag we read in carefully painted script "le ciel" ("the sky"), under an image of a pocket knife, "l'oiseau" ("the bird"), and under an image of a leaf, "la table" (the table). Only the image in the bottom right quadrant matches the words that are paired with it; the image of "l'éponge" is indeed a sponge. This painting calls into question the relationship between word and image, signifier and signified, and its title, which references Freud's landmark work, asks us to consider these relationships within the psychoanalytic context of manifest and latent content.[11] In psychoanalysis, rarely is a bird ever just a bird.

Figure 3.2: René Magritte, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1927

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[10] David Sylvester, ed., *René Magritte, Catalogue Raisonné: Oil Paintings, 1916-1930* (Menil Foundation, 1992), 168.

[11] The original title of the painting in French is *La clef des songes*—literally, "the key of dreams"—but is always translated as *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The original title of Freud's work is *Die Traumdeutung,* which is translated into French as *L'interprétation du rêve*. The original French title, with the word "la clef" seems to imagine a fixed relationship between the signifier and signified, while the title in translation emphasizes the interpretive work involved in that determination.

Figure 3.3: René Magritte, *The Treachery of Images*, 1928-1929

Magritte's well-known *The Treachery of Images* (1928-29)—which features an image of a pipe

flanked by the phrase "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" or "this is not a pipe"—pushes these questions

further.[12] Why *isn't* this pipe a pipe? Is the pipe not a pipe because it is an image of a pipe, or

because signifiers can never match their referents (whether an actual pipe or a representation

of one)? How does "ceci" or "this" function in the piece: can the word ever be indexical?

Importantly, I think, Magritte paints both of these pieces with an aesthetic that can only be

called scholastic; they both feel like a kind of Saussurean lesson in the gap between signifier

and signified. Foucault locates this scholastic aesthetic in the painting's text, which, like the text

of the earlier painting, is "steady, painstaking, artificial.... a script from the convent, like that

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[12] This piece's original French title is *La Trahison des Images*; it is sometimes translated into
English as *The Treason of Images*, or as *The Betrayal of Images*.

found heading the notebooks of schoolboys, or on a blackboard after an object lesson."[13]

Between these two paintings, then, we have a decidedly elementary-scholastic aesthetic: the careful script, a blackboard, the text and image combination indigenous to the alphabet primer. Text and image are in conflict for Magritte, but this is his point: the symbolic order is arbitrary.[14]

If Magritte explored the arbitrariness of the signifier in his work, Jasper Johns was conversely interested in the meaning of deeply-embedded cultural signifiers. His paintings from the 1950s—of flags, targets, maps, numbers, and the alphabetic sequence—elevate the ordinary instruments of western culture to heightened symbolic levels.[15] Simon Morley links Johns's work to Magritte's by way of their mutual scholastic aesthetic. He argues that Johns's pieces such as *Numbers in Color* and *Gray Alphabets*, like Magritte's, show a "preference for the kind of paraphernalia associated with the environment of the elementary school."[16] But Johns's interesting move, as Philip Fisher has argued, is that he takes these symbols of culture out of use; the number line and the alphabetic sequence, for example, function only as symbols. Johns presents the letters of the alphabet as objects in and of themselves; they are the *elements* of language, but not functioning language. The alphabetic sequence may be a potent symbol of civilization—and the letters may be a "means to assemble everything"—but in Johns's painting, the sequence is inert, even effaced; in Fisher's words, the letters "address human possibility

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[13] Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, trans. James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 15. See this piece for an extended reading of Magritte's painting.

[14] Other Magritte paintings play on this Saussurean theme; the artist painted a series of images titled *The Interpretation of Dreams*. All of these paintings share a form and aesthetic with the one described above. Other works by Magritte with similar concerns are *The Empty Mask* (1928), *The Living Mirror* (1928) and *The Palace of Curtains* (1929).

[15] Johns describes his intentions for these pieces: "everyone had an everyday relationship to numbers and letters, but never before had they seen them in the context of a painting."Qtd. in Morley, 128.

[16] Ibid., 130.

while in themselves being nothing."[17] Unlike Magritte, Johns doesn't play with the gap between

signifier and signified; in pieces such as *Gray Alphabets*, Johns give us signifiers and no signifieds.

He reduces western civilization to its barest elements, and then magnifies those elements to a
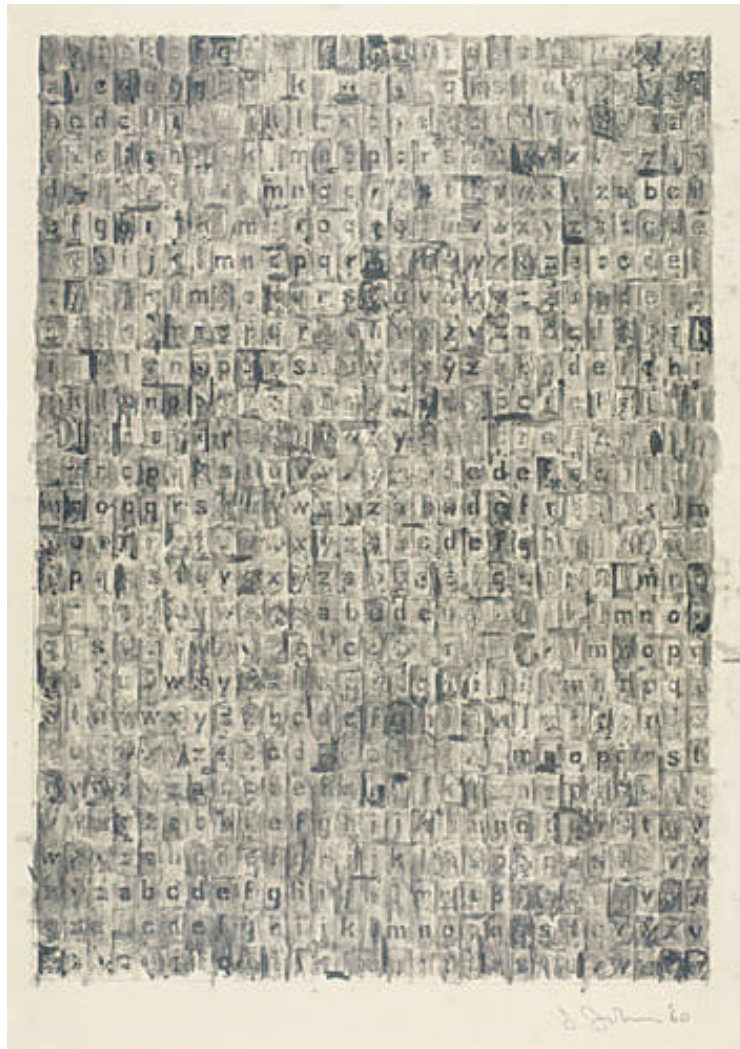
state of symbolic inertness.

Figure 3.4: Jasper Johns, *Gray Alphabets*, 1960

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[17] Philip Fisher, *Making and Effacing Art: Modern American Art in a Culture of Museums* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 86, 88.

The linguistic trend in visual art became more pronounced in the late 1960s and early

1970s, when conceptual artists began expressing a bold (if impossible) desire to escape

aesthetics and operate only in ideas, to disavow the optics of art and concern themselves only

with meaning. This concept-centric art, which draws from the tradition of the Duchamp

readymade, produced enormous amounts of text, both within and about the art; conceptualists

were fond of writing pieces in the commanding and didactic tone of the manifesto. In the

influential "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," for example, Sol LeWitt declares that "in conceptual

art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work" and that "the execution is a

perfunctory affair."[18] Ian Burn similarly affirms that "viewing is an experience outside of the

idea and its structure, visual interest has become arbitrary."[19] Joseph Kosuth, tracing

conceptualism's tradition, locates its roots in Duchamp: "with the unassisted readymade, art

changed its form from the form of the language to what was being said."[20] It is telling that

Kosuth uses a linguistic metaphor to describe the field of visual art; for him, the "form" of

conceptual art is "what [is] being said"—the signified, not the signifier. In these early

theorizations of conceptual art, artists authorize what Burn first identified as the "deskilling" of

art, in which aesthetic skill is downplayed and rendered immaterial and "perfunctory.[21] The

term deskilling, however, may be misleading. Burn doesn't suggest that conceptualists have no

skills; he suggests instead that artists' skills rest in a familiarization with "forms of knowledge"

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[18] Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed.
Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999)*,* 12.
[19] Ian Burn, "Dialogue," Alberro and Stimson, *Conceptual Art,* 110.
[20] Joseph Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy," Alberro and Stimson, *Conceptual Art,* 164.
[21] Ian Burn, "The Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath," Alberro and Stimson, *Conceptual Art*, 395. For a
more recent take on deskilling, see John Roberts, "Art After Deskilling," *Historical Materialism*
18.2 (August 1, 2010): 77–96.

rather than with "manual dexterity."[22] In 1968, Lucy Lippard and John Chandler described this

shift in less loaded terms, writing that "the studio is again becoming a study."[23] Though it would

be naïve to think that conceptual art could do away with aesthetics completely, that there

could even be such a thing as visual art without "visual interest," that conceptual artists both

conceived of and framed their art in discursive terms—in the terms of the study, rather than in

the terms of the studio—cannot be denied.[24]

    Kosuth's piece *One and Three Chairs* is a prime example of this increasingly discursive

art that aims to teach us a lesson, and it owes as much to Magritte as it does to Duchamp. The

piece is an installation that consists of three parts: a photograph of a chair mounted to a wall,

the chair itself leaning against the wall, and a photographic enlargement of a dictionary entry

for the word "chair," also mounted on the wall. This piece, which is a Saussurean lesson in the

vein of Magritte, calls into question the relationship between objects and their

representation—is there one chair in this piece or three? Is the actual chair more of a chair than

the linguistic and photographic representation of it? Is the idea of a chair the same as the chair

itself? Can language adequately substitute for the thing? A year later, Kosuth began a series

that homed in on these questions even more acutely; the pieces of *Art as Idea as Idea* (1966-

68) consist of negative photo-enlargements of dictionary definitions for words such as "water,"

"meaning," "art," "north," "nothing," and "element." In effect, Kosuth winnows down the

questions of *One and Three Chairs* to those that ask only about linguistic representations. Does

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[22] Ibid.

[23] Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," Alberro and Stimson, *Conceptual Art*, 46.

[24] For an important account of the aesthetics of conceptual art, see Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (1990): 105–43.

the word "water" conjure up the thing itself? Does an abstract word such as "meaning" signify

anything outside of the symbolic order as the word "water" might? Are these definitions

accurate? What do we have to compare these definitions to or against?

wa-ter (wâ′tėr), *n.* [AS. *wæter* = D. *water* = G. *wasser,* akin to Icel. *vatn,* Goth. *watō,* water, also to Gr. ὕδωρ, Skt. *udan,* water, L. *unda,* a wave, water; all from the same root as E. *wet*: cf. *hydra, otter*[1], *undine,* and *wash.*] The liquid which in a more or less impure state constitutes rain, oceans, lakes, rivers, etc., and which in a pure state is a transparent, inodorous, tasteless liquid, a compound of hydrogen and oxygen, H_2O, freezing at 32° F. or 0° C., and boiling at 212° F. or 100° C.; a special form or variety of this liquid, as rain, or (often in *pl.*) as the liquid ('mineral water') obtained from a mineral spring (as, "the *waters* of Aix-la-Chapelle".

Figure 3.5: Joseph Kosuth, *Art as Idea as Idea* [Water]," 1966-68

What binds these pieces together is not just their content, but their aesthetic; the

pieces of *Art as Idea as Idea* are all are negative enlargements of dictionary entries of white text

on black ground. The series' aesthetic is, like Magritte's, scholastic; the effect of the negative

reversal is that the pieces look almost like blackboards with white chalk writing on them. And

the dictionary definition itself is a specimen of authority, of all-knowingness; it is a text that not

only defines words, but that reduces them to their barest elements—their parts of speech, their etymology. Much like the alphabet book, in which A is for Apple and B is for Boy, the dictionary attempts to reduce the world to a set of knowable elements. Kosuth's innovation is that he no longer needs the text and image pairing of Magritte's *The Interpretation of Dreams* or even of his own *One and Three Chairs*; he asks the same questions that art had been asking since the 1920s with words alone.

We come, finally, to Baldessari, who enjoys a somewhat uneasy relationship to conceptual art. While artists such as Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Hans Haacke, and Douglas Huebler were defining the movement in New York through their work (largely curated and exhibited by Seth Siegelaub) and also through their writings, Baldessari was teaching in southern California, first at community colleges and then at UCSD and CalArts. In his landmark 1969 essay "Art After Philosophy," Kosuth is dismissive of Baldessari: "although the amusing pop paintings of John Baldessari allude to this sort of work by being 'conceptual' cartoons of actual conceptual art, they are not really relevant to this discussion [of conceptual art]."[25] Kosuth places Baldessari in a secondary position in this piece; he doesn't consider Baldessari to be one of the prime movers of the conceptual art movement, and reduces him to the role of "conceptual cartoon[ist]." While I do think Kosuth undervalues Baldessari's work, there is no doubt that, in 1969, Baldessari was a peripheral figure in conceptual art. But to reduce Baldessari's work to cartoon is to see only the (undeniable) humor in his pieces, and to refuse to read through, but also *with* that humor to find a point of critique.

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[25] Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy," 175.

Whether we think of Baldessari as a conceptualist, a fringe conceptualist, or even a post-conceptualist, it is clear that he shared conceptualism's interest in language and didacticism, and, more than any of his conceptual contemporaries, explored didacticism not just in theory but in practice. Furthermore, Baldessari took these interests into new forms of media. While the pieces I traced earlier in this section are primarily constructed out of two-dimensional media (Picasso's collages, Magritte's paintings), many important conceptual pieces such as Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* are three-dimensional installation pieces.[26] Baldessari went in a different direction from conceptualists such as Kosuth, however, and began exploring time-based media, particularly video. The Sony Portapak, a portable video tape recording system first developed by the US government for use in the Vietnam war, became available to the public in 1967, and many artists, Baldessari and Rosler included, grabbed hold of this new medium with a palpable sense of freedom. Its only technological precursor was broadcast television; it had no history as an aesthetic form. Artist Frank Gilette described the new medium as "the opposite of painting" in that "it had no formal burdens at all," while Catherine Elwes suggested that the only conventions of video were that "there were no conventions."[27] While some early video artists of the late 1960s and early 1970s—most famously Nam June Paik—did use the video camera to level a critique at broadcast TV, others were more interested in exploring the possibilities of this new time-based medium untethered to its technological

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[26] For more on this shift toward installation art, see Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 276-290.

[27] Qtd. in Marita Sturken, "Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form: Great Expectations and the Making of a History," in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, eds. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (New York: Aperture, 1990): 107; Catherine Elwes, *Video Art: A Guided Tour* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 41.

precursor.[28] In 1974, David Antin, colleague of Baldessari (in the late 1960s) and eventual

teacher and friend of Martha Rosler at UCSD (in the early 1970s), described the discourse that

was growing up around these early approaches to early video art: "One, a kind of enthusiastic

welcoming prose peppered with fragments of communication theory and McLuhanesque media

talk: the other, a rather nervous attempt to locate the 'unique properties of the medium.'"[29]

Baldessari found himself on the "nervous" side of this division, though it is highly

unlikely that he would describe his work in this way. He explains that he "spent a good deal of

time from 1970 onwards doing video, film, photography, trying in some Greenbergian way to

find out what was essential to each medium."[30] One of these "unique" or "essential" properties

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[28] Several volumes, some edited collections and others historical monographs, have largely
defined the field of video art. For more on the history of video art, see Catherine Elwes, *Video
Art: A Guided Tour* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005), and Chris Meigh-Andrews, *A History of Video
Art: The Development of Form and Function* (Oxford: Berg, 2006). For more theoretical
approaches to the field, see essays in *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, ed John Hanhardt
(Rochester, NY: Visual Studies Workshop, 1986), *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video
Art*, eds. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (New York: Aperture Books, 1991), in particular, the
excellent essay "Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form: Great Expectations and the Making of
History" by Maria Sturken. See also, *Video: The Reflexive Medium*, ed. Yvonne Spielmann
(Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007). For Rosler's extended take on video as a medium, in which
she expresses a desire for more socially-conscious video work, see her landmark essay
"Shedding the Utopian Moment" in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975—2001*
(Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 53-88.
[29] David Antin, "Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium" in *Video Culture: A Critical
Investigation*, ed John Hanhardt (Rochester, NY: Visual Studies Workshop, 1986), 147.
[30] Sidra Stich, "Conceptual Alchemy: A Conversation with John Baldessari," *American Art* 19.1
(March 2005): 68. Baldessari here is referring to Clement Greenberg's influential theory of
modernism, in which he posits that self-reflexive medium-specific investigation defines
modernist art: "Western civilization is not the first civilization to turn around and question its
own foundations, but it is the one that has gone furthest in doing so. I identify Modernism with
the intensification, almost the exacerbation, of this self-critical tendency that began with the
philosopher Kant." He continues: "Each art, it turned out, had to perform this demonstration on
its own account. What had to be exhibited was not only that which was unique and irreducible
in art in general, but also that which was unique and irreducible in each particular art." Clement
Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism*

of video was its duration, which opened up the possibilities for language in art; in video,

language could appear not just as static text, but as spoken in time.[31] Language could be central

in video in a way that it just couldn't be two-dimensional or non-time-based media, for in video,

there was a real potential for narrative. As such, it is telling that Baldessari and Rosler, when

working in the early days of this new medium, take on language's elemental form—the

alphabetic sequence—and use it to explore this new territory. Instead of creating new

structures, these artists turn to the alphabetic sequence, which functions in these videos both

as a synecdoche for language more generally and as a sequential structural scaffolding with a

potential for narrative. In doing so, they build upon the history of didactic language in art; in

both videos, the alphabetic sequence is part and parcel of a scene of teaching. In the early

1970s, the sequence could not be a more potent symbol. as Marshall McLuhan had influentially

argued a few years earlier that "the phonetic alphabet, alone, is the technology that has been

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with a Vengeance, 1957-1969, ed. John O'Brien (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 85,
86. For Baldessari, this Greenbergian exploration is largely a matter of circumstance; he is fond
of mentioning in interviews that CalArts had 26 Portapaks available for student and faculty use.
John Baldessari, "Somebody to Talk to," interview with Jessica Morgan, 2009.
< http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/somebody-talk >
[31] While video is, in this sense, similar to film, the barriers to video production were
considerably lower than those to film. Video technology was relatively cheap, accessible, and
quick to produce. Elwes describes the new medium by making a useful analogy with painting;
for Elwes, video is to film what drawing is to painting. In an interview, she remarks that "video
was a bit like having a pencil with a rubber. I could put something down, and if I didn't like it I
could just rub it out. To me it was much closer to drawing and that's why I felt an affinity with
it." Video required no large production team, no complex equipment, and no lag time for the
development of film, and videos could be produced and disseminated quickly. Also unlike film,
video cameras recorded visual and audio components simultaneously. This allowed Baldessari,
Rosler, and many other early video artists to create and edit—if indeed, they even wanted to
edit—their videos alone and quickly. Catherine Elwes, interview with Chris Meigh Andrews.
< http://www.meigh-andrews.com/writings/interviews/catherine-elwes >

the means of creating 'civilized man.'"[32] As we will see in Baldessari and Rosler's videos,

"civilizing," or, in other words, "teaching," was crucial to the discursive landscape of art in the

early 1970s.

Baldessari at CalArts: Pedagogy and the Elemental

When John Baldessari began teaching at the California Institute of the Arts in 1970, he put

together a list of "art ideas" for the students in his now-legendary "Post Studio" class. The

course had no syllabus, no assignments, no grades, and no predetermined subject matter.

Baldessari's suggestions for his students, titled "List of Art Ideas for 1st Class of CalArts, Post

Studio (If They Have No Ideas of Their Own from which to Make a Piece)" are sometimes useful,

often hilarious, and never boring, and they illuminate both Baldessari's artistic practice and his

approach to pedagogy. These "art ideas" include commands: "Disguise an object to look like

another object," abstract and open-ended questions: "Can one give and take away aesthetic

content?" and somewhat obtuse phrases: "Ecological guerrilla art."[33] This intriguing list, which

has 109 entries, may help us understand why Baldessari, perhaps more than any other visual

artist of his generation, is famed both for his own work and for his teaching. From the mid-

1960s onward, he taught at the Otis Art Institute and at public schools and community colleges

across southern California. He helped found the studio art program at UCSD, taught and chaired

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[32] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New American Library, 1964), 86.

[33] John Baldessari, "List of Art Ideas for 1st Class of CalArts, Post Studio (If They Have No Ideas of Their Own from which to Make a Piece)," in *More Than You Wanted to Know about John Baldessari. Volume 1,* eds. Hans Ulrich Obrist and Meg Cranston (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2013), 76-88.

the art department at CalArts for almost 20 years, and taught at UCLA from 1996-2007.[34]

Accounts of Baldessari's art practice invariably turn to teaching at some point, and many

contemporary artists, including James Welling, David Salle, Barbara Bloom, Matt Mullican, and

the recently-deceased Mike Kelley were students in Baldessari's CalArts Post Studio classes in

the 1970s.[35]

A number of Baldessari's most well-known works explicitly thematize pedagogy.

Consider, for example, the 1968 photoemulsion on canvas *WRONG* which features an oddly

composed photograph in which a man stands in front of a palm tree such that the tree appears

to be growing out of the top of his head.[36] If we look closely enough, we see that Baldessari

himself is the subject. Beneath the photograph, we find the word "WRONG" painted in clear,

large lettering in acrylic paint across the canvas. The judgment that this one half of the piece

exerts on its other, a judgment so blatant that it reads as comically excessive, evokes the

discourse of the beginner's photography textbook that espouses the "rightness" or "wrongness"

of certain photographic compositions. This "WRONG" is unequivocal and authoritative not just

in its brevity but also in its style. Baldessari explains: "Although I actually did teach lettering in

high school and could have done it, I wanted to remove myself from it. I hired a professional

sign painter and told him, 'Don't try to make it look like art. Just make it like 'For Sale,' or 'Keep

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[34] Meg Cranston, "Tell Stories Like Jesus," introduction to *More Than You Wanted to Know about John Baldessari. Volume 1,* by John Baldessari, eds. Hans Ulrich Obrist and Meg Cranston (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2013), 21.

[35] For more on the history of Baldessari and his students at CalArts, see Douglas Eklund, *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009), particularly Chapter 1, "Image Art After Conceptualism: CalArts, Hallwalls, and Artists Space." See also Richard Hertz, *Jack Goldstein and the CalArts Mafia* (Ojai, CA: Minneola Press, 2011), particularly Chapters 1-5.

[36] For a description of the photoemulsion process, see: Coosje Van Bruggen, *John Baldessari* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), 38.

Out,' or whatever. I just want it to look like information.'"[37] The aesthetic of the "WRONG" is

not the aesthetic of Magritte's scholastic cursive; it is bold, clear, and authoritative. As such, it

sets the condition for resistance from its viewers. What *is* so wrong about this unusual

composition? Can we imagine an instance in which a photographer might want a palm tree to

appear to be growing out of his subject's head? Is strangeness, even ugliness, always

aesthetically "wrong"? Must photographs be composed with the golden ratio to be considered

"right"? What makes a composition right or wrong in the first place? And who is to make this

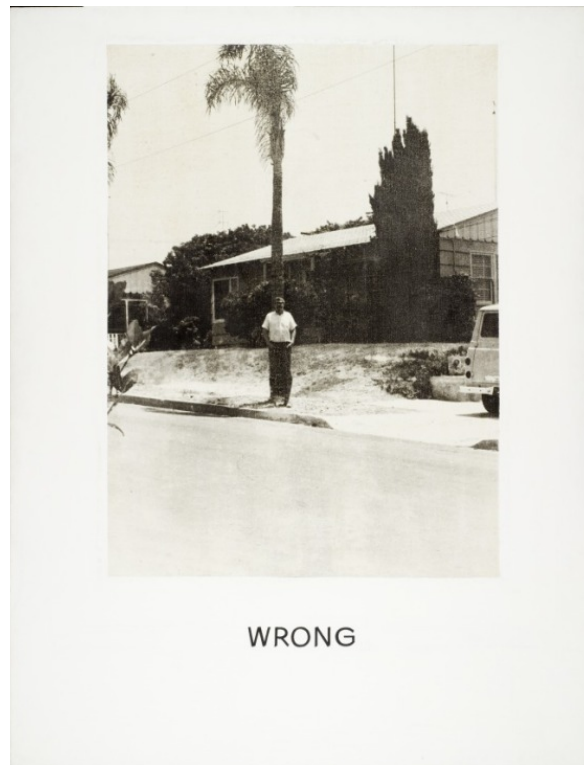decision—the artist? The viewer? A teacher?[38]

Figure 3.6: John Baldessari, *WRONG*, 1968.

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[37] Stich, "Conceptual Alchemy," 63.
[38] This reading of *Wrong* and aesthetic judgment is indebted to Sianne Ngai's reading of
Baldessari in Chapter 2, "Merely Interesting," of *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute,
Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

Baldessari's *WRONG* does not so much question the relationship between word and image as question the teacherly act of aesthetic judgment. The piece does not just have a scholastic aesthetic, as does Magritte's *The Interpretation of Dreams*; it actually creates a didactic situation within its borders. *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet* is thus but one of Baldessari's many pieces that thematize the relationship between art practice and pedagogy. In this section, I will contextualize Baldessari's 1972 video by considering it among his other discursive art pieces, his writings and interviews, the larger history of arts education in the west, and Joseph Beuys's performance piece *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*. I will argue that for Baldessari, making the bones of language bare in his video is not only a means of structuring a palpably new medium, but that by putting the alphabetic sequence at the center of his video he insists on the discursive turn within the visual arts while also a critiquing a traditional style of arts education based on the idea of a sequential pedagogy. In *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet*, Baldessari asks what arts education might (and might not) look like within the decidedly-radical arts institution.

CalArts was incorporated in 1961 by Walt Disney, and the school was born out of the merging of the Chouinard Art Institute and the Los Angeles Conservatory of Music. It was unique in that it offered programs in both the visual and the performing arts. Its first academic year was 1970-1971, and it opened with a "radical educational model," still in place today, that "favors independent artistic work over rigid curricula, collegial relationships among a community of artists over hierarchies of teacher and student, and continuous interaction among the different branches of the arts over the self-containment of each discipline."[39]

[39] http://calarts.edu/about/history

Though not explicitly articulated in this statement, one of the keys to the CalArts philosophy is the valuing of critical thinking above and beyond traditional artistic skills, or, in Ian Burn's terms, the valuing of "forms of knowledge" over "manual dexterity." The CalArts mantra was, and still is "no technique before need;" at CalArts, traditional skills such as drawing and painting were and are taught only *in service* of ideas. Baldessari has described the institute as having a "think-tank model" of education.[40] Even today, the required "Foundation Course" for all BFAs at CalArts is in critical studies, not in studio art.[41] As we can see, CalArts was deep in the sway of the conceptual art movement, and many of its early faculty members, including not just Baldessari, but also Allan Kaprow, Nam June Paik, and Michael Asher, were committed to the basic tenets of conceptualism.[42]

The radicalness of CalArts's educational model comes into sharp relief when we consider it against the backdrop of the history of studio arts education. This history is long and various, and each country has its own traditions of education, art and otherwise. What the many schools and camps of arts education have in common, though, is a commitment to a sequential idea of pedagogy, to the idea that there are fundamentals to art and that they must be learned in a meaningful order. In the paragraphs that follow, I will provide a brief overview of several examples of this sequentially-ordered pedagogy, a pedagogy that CalArts set itself up against, and, I will argue, that Baldessari skewers in *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet*. We can begin with the French Academy, which was founded in 1655. The academy held classes at the

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[40] Sarah Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World* (New York: Norton, 2009), 52. The second chapter in this book, "The Crit," provides a detailed portrait of the CalArts culture today.
[41] http://calarts.edu/academics/undergraduate-general-studies/faq
[42] Other influential visual arts faculty members of the time (not necessarily associated with conceptual art) include Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro, who founded the Feminist Art Program at CalArts in 1972.

Louvre and taught only drawing. The curriculum unfolded in a strict sequence: first students

drew from other drawings, then from plaster casts or antique sculptures, and then finally from

live models. In the eighteenth century, the sequence at the French Academy became even

more narrowly prescribed, not just in terms of models, but in terms of approach; students first

had to master drawing specific body parts before attempting to draw the whole body; they had

to draw noses, ears, lips, and so on before they could take on the whole human figure.[43] This

sort of sequential curriculum values representational skill, not originality.[44] And while the

influence of the Romantics expanded the mediums of art taught in schools beyond drawing,

curricula remained sequential, and almost always began with drawing. Take for example,

Britain's National Course of Instruction from the mid-nineteenth century for its schools of

design: the course consisted of 23 stages of instruction, 21 one of which were "strictly

imitative."[45] The course began with drawing. Stage 1 was "linear drawing with instruments,"

while Stage 2 was the "freehand outline of rigid forms from the flat copy." It wasn't until Stage

9 that students took on "anatomical studies,[46] and only a small fraction of students ever even

made it to Stage 10 (which finally introduced shading).[47]

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[43] James Elkins, *Why Art Cannot Be Taught: A Handbook for Art Students* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 17-18. For more on the history of the French academies, see Arthur D. Efland, *A History of Art Education: Intellectual and Social Currents in Teaching the Visual Arts* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1989) particularly Chapter 2, "Western Origins of Art Education," 8-48.

[44] For more on the rationale for this kind of pedagogy, see, Elkins, *Why Art Cannot Be Taught,* 18-27.

[45] Stuart MacDonald, *The History and Philosophy of Art Education* (London: University of London Press, 1970), 188.

[46] Ibid., 388-399.

[47] Ibid., 188.

While the skills taught in art and design programs would continue to change, the

underlying structure of a sequential set of masterable skills would persist into the twentieth

century. Perhaps the most influential art school of the modern period was the Bauhaus, the

German institute that was opened in 1919 by Walter Gropius. The Bauhuas, which taught a

combination of fine arts, design, architecture, and crafts ran until 1933 when it was shut down

by the Nazis. The heart of the Bauhaus curriculum was the *Vorkurs*, or Basic Course, developed

by Johannes Itten, which was a six-month introduction to the fundamentals of art and design.

The Basic Course covered Bauhaus-designated fundamentals such as color, materials,

composition, and abstract formal techniques that could be applied in any and every field, from

painting to architecture to textile work. The Basic Course offered training in "the mind, senses

and emotions,"[48] and the enrolled students performed prescribed exercises as a class. The goal

of Itten's Basic Course was to "liberate the student's creative powers" by teaching her the

foundations of art; once those had been learned, she could be "free."[49] James Elkins describes

some Basic Course lessons:

> **Textures:** Students gather different textures and try to depict them in pencil or charcoal.
>
> **Materials:** Students learn about different materials by making carvings, molds, and so
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> forth. Sometimes the object is to make as many different objects as possible out of the
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> same material.

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[48] Marcel Franciscono, *Walter Gropius and the Creation of the Bauhaus in Weimar* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 180.
[49] Ibid., 191.

Value: Students are asked to arrange small newspaper clippings into a continuous scale from white to black or to reproduce a scene or still life in shades of gray.[50]

While the exact exercises varied from teacher to teacher, the rationale behind them was the same: every artist, artisan and designer must have an understanding of the fundamentals first.[51] The Bauhaus pedagogy was so influential that James Elkins goes as far as to say that he is not sure "that there is any such thing as a post-Bauhaus method of elementary art instruction."[52]

Note the word "elementary" here: it may come as no surprise that Itten's Basic Course, and indeed the philosophy of the Bauhaus in general, was deeply influenced by the nineteenth-century reformer Friedrich Fröbel's conception of kindergarten.[53] Fröbel's kindergarten curriculum was organized around a strict sequence of what he called "Gifts and Occupations," in which the young students would receive "gifts" in a set order: first a set of six yarn balls attached to strings, then a sphere, cylinder, and cube attached to a bar, then four wooden

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[50] Elkins, *Why Art Cannot Be Taught*, 33. For many illuminating examples of the results of these exercises, see Michael Siebenbrodt, ed., *Bauhaus Weimar: Designs for the Future* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2000).

[51] After the six months of the Basic Course, students spent three years in a workshop specializing in a specific kind of material (such as glass, wood, textiles or stone). They would conclude by passing a municipal exam and then graduating to work in local industries or on Bauhaus commissions.

[52] Elkins, *Why Art Cannot Be Taught,* 36. For a reading of Bauhaus-inflected educational theory on an artist's work, see Rosalind Krauss's essay "Francesca Woodman: Problem Sets," which reads the artist's work in the context of her Rhode Island School of Design curriculum. Rosalind E. Krauss, *Bachelors* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000).

[53] Frobel in turn was building on the theories of Jean-Jacque Rousseau and Heinrich Pestalozzi. In books such as *ABC's of Anschauung*, for example, Pestalozzi argued that drawing should be taught in parallel to alphabetic writing through a sequence of "synchronized, repetitive exercises." J. Abbott Miller, "Elementary School" in *The ABC's of Bauhaus: The Bauhaus and Design Theory,* eds. Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000), 6.

blocks (and so on). There were twenty gifts in all. The gifts increased in complexity as the

sequence progressed, and kindergarten teachers encouraged students to use the toys to

interact with and eventually, to represent their environments.[54] While Fröbel's kindergarten is

fascinating area of study in and of itself, its influence on the Bauhaus is particularly compelling.

The underlying structure of the foundational sequence, the idea of the elemental in pedagogy,

the belief in a set of accumulative skills is evident across the Bauhaus curriculum, in the work of

Bauhaus teachers and students such as Kandinsky, Klee, and Moholy-Nagy, but also, as many

have argued, in the art and architecture of modernists such as Josef Albers, Piet Mondrian,

Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier.[55] Fröbel's idea—that the world can be broken down to its

elements, and then understood by a new human being, element by element—is a kind of

atomistic philosophy that we can trace back to Plato and Lucretius, and that we see in action all

across the modern period, not just in visual art, but also, for example, in the sphere of labor, in

Ford's assembly line and in Taylor's theory of scientific management.

It is important to understand CalArts in the context of this atomistic and sequential

educational theory; the institute's "radical educational model" rejected hundreds of years of

arts education. CalArts even overturned the curriculum of Chouinard Art Institute, its direct

predecessor, which focused on "classical art techniques and drawing skills," where "drawing

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[54] In the words of W. N. Hailmann, an American "kindergartener," "The gift gives the child a new cosmos, the occupation fixes the impression made by the gift. The gift invites only arranging activities, the occupation invites also controlling, modifying, transforming, creating activities. The gift leads to discovery; the occupation, to invention." Qtd. in Norman Brosterman, *Inventing Kindergarten* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 36. This book provides an excellent (and beautifully-photographed and illustrated) introduction to the history of Frobel's idea, and helpfully provides a chapter on each of his gifts, and later chapters on Fröbel's effects on twentieth-century art and architecture. For more on the Bauhaus and Fröbel, see Chapter 5 of Franciscono, *Walter Gropius.*

[55] See Brosterman, *Inventing Kindergarten*, particularly Chapters 5 and 6.

was mandated as an unavoidable discipline."[56] When Chouinard merged with the LA

Conservatory of Music and became CalArts, and when the new institution revolutionized the

traditional art curriculum and did away with all requirements, it decided not even to offer a

drawing class in the first year that it was open.[57] Not only did CalArts displace drawing as the

foundation of arts education, it negated the very idea that art could be broken down into a

series of skills that could be mastered.

Art pedagogy was not just a concern in southern California in the 1960s and 1970s; the

question of how to teach art was very much a concern in postwar (and post-Bauhaus) Germany

as well. Joseph Beuys's performance piece from 1965 titled *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead*

Hare, which Baldessari cites as an inspiration for his video, explicitly thematizes the question of

how to teach art to the viewer, not to the artist.[58] At the beginning of this piece, which was

performed as part of the artist's first solo exhibition in a gallery in Düsseldorf, Beuys locked all

of the visitors out of the gallery so that the audience could only see the performance by peering

in the windows. His head eerily covered in honey and gold leaf, Beuys began slowly walking

around the gallery while cradling a dead hare on his arm and whispering to it. The performance

lasted for three hours.[59] Critics have tended to read the piece within Beuys's mystical, hermetic

system of signifiers—he often used hares, honey, and gold in his pieces—and Valerie Casey

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[56] Whether their primary field was drawing or not, Gerald Nordland describes that all Chouinard students had to spend at least one full day a week drawing "in relation" to their art. For more on Chouinard, see Nordland's "Drawing and the Art School," www.chouinardfoundation.org.
[57] CalArts eventually had to begin offering drawing for reasons having to do with accreditation. See John Baldessari, interview with Karen Wright. *Art in America*, Oct. 23 2009.
< http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/john-baldessari >
[58] Stich, "Conceptual Alchemy," 80.
[59] For a more detailed description of the piece, see: Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 101-105.

explains that the artist "emphasized the productive potential of the animal consciousness to reach spiritual transformation."[60] Beuys himself offered readings along these lines, suggesting that "The idea of explaining to an animal conveys a sense of the secrecy of the world and of existence that appeals to the imagination…. Even a dead animal preserves more powers of intuition than some human beings with their stubborn rationality"[61] and "I explained to [the hare] because I do not really like explaining to people…. I told him that he needed only to scan the picture to understand what is really important about it."[62]

There is thus a deep ambivalence in Beuys's piece; it registers as both an earnest attempt at cross-species communication and, I think more interestingly, a provocative send-up of the art world. Casey writes that "the dead hare appears quite literally as a marker for the viewer in the museum—an anesthetized and flaccid figure to be carried and directed, supplied with the prosthetic vision of curatorial interpretation,"[63] and the piece poses the possibility that we humans are perhaps no better than a (dead) animal in our appreciation and understanding of art. Beuys makes his approach to understanding art known in his statements about the piece; in reaction against human "stubborn rationality," his reported "explanation" to the hare is not about the history of art or aesthetic theory or a cataloguing of his pieces' signifiers. He purportedly tells the dead rabbit that "he need only scan the picture" to understand it; that understanding art is in some sense intuitive. This sort of context-less appreciation of art relies

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[60] Valerie Casey, "Staging Meaning: Performance in the Modern Museum," *The Drama Review* 49.3 (2005): 78.

[61] Qtd. in Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys,* 105.

[62] Qtd. in Tracey Warr and Amelia Jones, eds, *The Artist's Body* (London: Phaidon Press, 2000) 77. For more on the mystical signifiers across Beuys's oeuvre, see Annie Suquet, "Archaic Thought and Ritual in the Work of Joseph Beuys," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 28 (1995): 148-162.

[63] Casey, "Staging Meaning," 78.

both on the ability of the artist to transmit information and the ability for the audience to

understand it without an art historical or critical apparatus. If the work of art does not

communicate directly with the viewer, Beuys's piece asks, how much is there really for the

artist to explain? What is the worth of an audience that needs such explanation? Beuys's *How

to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* both produces and questions the complex set of

relationships between artist and audience, human and non-human, pedagogue and student. It

is also worth mentioning that for Beuys, like Baldessari, teaching was an important part of his

identity as an artist; in a 1969 interview for *Artforum*, Beuys announced "to be a teacher is my

greatest work of art."[64]

Baldessari credits Beuys's piece as one of the catalysts for *Teaching a Plant the

Alphabet*; in a 2005 interview, he says that "I was certainly aware of Joseph Beuys's teaching

and his famous performance *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*. Also back then people

thought they could talk to plants. You might start out in a very elemental fashion and teach the

plant the alphabet first and then simple words and so on [*laughs*]."[65] Sidra Stich, the

interviewer, goes on to speak of Baldessari pushing Beuys's piece from "mysticism into

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[64] Qtd. in Catherine Moseley, ed., *Conception: Conceptual Documents 1968 to 1972* (Norwich: ARTicle Press, 2002), 159.

[65] Stich, "Conceptual Alchemy," 80. We can see that Baldessari was very interested in plants in general during this time period: the idea of talking to plants was not a throwaway interest. In his "List of Art Ideas," entry #5 is plant focused: "How can plants be used in art? Problem becomes how can we really get people to look freshly at plants as if they've never noticed them before. A few possibilities: 1. Arrange them alphabetically like books on a shelf; 2. Plant them like Popsicle trees (as in child art) perpendicular to line of hill; 3. Include object among plants that is camouflaged; 4. Color a palm tree pink; 5. Photo found growing arrangements; 6. Or a movie on how to plant a plant (76)." In a contemporaneous grant proposal, Baldessari suggests that he "would like to work in a botany lab" so that he can "explore living materials as opposed to inert materials" (72), and, interestingly, in a journal entry labeled "Working Backwards," he poses the question: "Is it worth it to teach ants the alphabet?" Baldessari, *More Than You Wanted to Know*, 150.

absurdity" but to see Beuys's piece only as "mystical" overlooks the deep absurdity of Beuys's

performance and the critique of the art world that it engenders.[66] Honey and gold-covered

head aside, can we really say that to teach a plant the alphabet is absurd, while to explain

pictures to a dead hare is not? (Baldessari's plant, is, at least, alive).

Baldessari's *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet* is thus at the crux of the two issues that I've

been tracing thus far; it is a response to the discursive turn in visual art amplified by

conceptualism *and* a response to the new—and un-sequential—form of arts education that

Baldessari was involved in instituting at CalArts. The black and white video opens on a small,

even scrawny house plant in a black pot sitting on a small circular table, positioned slightly off-

center in the screen, in front of a grayish wall. Thirty seconds into the start of the video,

Baldessari's hand appears in the top left corner of the screen, holding a flashcard printed with a

very large uppercase A and a smaller lowercase a. Underneath these As on the flashcard are

indistinguishable words. We see the shadow of the plant on the card. When his hand appears,

Baldessari, who is otherwise completely off screen, begins to speak, and he says, over and over

in a forceful, insistent monotone "A. A. A. A. A." He repeats the letter A a total of 41 times.

Then, the hands disappears and reappears with a similar flashcard for the letter B. We hear

Baldessari say "B" 39 times. Baldessari works through the entire alphabet like this, repeating

each letter between 35 and 50 times, ultimately repeating "Y" 44 times and "Z" 50 times.

Baldessari's repetitions are mostly mechanical, but are not perfectly regular; he sometimes

speeds up or slows down, and we can often hear him pause to take a breath. The intervals for

each letter vary from 25 to 40 seconds, though most intervals hover around 33 seconds. His

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[66] Stich, "Conceptual Alchemy," 81.

speech is fairly flat and affectless, though, I detect a slight plaintiveness (or maybe just

desperately inscribe one myself) when Baldessari repeats "Y"—easily heard as "why"—44 times

at the end of the video.[67]
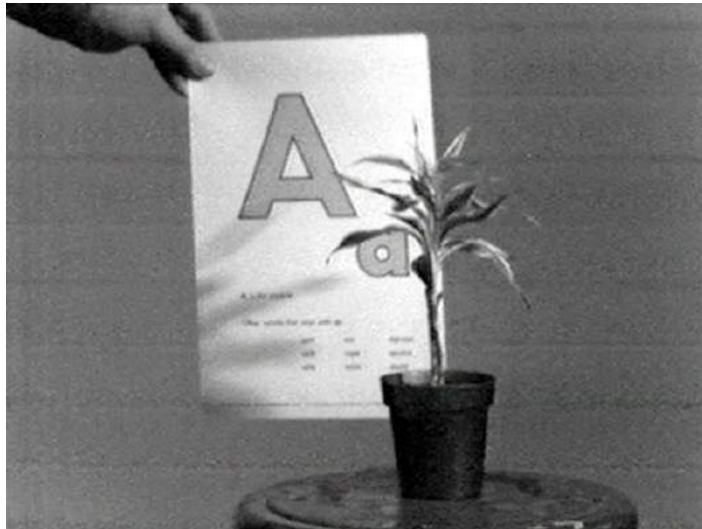
Figure 3.7: Video still from John Baldessari, *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet*, 1972

The video lasts just short of 19 minutes. The only movement in the frame is Baldessari's hand—

the camera is most likely on a tripod—and the only sound is Baldessari's voice. Once Baldessari

has made his way through the alphabet, the camera holds its gaze on the solitary plant for

another 30 seconds. When the video ends, we have no indication of whether or not the plant

has learned the alphabet.

If Beuys channels his absurdity into otherworldliness and creates a tension between

sincerity and absurdity, Baldessari's piece simply revels in it. Along with crediting Beuys as an

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[67] John Baldessari, "Teaching a Plant the Alphabet," 1972, 18:40 min, b&w, sound. Available
online at < http://ubu.com/film/baldessari_plant.html >

inspiration for his video, Baldessari has consistently named another source, explaining that

Teaching a Plant the Alphabet "was done during the hippy times. There were books about how to communicate with your plants. I thought, okay, I guess I'll start with the alphabet and then we'll talk."[68] There is an absurd logic that undergirds Baldessari's plan for communicating with his plant, to the idea that he should "start out in a very elemental fashion" and teach the plant the alphabet before can teach it "simple words and so on." Baldessari's level of commitment to this goal—that he has mapped out a pedagogical approach to teach his plant—is part of what makes the piece so funny. But of course, we humans do not learn to speak by learning the alphabet; our acquisition of language through speech almost always precedes our development of reading and writing skills. We do not learn language by learning the discrete elements of the alphabetic sequence. The foundations of written language—the letters of the alphabet—are *not* the foundations of speech. If Baldessari really wanted to talk with his plant, perhaps he should have started by singing it nursery rhymes or simply talking to it, rather than attempting to teach it the alphabet. Not only is Baldessari's conceit absurd, his pedagogical strategy— teaching a plant to speak by first teaching it the letters of the alphabet—is poor.

To engage in this kind of thinking about the video is perhaps to overinvest in its premise, but by refusing to take it purely as a joke—or to see it as Kosuth might as a "conceptual cartoon"—I will go on to suggest that Baldessari's video is as complex and critical as Beuys's *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, and even as Magritte's *The Treachery of Images*. Critics are fond of describing Baldessari's video by quoting Coosje Van Bruggen, who called it "a rather

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[68] Baldessari, "Somebody to Talk to."

perverse conceptual exercise in futility," but to begin and end analysis here is a mistake.[69] First,

we can read Baldessari's piece in the context of, and in reaction to, Beuys's. Beuys's

performance was titled, in the original German, *Wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt*.

Beuys's titular verb is "erklärt" or "explain" while Baldessari's is "teaching." While "explain"

suggests a unidirectional transmission of information from subject to object, Baldessari's

"teaching," while not exactly a reciprocal term, allows for more of a discursive exchange.

"Explaining" only allows for one speaker, while "teaching" allows for more than one. Further,

there is a sense that Beuys's piece is doubly instructional; he is explaining pictures to a dead

hare, but he is also demonstrating "how to" explain pictures to a dead hare to the audience of

gallery-goers. The title's didactic tone is borne out in both the original German and English titles.

And in performance, Beuys makes the two registers of audience clear by separating himself and

the hare from the gallery goers, and the title suggests that that the audience learns from Beuys.

How to explain pictures to a dead hare? Watch Beuys and learn.[70]

This sort of doubling is not present in *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet*. Baldessari's title

does not ask us to watch and learn "how to" teach a plant the alphabet; there is only one scene

of pedagogy in Baldessari's piece. Further, chances are that viewers of Baldessari's video will

already know the alphabet (the subject to be learned) while they may not already know how to

"explain pictures." There is thus a small but real sense of possibility in Beuys's piece—not for

the dead hare, but for the human audience—that doesn't exist in Baldessari's. We might learn

something from Beuys, but the possibility of learning something new is foreclosed upon in

Baldessari's video. It is perhaps for this reason that *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet* is so often

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[69] Van Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, 78.
[70] Many thanks to Adrian Pellereau for his assistance with the German in this paragraph.

described in terms of futility, while *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* is not. Beuys's piece

seems to have some faith that at least something may be explained to someone, while

Baldessari's may feel as if nothing can be explained to anyone.

But most important is the shift in subject matter between these two pieces; the

analogue for Beuys's "pictures" is Baldessari's "the alphabet." When we consider Baldessari's

piece within its very specific context, we see that what is at stake at CalArts in the early 1970s is

no longer pictures—it's language. Baldessari's video thus inscribes a paradox: under the sway of

conceptual art, it puts the alphabetic sequence, which acts as a synecdoche for language more

generally, at the center of art education while at the same time critiquing the very structure of

the alphabetic sequence *as* a form of education. Language and discourse, which we see

manifested in the valorization of critical thinking above and beyond traditional artistic skills, is

now at the heart of the CalArts (non)curriculum, but the very structure of language—the

alphabetic sequence—fails to actually teach students the kind of skills that they need in this

newly discursive art economy. *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet*, I want to suggest, is an allegory

that asks how art can be taught under the conditions of conceptualism, in which ideas are

meant to supersede aesthetics, and, as such, in which the rigorous elemental training that

characterized arts education from the French Academy to the Bauhaus no longer seemed

relevant.[71] The very idea of elemental and foundational knowledge in art-making, and the

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[71] Baldessari was also interested in the allegory as a form; in 1972, contemporaneous with *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet,* he published *Ingres and Other Parables*, a book of parables with accompanying photographs that offered "morals" both incisive and absurd: "If you have the idea in your head, the work is as good as done" and "It's difficult to put a painting in a mailbox." John Baldessari, *Ingres and Other Parables* (Chatham: W & J Mackay Limited, 1972), n.p.

structure of the sequential curriculum that relies upon this idea, is made irrelevant by CalArts'

"radical educational model."

For Baldessari, then, the alphabetic sequence is a multivalent signifier; we have seen that it is not just a stand-in for language more generally, but that it is also a figurative manifestation of the sequential methodology behind arts education that had been in existence for hundreds of years—a pedagogy that, in the video, is a failure. Baldessari's rote repetition of the letters of the alphabet at uneven and arbitrary intervals in *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet* is not just a poor way to teach language; it is, in this allegory, equivalent to the kinds of repetitive sequential, and arbitrary practices promoted by a long history of art educators. In the video, Baldessari creates an unflattering portrait of the pedagogue as a remote, repetitive, and nearly-disembodied authoritarian presence that can only bark out subject matter like a drill sergeant. Imagine that a plant could learn—and this is Baldessari's absurd but nonetheless articulated goal—is repeating the letter A 41 times really the best means for teaching the alphabet? Not only does the plant have no eyes with which to see the flashcards and no ears with which to hear Baldessari's voice repeating them, is this sort of rote repetition the best that a teacher can do? Drill A into a student's head, then B, then C? Consequently, is the best way to make art to begin by drawing eyes over and over, and then noses over and over, as in the eighteenth-century French Academy? Or, to take this allegory into the 1970s: why must a student learn figure drawing—the supposed foundation of art practice—when what she really wants to be doing is making videos? To be fair, Baldessari's characterization of the student is as unflattering as his portrait of the teacher; the student's figuration as a "potted plant"—which is not so much an objectification but a de-anthropomorphizing—does not exactly put much faith in her

learning capabilities. But this remote teacher and unlearning student is a neat allegory of the problem with traditional arts pedagogy as Baldessari sees it: the unthinking studio art student is inseparable from the unthinking sequential pedagogy that made her.

Teaching a Plant the Alphabet, then, is a critique of a traditional arts pedagogy that also functions as a rationale for doing things differently at the newly-founded CalArts. But all of this raises the question: What and how does one teach if there are no more foundations? In terms of art education, this question then becomes: what can teachers replace a sequential curriculum with? To answer these questions, we can look a little more closely at Baldessari's teaching philosophy. Speaking about *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet* in an interview with Christopher Knight in 2005, Baldessari explains:

> Well, the whole idea was to raise the question what do you do in an art school? And you say, "Well, what courses are necessary to teach?" and that is question begging in a way, because you can say, "Well, can art be taught at all?" And, you know, I prefer to say, "No, it can't. It can't be taught." You can set up a situation where art might happen, but I think that's the closest you get. Then I can jump from there into saying, "Well, if art can't be taught, maybe it would be a good idea to have people that call themselves artists around. And something, some chemistry, might happen." And then the third thing would be that to be as non-tradition-bound as possible, and just be very pragmatic, whatever works. You know, and if one thing doesn't work, try another thing. My idea was always you haven't taught until you see the light in their eyes. I mean, whatever.

Extend your hand, that's what you do. Otherwise, you're like a missionary, delivering

the gospel and leaving [laughs].[72]

While Baldessari may begin these remarks by suggesting that art "can't be taught," in this

interview and many others, he (seemingly) unwittingly goes on to articulate his particular

pedagogy for teaching the kind of art that to him seems un-teachable. If Baldessari feels that

there no longer are foundational elements—or ABCs—of art, he certainly does have methods

for creating "a situation where art might happen." And these methods are indeed a kind of

pedagogical practice, even if the artist doesn't recognize them as such. What becomes clear in

remarks such as these is that for Baldessari, learning is all about the creation of a discursive

community where artists communicate with one another, collaborate, and work through ideas.

This is distinctively *not* the pedagogy of *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet*, which is more like

Baldessari's figurative "missionary delivering the gospel and leaving" through an (attempted

and thwarted) unidirectional transmission of knowledge. Baldessari's real-life pedagogy is

active, discursive, multidirectional. His "pragmatic" approach encourages experimentation and

exposure, and a refusal to make art precious. We can see his "List of Art Ideas for 1st Class at

CalArts, Post Studio" as an elaboration of this philosophy; the list of ideas encourages work in

many different mediums—including photography, drawing, writing, performance, and video—

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[72] John Baldessari, "A Situation Where Art Might Happen: John Baldessari on CalArts," Interview with Christopher Knight. http://www.eastofborneo.org/articles/a-situation-where-art-might-happen-john-baldessari-on-calarts. Baldessari also remembers that "there was no curriculum… and I even suggested—and we tried it for one year—that students could propose any course that they thought would be necessary, and we would find an instructor for it…. And we had some unusual courses. I think one of the most bizarre ones that comes to mind was a course on joint rolling…. we actually had it listed. And we had another one taught by a sociologist who was on the critical studies faculty, and that class was in session anytime that he encountered a student on campus. So in other words, no fixed time. Rather Socratic. [laughs]."

while refusing to hierarchize them. The list is arbitrarily ordered, and it asks as many questions as it prescribes practices and activities.

Baldessari says that he approached teaching in the same way that he approached his art practice: "I was going at my class much like I would do art, which was basically trying to be as formed as possible but open to chance."[73] The artist would show students slides of contemporary art, bring back catalogues from art exhibitions around the world, and bring visiting artists into the classroom to talk about their work. He developed a collegial relationship with his students, explaining that at CalArts, "we'd break down this relationship of student and teacher. We just had more years on them, that was all, but we fully accepted them as artists, and that helped a lot, too."[74] He also took his students on many, many field trips. Baldessari explains that the field trips were "not necessarily art related, you know: going into the things that introduced them to culture in the broadest sense, like going to Forest Lawn, or the Hollywood Wax Museum, or what have you. And a lot of times just anything to get out of the studio. One of my tricks was that we'd have a map up on the wall, and somebody would just throw a dart at the map, and we would go there that day."[75] Baldessari's is an untraditional arts pedagogy for sure, but a pedagogy nonetheless. By viewing arts education as akin to conceptual art practice, Baldessari's emphasis on creating the conditions *for* art—"a situation where art might happen" not through lessons, but through conversations, field trips, art experiments, and so on—seems not just appropriate, but ideal for the teaching of a kind of art committed to criticality of culture, institutions, and the aesthetic tradition.

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[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.

In *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet*, then, we see that alphabetic sequence functions in a number of different registers: as a synecdoche for language more generally and as a symbol for a particular kind of set-based, sequential learning, but also as the foundation of a discursive system of art of whose learning demands an unconventional pedagogy very much *un*like its own structure. This irony—that the alphabetic sequence has a logic unto itself that is very much different from the larger system of language that is so often called upon to represent—creates much of the tension in *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet*, which both relies on the sequence for structure while disavowing its use. That the alphabet in the video functions both as a vanguard for a conceptual discursive art and as a critique of traditional arts education speaks to the vexed role that language always holds in visual art; Baldessari's work from the late 1960s and early 1970s imagines the ways in which language may function in art not just visually or aesthetically, but semantically and, in particular, didactically. Whereas Baldessari allegorizes the scene of teaching in his video to comment on the staid traditions of the arts institution, we will see in the next section how Martha Rosler allegorizes the scene of teaching in a broader public sphere to comment on the oppressiveness of the patriarchal order.

Rosler: Feminism and Form

If John Baldessari saw himself investigating the medium of video through "Greenbergian" experiments, Martha Rosler saw herself on the opposite end of the video spectrum. Simply put, she is less interested in the medium than in the message. Rosler, who received a BA in art from Brooklyn College and an MFA from the University of California, San Diego in 1973, was a generation or so behind Baldessari; she arrived at UCSD as a graduate student while Baldessari

was teaching his Post Studio course at CalArts. Rosler was the beneficiary of the teaching of

conceptually-oriented photographers at UCSD at the time such as Phel Steinmetz and Fred

Lonidier, as well as of other UCSD faculty members such as Herbert Marcuse and Fredric

Jameson.[76] While Rosler, like Baldessari, is heterogeneous in her choice of mediums and

methods, unlike the older artist, she consistently prioritizes content over medium. In an

interview, she explains:

> The question of medium per se isn't terribly interesting to me. Meaning is, and I use the
>
> appropriate medium. Often it's not a decision so much as it is a matter of the way the
>
> work presents itself to me. If a text unfolds in my mind, I may wind up with something
>
> written. If I want a greater intensity of address, something seen, that may become a
>
> script for a videotape. Sometimes I want video's lack of definition; at other times I want
>
> the sharpness of film."[77]

Rosler's flexible approach to medium speaks to the influence of conceptualism on her art. For

Rosler, medium is only ever in service of the content of her work. But this doesn't mean that

she is uninterested in the consequences of the mediums in which she works. Her well-known

piece *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1974-75), for example, investigates

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[76] Rosler was also close with fellow UCSD graduate student Allan Sekula, who would go on to teach at CalArts until his death in 2013. For more on Rosler's education history, see Alexander Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of the Decoy" in *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Birmingham: Kion Gallery, 1999), 77-79.

[77] Jane Weinstock, "Interview with Martha Rosler," *October* 17 (1981): 77. In an interview with Benjamin Buchloh, Rosler makes a similar claim. She says that she "was quite interested in deprivileging modes of production," and went on to explain: "At a work's inception, I would try to figure out what was the best mode of production for its idea. But then I might use the text of a postcard novel or a performance of a written piece as a videotape, not simply let it rest." Benjamin Buchloh, "A Conversation with Martha Rosler" in *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Birmingham: Kion Gallery, 1999), 50.

the ways in which both documentary photography and language fail to sufficiently represent the conditions of the impoverished and homeless.

Though Rosler shares with conceptualists a heterogeneous approach to medium and an interest in language as one of the "descriptive systems" available to visual artists, her work departs from the legacy of conceptual art in many ways. Her oeuvre is urgently political, and throughout her career, she has taken on charged subjects such as women's rights, the Vietnam War, and capitalism and poverty. Her work can make the work of other conceptualists look downright small. If Kosuth is interested in teaching in a sort of abstract manner, and Baldessari is interested in teaching within the arts institution, Rosler has a much wider aim in her didacticism. In her video *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, Rosler does not, like Kosuth, aim to teach an abstract idea about the gap between signifier and signified to an audience of gallery-goers, nor does she address, like Baldessari, a community of like-minded artists. By aping the television cooking show in the mid-1970s, Rosler aims to teach a specific feminist "lesson" to a specific group of women, a group not exactly known for being hip to conceptual art. Even if the video ultimately appeared in spaces such as the gallery, museum, and in feminist community groups and not on public broadcasting, by mimicking the low or middlebrow form of the cooking show through the mass culture medium of video, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* interpellates and addresses itself to an audience of housewives.[78] Rosler uses the television program—what she refers to as "one of the primary conduits of ideology"—to expose a patriarchal ideology that keeps women,

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[78] For more on Rosler's work with feminist university and community groups, see Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life."

quite literally, in the kitchen.[79] In her cooking show, Rosler doesn't teach her audience how to

cook boeuf bourguignon, but instead teaches a lesson about the ways that language—

manifested in the video by the alphabetic sequence itself—functions as a form of political

oppression.[80] In *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, Rosler takes many of the tenets of conceptual art,

including its commitment to ideas over aesthetics, its interest in language, its tendency toward

meta-commentary, and politicizes them.

The video opens on Rosler herself, who is holding a blackboard that reads, in all capital

letters, "SEMIOTICS OF THE KITCHEN c 75 M. ROSLER." The camera holds still on Rosler for

about 30 seconds, and then zooms out to reveal that Rosler is in a small kitchen. In front of the

artist is a counter, upon which rests a number of kitchen implements. Behind Rosler is a

refrigerator and a bookshelf, on which a book titled "MOTHER" is visible. Rosler slowly puts on

an apron, ties it at the neck and the waist, and while she is adjusting its fit, says the word

"apron" with a deadpan expression and flat affect, one minute and eight seconds into the video.

This opening to the video is long and slow, even belabored. After putting on the apron, Rosler

then picks up a large bowl with deliberation, says "bowl" in the same intonation, and pretends

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[79] Martha Rosler, "For an Art Against the Mythology of Everyday Life" in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975-2001* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 6. Rosler explains her interest in using television as a medium further in an interview, saying: "I think video is particularly useful because it's portable and easily available, and it's a form with which people are familiar. My video confronts many of the comfortable patterns of response. So when I'm using the TV set to address an issue, I also take account of what normally appears on the set. But even though my work is critical of TV, audiences tend to accept it simply because it comes out of the set: it is TV, though strange TV." Weinstock, "Interview," 78.

[80] *Semiotics of the Kitchen* is not Rosler's only video piece to deal with the intersections of food, eating, and politics. See also her videos *Kitchen Economics: the Wonder of White Bread*, *The Art of Cooking: A Mock Dialogue between Julia Child and Craig Claiborne*, *Losing: A Conversation with the Parents,* and *Global Taste: A Meal in Three Courses*, and her book *Service: A Trilogy on Colonization* (New York: Printed Matter Inc., 2008).

to forcefully stir the bowl's (nonexistent) contents. She then places the bowl down. Next, she

picks up a meat chopper, angrily bangs it into the bowl, and says, with purpose, "chopper." In

the next six minutes of the video, she continues to enumerate kitchen's implements in

alphabetical order—next up are "dish," "eggbeater," and "fork." Rosler's actions are deliberate

Figure 3.8: Video still from Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 1975

and forceful, jerky and over-exaggerated, and often her movements result in loud, clattering

sounds. While she often looks at the objects while handling them (especially if she is doing

something potentially dangerous, such as stabbing an ice pick into the table), she spends the

majority of the video focusing her gaze directly into the camera, and by extension, onto the

viewer. When she reaches U, instead of enumerating another kitchen implement, Rosler picks

up a large knife and fork, and forms the shape of the letter with her body. For Y, she throws her

head back and her arms up to form a crucifixion-like pose. When she reaches Z, she puts down

the fork, and makes a "Zorro" sign in the air with the knife, slashing the air in front of her body.

When she finishes making her way through the alphabet, Rosler puts down the knife, crosses

her arms, looks directly at the camera, and shrugs, tilting her head and raising her eyebrows.

After she shrugs, she stares directly into the camera for another three seconds, then the video

ends.[81]

Figure 3.9: "Knife": Video still from Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 1975

Rosler has referred to her character in *Semiotics of the Kitchen* as an "antipodean Julia Child,"

and critics tend to read the piece as a humorous parody of the television cooking show in which

the artist's character fights back against the expectations of the genre that locate and limit the

domain of woman to the kitchen.[82] Clare Johnson, for example, has suggested that Rosler's

character is "deliberately incompetent at feminine 'duties' from the start, never adopting the

position she wishes to defamiliarize" and that "part of the humor [of the piece] is in the lack of

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[81] Martha Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 1975, 6:09 min, b&w, sound. Available online at:
< http://ubu.com/film/rosler_semiotics.html >.
[82] Rosler, "For an Art Against the Mythology of Everyday Life," 6.

care, dexterity, and domestic 'know-how' displayed by the artist as she wields kitchen implements as weapons against domestic servitude in a deadpan A-Z show and tell routine."[83] For Johnson, Rosler's humor—as well as her political resistance—lies in this deliberate incompetence in the kitchen. Helen Molesworth has likewise suggested that "Rosler's deadpan delivery is held in humorous relation to her slapstick-like performance of nonexistent activities…. The exaggerated sense of physical labor means that her everyday kitchen gestures border on the callisthenic."[84] The video is humorous not just because Rosler's character works against the expectations of the genre—instead of cooking, she enumerates kitchen implements—but because she does so in such an exaggeratedly off-kilter way, angrily chopping and stirring in a manner that, were there actual food involved, would result in a significant mess. These critics' readings are in the affective register, and Molesworth ultimately poses the question: "Should we giggle or shudder at the trapped quality of Rosler's slightly maniacal home cook?"[85] In doing so, she implies, I think, that regardless of what we "should" do, that we do indeed have both reactions to Rosler's exaggeratedly angry character. And in a piece that interpellates its own audience through a scene of teaching, audience reaction is paramount. That we are both amused *and* horrified by Rosler's "slightly maniacal" character and her predicament seems to be the very point of the video.

Johnson and Molesworth's readings of *Semiotics of the Kitchen* focus more on the video's content and less on its form; the fact that Rosler enumerates kitchen implements alphabetically is less important to these critics than the manner in which she enumerates them.

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[83] Clare Johnson, *Femininity, Time and Feminist Art* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 105.
[84] Helen Molesworth, "House Work and Art Work," *October* 92 (2000): 91.
[85] Ibid.

But Rosler's own reading of her video is more attuned to the centrality of language—formalized

through the alphabetic sequence—in the video. Rosler explains:

> As [the character] speaks, she names her own oppression. She thinks she is voluntarily
>
> naming something in the world, a kitchen instrument, but by acting within that system,
>
> she unwittingly names and instrumentalizes herself. She names the implements,
>
> ordered according to the alphabet, but by the time she reaches the last letters, she is
>
> being named, transformed into reduced, essentially meaningless signs—x, y, z."[86]

Or to put it in slightly different terms: Rosler, likely drawing on the work of feminist critics of

psychoanalysis such as Cixous and Kristeva, suggests that the symbolic order—manifested in

the video by the alphabetic sequence—is inescapable, and that it is intimately bound with

patriarchal oppression. Thus, even if we read her character's "slightly maniacal" incompetence

in the kitchen as a form of resistance, the character is still trapped within an oppressive system.

By the end of the video, this symbolic system is not just associated with the alphabetically-

enumerated kitchen implements that surround Rosler's character; the character, in forming the

last letters of the alphabet with her body, comes to quite literally embody the system. In the

video, alphabetically-enumerated kitchen implements give way to an alphabet in which the

letters are no longer associated with externalized objects, but are embodied by the subject

herself. In the video, Rosler makes manifest—even comically visible—the conditions that

Hélène Cixous describes in her landmark essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," which was first

published (in French) in 1975, the same year as *Semiotics of the Kitchen* was made:

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[86] Weinstock, "Interview," 86.

If woman has always functioned 'within' the discourse of man, a signifier that has

always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and

diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this 'within,'

to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her

own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language

to get inside of.[87]

Rosler's video clearly shows the female subject "'within' the discourse of man;" what reading

the video alongside Cixous does is raise the possibility of whether the character's embodiment

of the linguistic system may include an ounce of resistance. We can surely read Rosler's

character as attempting to fight back against this oppression, possibly even attempting to make

language "hers" as she struggles within it.

Critics have tended to view the role of the alphabet in the video quite narrowly, and

read it only as a manifestation of the symbolic order. Silvia Eiblmayr, for example, suggests that

Semiotics of the Kitchen "shows that the structures of power, domination, and submission and

their ideological ramifications have to be detected and analyzed now only within the economic,

social, and political realms but also within the system of language and signs itself that

constitutes the order of the symbolic."[88] Though psychoanalytic readings such as Eiblmayr's,

and even Rosler's own, clearly recognize the centrality of language to the video, their readings

don't go beyond identifying the symbolic order as a site of patriarchal oppression. As I continue,

I will argue that these readings leave out several important aspects of the video. I will suggest

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[87] Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs* 1.4 (1976): 887.
[88] Silvia Eiblmayr, "Martha Rosler's Characters," *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Birmingham: Kion Gallery, 1999), 153.

that the alphabetic sequence in Rosler's video is not just an abstract representation of a phallogocentric symbolic order. Rather, by conflating the television cooking show with the children's alphabet book, Rosler draws upon the alphabetic sequence as a didactic tool that is both used and perpetuated by the women trapped within it.

A telling moment in the criticism on the video illustrates importance of the alphabetic sequence not just as a synecdoche for language more generally, but as a didactic device for teaching language. In an article on the cooking show, Charlotte Brundson mistakenly describes *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, writing that Rosler's character, instead of simply saying "apron," and then "bowl," says "A is for Apron," and "B is Bowl" and so on.[89] In making this mistake, Brundson intuits the form of the alphabetic sequence which structures the video. She reads the form of the alphabet array—the "A is for," "B is for" form familiar from children's literature and texts such as *The Cubies' ABC*—as explicit where it is, in fact, only implied. This telling mistake crystallizes the centrality of the alphabetic array in the Western cultural imagination, whether A is for Apple, Apron, or for the Russian Cubist Archipenko.[90] By structuring her video with the alphabetic sequence, Rosler is not just aligning her video with post-Sausseurean semiotic theory; her alphabet array, even if implicit, recalls children's books and the means of early language learning. And Rosler's character's problem is not just that she's trapped in the patriarchal symbolic order; her problem is that she herself has been absorbed by that order. By

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[89] Charlotte Brundson, "The Feminist in the Kitchen: Martha, Martha and Nigella." *Feminism in Popular Culture*, ed. Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley (Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, 2006), 42.

[90] For the twenty-fifth anniversary of the video, Rosler put out an open call for twenty-six women to restage the original piece, thereby underlining the importance of the alphabetic structure to the piece. The video *Semiotics of the Kitchen: An Audition* documents rehearsals and the performance of the collective piece. 2011, 10:26 min, color, sound.

way of the structure of the alphabet array, in which each letter stands for an object that is part

of a set (whether a set of animals, foods, or kitchen implements), the character has become, in

Rosler's term, "instrumentalized" alongside the kitchen appliances. Through the alphabetic

sequence's effect of leveling, in which objects are made equivalent to each other through its

non-hierarchical paratactic form of one thing after another, Rosler's body is made equivalent to

the apron, bowl, chopper, and so on. The woman is just one more kitchen appliance.

Rosler's take on the alphabetic sequence, then, is not sunnily nostalgic. Though it may

draw on the alphabet as a didactic device from childhood, the sequence in *Semiotics of the*

Kitchen is oppressive, even unnatural: an all-consuming force applied to the body from without.

And while Rosler draws mainly upon the form of the alphabet array in the video, she also, at its

end, references another historic alphabetic form: the "body alphabet," in which a very flexible

acrobat, or a number of acrobatic figures join their bodies together to form the letters of the

alphabet with their bodies.[91] At the end of her video, Rosler merges the form of the alphabet

array with the form of the body alphabet, but when she makes the form of the letters U,V,W,

X,Y and Z with her body, she does not mimic the cheerful acrobats of children's books. In these

last moments of the video, she contorts her body jerkily, even violently, waving and slashing

around a knife and fork. She stares relentlessly at the camera (except for when she throws her

head backwards in a crucifixion pose for Y), implicating the viewer in her movements. Her

unease within both alphabetic genres or systems—one in which she is made equivalent to

objects, one in which her body is subjected to language from without—is palpable, and we are

left to wonder whether the violence in this body alphabet is a result of the symbolic order

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[91] For more on the body alphabet, see Crain, *The Story of A*, 88-91.

acting on Rosler's character, or whether it's a result of the character's attempt to overcome the

order. Is this wrestling with the alphabet a way of making it her own?
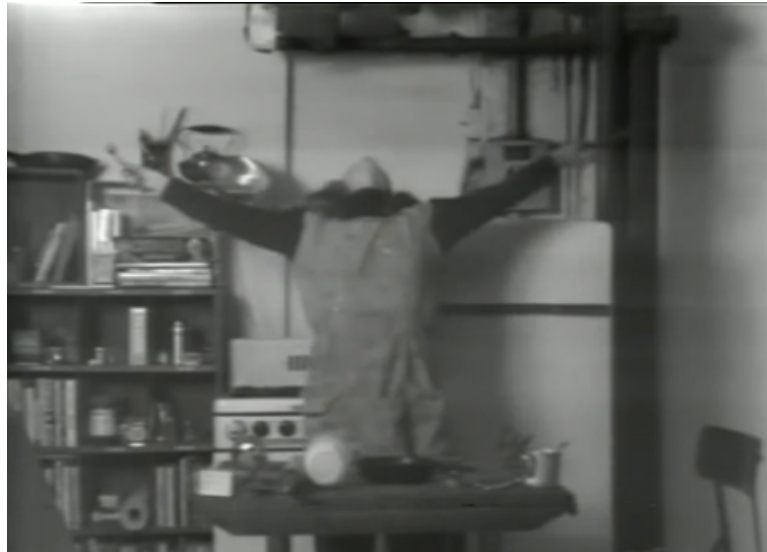
Figure 3.10: "Y," Video still from Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 1975

Rosler's deployment of the alphabetic sequence, whether we read her character's

entrapment in it as permanent or with chance for liberation, is surely a force that emanates

from without the human body. Rosler has written extensively about her interest in an

"unnatural" aesthetic that has a distancing effect on viewers; in this context, we might see

Semiotics of the Kitchen as a reckoning with unnatural forms. In a 1979 essay, Rosler writes:

> In choosing representational strategies, I have avoided naturalism…. as being that which
>
> locks narrative into an almost inevitably uncritical relation to culture. Rather, I aim for
>
> the distancing effect that breaks the emotional identification with character and
>
> situation that naturalism implies, substituting for it, when it is effective, an emotional

recognition coupled with a critical, intellectual understanding of the systematic meaning

of the work, its meaning in relation to common issues.[92]

Rosler here conflates naturalism with narrative, and argues for the importance of a Brechtian

form of distancing and alienation in her work.[93] In doing so, she argues that non-narrative

structures are particularly "unnatural," and therefore, that they encourage a critical, rather

than an emotional response from the audience. While it is clear from the criticism that

Semiotics of the Kitchen does elicit an affective response—both giggles and shudders—from its

viewers, these responses don't strike me as uncritical, though they seem borne out of

discomfort rather than emotional detachment. We might characterize these responses as

instances of "emotional recognition," rather than "emotional identification." Our unease is a

recognition of all of the "unnaturalness" that we are seeing on screen, whether that

unnaturalness is tied to the character's visible discomfort in the kitchen, her jerky and

unsmooth movements and pained expressions, or even the replacement of the familiar

narrative of the cooking show with the sequential but non-progressive logic of the alphabetic

sequence. The audience's affective response to the video is rooted in these departures from

what Rosler might term "naturalism." In *Semiotics of the Kitchen,* then, Rosler not only subjects

the woman's body to oppressive patriarchal language, she also substitutes the familiar

narrative of the cooking program with the "unnatural" structure of the alphabet. Rosler's

avoidance of what she calls "naturalism" thus occurs at the level of content and form, and it is

this avoidance that sparks our criticality.

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[92] Rosler, "An Art Against the Mythology of Everyday Life," 8.
[93] For a reading of Rosler's work in the context of Brecht, see Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life," 84-88.

As I and many others have already noted, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* parodies the

television cooking show, a medium that has an inherent didactic purpose.[94] The typical cooking

show has a lesson or several lessons to impart; it teaches an audience of viewers—presumably

home cooks—how to make a recipe or meal. The cooking show has a teleological, progressive

and productive narrative form that has remained strikingly consistent since the advent of

television in late 1940s, and since it was widely popularized by Julia Child in the 1960s.[95] A

televised chef, most often a woman, addresses the camera—and thus, the home audience,

directly—and narrates the steps to prepare a meal. She chops onions, mixes ingredients, cooks

them on a stovetop, bakes them in an over; she does whatever needs doing with the

appropriate implements. She enumerates and explains the steps while performing them, and,

in just thirty minutes, creates a perfect meal, which she then tastes and declares delicious.

While there have been many variations on the form of the cooking show since Julia Child's *The*

French Chef, which premiered in 1963, in the 1960s and early 1970s, the cooking show was

produced with an audience of women in mind, and aimed specifically to demystify cuisine for

the average American woman.[96] The traditional cooking show's structure animates the form of

the recipe; discrete steps are performed by a chef in a specific and meaningful order to achieve

the desired outcome: a perfectly-prepared meal. There is nothing quite as formulaic as a

cooking show, which takes an actual formula as its structure. A recipe is a paradigmatic form of

meaningful order.

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[94] For a history of the cooking show that focuses on the twin purposes of teaching and entertainment, see Kathleen Collins, *Watching What We Eat: The Evolution of Television Cooking Shows* (New York: Continuum, 2009).
[95] Ibid., 13-70.
[96] Ibid., 71-100.

While the alphabetical structure of *Semiotics of the Kitchen* parallels the basic structure of the cooking show narrative—it is, after all, a sequence of one thing after another—unlike the narrative of the traditional cooking show, the discrete "steps" along the sequence of the alphabet are not meaningful. The alphabetic form, though sequential, is not progressive. Z is not worth more than A, nor is it a sum or even a culmination of the letters than have come before it. Z just comes later in the sequence than A. When baking a cake, the steps of the recipe matter; when listing the letters of the alphabet, the order of the letters matter only in that they are culturally prescribed. Alphabetical order may be teleological—it will always begin at A and end at Z—but it is not meaningful in the way a recipe is, which is to say that is not meaningful in the way the narrative of the cooking show is. While the form of the alphabet array may appear to reduce the world (and in the case of this video, the kitchen) to a set of 26 parts, its order is not meaningful, and each letter's referents may be easily swapped for another than conforms to its rules. Would *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, for example, signify any differently if C were represented by a "cup," or a "cleaver" instead of by a "chopper"?[97] In her notes for creating the piece, which consist of an alphabetized list of possible kitchen implements, Rosler includes several possibilities for the letter C. She lists: "Cup, Can-opener, Cleaver, <u>Chopper</u>, cuttingboard," though she ultimately uses "chopper" in her video. In these notes, we see Rosler playing with the arbitrariness of the referents. What's important to Rosler is the alphabetic sequence as a whole; its alphabetical referents are easily swappable. (Not so easily swappable are ingredients in a recipe). By replacing the meaningful narrative of the recipe with the arbitrary, non-hierarchical, and non-progressive alphabetical sequence, Rosler emphasizes what

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[97] Rosler, *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, 101.

she might call the "unnaturalness" of the form itself. At the end of the video, the character has

nothing to show for her alphabetically-ordered efforts. The recipe is validated by the cake at

the end of the cooking show, but Rosler, who has followed the alphabet and not a recipe, has

no cake. She has only a shrug, and then a challenging stare. The alphabetic sequence replaces

the recipe with an unsatisfyingly empty narrative.

In Rosler's remarks on the video quoted earlier, she emphasizes the Saussurean aspects

Semiotics of the Kitchen, explaining that "by the time [her character] reaches the last letters,

she is being named, transformed into reduced, essentially meaningless signs—x, y, z." What

reading the video through the lens of the alphabet makes clear is that the horror in the video

lies not just in the meaningless of the signifier and in its effects on the body, as Rosler suggests,

but in the fact that it is the woman's task to be the purveyor of that arbitrariness to others in a

didactic setting. By drawing on the alphabet not just in terms of semiotics, but in terms of

children's literature forms, and by locating her character within the frame of the didactic

cooking show, Rosler positions herself as pedagogue. Teaching pre-literate learners has

historically been the purview of women, and critics have long argued for the symbolic

relationship between women and alphabet; Kittler has gone as far as to suggest that the

mother is "the origin of the pedagogic discourse."[98] Not only is Rosler's character, in the artist's

words "nam[ing] her own oppression," then, she is also teaching—and oppressing—the implied

audience of her viewers. By activating the early language acquisition aspects of the sequence

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[98] Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900.*, trans Michael Metteer (Stanford
University Press, 1992), 60. See also Crain, *The Story of A*, particularly Chapter 3, and Sandra
Caruso Mortola Gilbert and Susan Dreyfuss David Gubar, "Ceremonies of the Alphabet: Female
Grandmatologies and the Female Authorgraph" in *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice
of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Domna C. Stanton (Chicago:
University of Chicago Press, 1987), 21-48.

through her use of the alphabet array and body alphabet, Rosler positions herself as teacher, not just of housewives tuning in to their favorite cooking show, but of children acquiescing to the symbolic order. She is not only naming her own oppression, as Rosler says, but teaching by its rules and oppressing others. The woman builds and also transmits the system that oppresses her.

All this being said, the video's final moments, in which Rosler's character crosses her arms, looks directly into the camera, and shrugs, are ambivalent. Is the character shrugging as if to say: things are how they are; I am stuck in the kitchen and resigned to it? Or is the shrug a form of resistance? A way of saying: after all this, I'm still here; I have fought, and I have not been crushed by the system. The shrug is then followed by a three-second stare directly into the camera; Rosler, in this moment, implicates us in the interpretive possibilities of the shrug and the video itself. Rosler sees this indeterminacy and the possibility of multiple readings as crucial to her own didactic agenda; the artist is not shy about stating that her work has a didactic intent. In a 1979 interview, she explains:

> My work is didactic and expository; it makes an argument…. Yet oddly enough, my work isn't hortatory. It doesn't insist on an avenue of action, or say, "Do this!" Ultimately it's more contemplative, in that it does not answer the questions it poses. I don't often take a firm line. There are vacillations, changes of direction meant to point to a panoply of ways of thinking about a question, even if they're mostly contiguous points of view. It's not so unidimensional and coherent that you can sum it up in a sentence.[99]

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[99] Weinstock, "Interview," 77-78.

Here, Rosler implicitly draws a distinction between the didactic and the political. She is clear about not prescribing action, and makes sure to distinguish between her work and "propaganda," which she describes as being "clearcut, with easily articulated motifs."[100] For Rosler, didacticism is not about narrow arguments or prescriptions for action. Her work is didactic in that it is *not* "unidimensional," in that it may spark debate, in that it is ambivalent**.** And this ambivalence (what Alberto Alberro refers to as Rosler's "refusal of resolution"[101]) at the end of *Semiotics of the Kitchen* is intentional. In an interview, Rosler speaks to the ambivalence at the end of the video, explaining that her character "not leaving [the kitchen] isn't meant as definitive. The tape presents a moment of expression; it isn't saying, 'This is for all time nothing but passive and pessimistic.'"[102]

Rosler's own philosophy of didacticism, then, is quite different from the didacticism enacted by Rosler's character within the video itself; in this context, we may read the video not just as critical of patriarchal institutions and language, but as critical of the pedagogical methods than accompany them. While Rosler made *Semiotics of the Kitchen* at the beginning of her career (and had not yet begun teaching at Rutgers University which she would go on to do for over 30 years) in the mid and early-1970s, she was already involved in teaching and working with community feminist groups. And the kind of teaching that interested Rosler at the time of the 1979 interview quoted above—teaching that allows for ambivalences, different perspectives, contemplation and questioning—is quite different than the structure of teaching present in *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, which, following the alphabetic sequence, *is* unidirectional,

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[100] Ibid.
[101] Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life," 86.
[102] Weinstock, "Interview," 86.

narrow, rote, uninspired, and oppressive. The video critiques what we might think of as "alphabetic" pedagogical practices, not, like Baldessari, within the actual classroom, but more broadly within the woman's domain. That the woman is trapped in a system that she must perpetuate is the horror that elicits both our shudders and giggles; that this system takes the foundational form of language as its metaphorical structure is not just a comment on some abstract idea of language, but on language as it emanates from the position of woman as mother and educator. For Martha Rosler, the alphabet is located at the intersection of patriarchy and pedagogy, and *Semiotics of the Kitchen* and its ambivalent shrug raises but does not answer the question: is there another way? Is resisting the patriarchy from within the best women can hope do?

Arbitrariness, Ambivalence, and Narrative

Teaching a Plant the Alphabet and *Semiotics of the Kitchen* have many obvious differences. A key concern of Rosler's video is the ways in which language oppresses the body, while Baldessari's video is curiously absent of bodies. Baldessari takes a very particular history and method of arts education as his target, while Rosler takes a more generalized history of the patriarchy as hers. Rosler's video interpellates a broad audience of women, while Baldessari's intended audience is the fairly narrow world of conceptual artists. Baldessari's video camera takes as its subject the student (the plant) in its didactic scene, while Rosler's focuses on the teacher. But despite these differences, Baldessari and Rosler use the alphabetic sequence in the same way; for both artists, it is a manifestation of an oppressive didacticism, whether that didacticism comes in the form of traditional studio arts education, or as in the form of the

patriarchal symbolic order which demands submission. But what is particularly interesting when we think about these videos within the larger history of art is that both Rosler and Baldessari chose not only to take the alphabetic sequence as subject, but that both artists used it to constitute the very forms of their videos at a time when the palpably new medium of video was widely viewed as a medium of freedom and formal possibility. If video had a liberatory potential in the early 1970s—if it offered artists a means of breaking free of hundreds of years of artistic traditions—the question then becomes: what did Rosler and Baldessari have to gain by structuring their video works with forms that they saw as oppressive?

One easy answer to this question is that the alphabetic sequence *was* a new—or at least, an uncommon—form for the visual arts. The alphabetic sequence has a very long and clear history within literature but a much less obvious tradition within the visual arts. While I have traced in this chapter a long history of artists concerned with the written word, and particularly the didactic written word, the alphabet as a sequence in and of itself was much more rarely seen in the visual arts; even its most well-known proponent Jasper Johns employed it as just one of his many symbols (including numbers, flags, and maps) of the foundations of Western culture. The alphabetic sequence provided Rosler and Baldessari with a form—or, we might call it, a formal constraint—that was both very old and in some ways unfamiliar, an embodiment of an oppressive didactic and patriarchal order that had never been employed in quite the same way. The alphabetic sequence provided structure to a seemingly structure-less medium and it did so by taking advantage of the unique properties of video.

Video, which easily and simultaneously recorded both image and sound, allowed both artists to register the oppressiveness of the alphabetic sequence through multiple avenues of

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sense. The alphabetic sequence is not just orthographic for Baldessari, but oral; for Rosler it is both oral and embodied. The alphabetic sequence is manifested through voice and printed flash cards in Baldessari, and through voice, objects and the body in Rosler. And in the post-Saussurean, post-structuralist, and Foucauldian-inflected 1970s, both Baldessari and Rosler used the alphabetic sequence to figure the relationship between subjects, language and institutions to ask: is there a position from outside of the institution (be it the patriarchy or the educational institution) from which to critique it? Or, in the vocabulary of their videos: is there an outside the alphabet? By structuring their videos with the very forms that they hope to reveal as oppressive, Baldessari and Rosler seem to suggest that there is no outside the alphabet, that the alphabet is sight and sound, body and word. The only sense of an outside in either of these videos comes in *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, when Rosler shrugs ambivalently at its end; we can read this shrug as either a capitulation to the oppressive order, or as a small moment of resistance. Her end-of-video stared implicates us, her viewers, in the decision.

But despite all of their figuring of the alphabetical sequence as oppressive, both artists share more with the sequence than they might think. Baldessari offers nothing outside of the alphabetic sequence in *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet*; in the context of CalArts in the early 1970s, the sequential tradition of teaching studio art is both oppressive and arbitrary. But as I've already noted, Baldessari himself was interested in arbitrariness as a pedagogical tool; he embraced it in the classroom along with chance, and decentered skill and promoted discursive communities. Both language and arbitrariness, then, were at the heart of his pedagogy: is determining a day's classroom activities by throwing of a dart at a wall all that different than the arbitrariness of the alphabet as a structure? What Baldessari does in his own pedagogy is

embrace the arbitrariness of the art assignment, to make that arbitrariness both visible and central to art practice. While in *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet*, Baldessari does not use the alphabetic sequence as an arbitrary but generative constraint (as we will see that present-day conceptual writers do in the following chapter), his own didactic philosophy has much more in common with the alphabetic structure than the video lets on.

Rosler does not share with Baldessari an interest in arbitrariness; as an artist with a self-proclaimed didactic bent, she is interested in ambivalence—with, in perhaps too-reductive terms—a surplus of possible meaning to Baldessari's evacuation of meaning. For Rosler, schooled in semiotics and psychoanalysis, the alphabet is of course a sequence of arbitrary signifiers, but what is at stake in the video is the sequence's power as a synecdoche or manifestation of the symbolic order. What is ambivalent for Rosler in *Semiotics of the Kitchen* is not just the shrug, but the alphabet as a whole; the video recognizes the alphabet's liberatory properties alongside its oppressiveness. When Rosler's character embodies the letters of the alphabet, might we not see her at wresting (or attempting to wrest) control over language? Might we read the alphabet as the site of woman's resistance? I do not mean to suggest that the alphabetic sequence for Rosler is not oppressive, but simply that it can be both oppressive *and* the means to escape that oppression. *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, in all of its ambivalences, echoes Cixous's command: "If woman has always functioned 'within' the discourse of man....it is time for her to dislocate this 'within,' to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth."[103]

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[103] For useful critiques of Cixous, see Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), and Joan Retallack, *The Poethical Wager* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), particularly the essays "The

Rosler confirms this perspective in an interview, explaining that "language can be an instrument of control or of liberation… Language is the ocean of civilization; everything is enacted within it; it is both oppressive and emancipatory."[104] In pursuing a didacticism not within her classroom as Baldessari does (at least, not quite yet in the mid-1970s) but within her art practice, Rosler encourages ambivalent, even multivalent reading. She refuses to see the alphabet as wholly oppressive, or her character as unequivocally trapped; *Semiotics of the Kitchen* is much more open to interpretation than *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet*. The artists, then, teach two different post-structuralist alphabet lessons. Baldessari teaches us that the letters of the alphabet are arbitrarily-ordered arbitrary signifiers that have no meaning in and of themselves, while Rosler teaches us that the alphabet—for her, a stand-in for language more generally—is multivalent and always subject to interpretation, that meaning is unstable and contextual and mutable.

Following the legacy of didactically-minded conceptual artists such as Kosuth and Magritte, Baldessari and Rosler, by working in the medium of video, are free not just to teach a static lesson through a two-dimensional art object, but to actually *enact* that lesson through a performance, with bodies and voices, with teachers and students in time. We don't just see the fruits of didactic labor—Kosuth's pseudo-blackboards with their dictionary definitions, or Magritte's pseudo-blackboards with their semiotic games—but we see an actual scene of teaching that allows us to reflect both on the lesson being taught within the video by Baldessari's off-screen voice and Rosler's home cook character, and on the meta-lesson that

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Experimental Feminine" (90-101) and "The Scarlet Aitch: Twenty-Six Notes on the Experimental Feminine" (102-109).
[104] Weinstock, "Interview," 87.

both videos offer in response to that scene of teaching. By placing the alphabetic sequence—

the *ur*-symbol of language learning—at the center of their videos (both thematically and

structurally) Rosler and Baldessari offer us a perspective on the sequence and its uses that,

because of video's basis in time, has as much in common with literary work done on the

sequence as it does with the long history of language in visual art. The alphabetic sequence in

both videos is not static or inert as it is in Johns's paintings; in *Semiotics of the Kitchen* and in

Teaching a Plant the Alphabet, the sequence unfolds in both space and time. Video offers a

means for Baldessari and Rosler to explore the alphabetic sequence not just as a synecdoche

for language more generally, but equally importantly, as a narrative structure that, like teaching,

takes time.

CHAPTER FOUR:

The ABCs of Conceptual Writing:

Kenneth Goldsmith and the Alphabetization of Literature

Conceptual Writing and Reading

This chapter will consider the central role of the alphabetic sequence in the conceptual writing

movement, which has emerged as the dominant avant-garde in poetry in the past decade. By

looking at alphabetic conceptual works through a formal lens, I will argue here that conceptual

writing has more in common with its textual forbears—many of which have been covered in

previous chapters—than its practitioners would often like to admit. Instead of seeking

precursors to conceptual writing in conceptual visual art, I will consider conceptual written

works alongside other alphabetic texts, such as abecedarian poetry and reference texts, to

provide a new context for approaching conceptual writing formally. By focusing in particular on

Kenneth Goldsmith's *No. 111 2.7.93—10.20.96*, I will argue that close reading conceptual work

is not just possible, but essential, and that studying form allows us not just to see conceptual

procedure in action, but also the ways in which rules-based texts formally exceed their

constraints and thus destabilize their conceptual frameworks. By using the alphabetic sequence

as a procedural device, conceptual writers are participating in a long tradition of alphabetic

composition methods, and though they may claim otherwise, Goldsmith and other conceptual

writers ask the same questions about reading, writing, and knowing that alphabetic texts have

been asking for a century. This chapter will conclude by suggesting that the alphabetic structure

is the epitomic form of a movement that would like to deny form's centrality to its goals, and

that alphabetization—a seemingly rote and rigid procedure—unexpectedly reveals the formal

possibilities of conceptual writing, as well as the movement's continuity with a century's worth

of experimental writing practices.

Conceptual writing has been defined and delimited in recent years by two anthologies,

Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing (2011) edited by Craig Dworkin and

Kenneth Goldsmith, and *I'll Drown My Book*: *Conceptual Writing by Women* (2012) edited by

Caroline Bergvall, Laynie Browne, Teresa Carmody, and Vanessa Place, and by several prose

monographs: Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman's *Notes on Conceptualisms* (2009), Marjorie

Perloff's *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (2010), and Goldsmith's

Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age (2011). The critical discourse on

conceptual writing has thus far been more focused on the means of the production of

conceptual writing—on writers' intentions and techniques—than on its formal properties or

reception by readers. This is no surprise; the methods of producing conceptual writing,

summed up by Perloff as "appropriation, citation, copying, reproduction,"[1] though old news in

the visual arts, are provocative when it comes to literature. While of course these techniques

have made their appearances throughout the literature of the twentieth century—just think of

The Waste Land—conceptual writers have employed them in recent years to a radical degree.

Goldsmith, the most visible proponent of conceptual writing, claims on the first page of his

book *Uncreative Writing* that "faced with an unprecedented amount of available text, the

problem is not needing to write more of it; instead, we must learn to negotiate the vast

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[1] Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2012), 23.

quantity that exists."[2] Craig Dworkin, in his introduction to *Against Expression*, expands on

Goldsmith's ideas, writing that:

> the intelligent organization or reframing of already extant text is enough. Through the
>
> repurposing or détournement of language that is not their own (whatever that might
>
> mean), the writers [in *Against Expression*] allow arbitrary rules to determine the chance
>
> and unpredictable disposition of that language; they let artificial systems trump organic
>
> forms, and they replace making with choosing, fabrication with arrangement, and
>
> production with transcription.[3]

Negotiation, organization, arrangement, reframing, transcribing: choice, not creation *ex nihilo*,

is the ethos behind conceptual writing. These methods make *The Waste Land*'s quotations and

allusions look almost quaint.

Perloff, Goldsmith, and Dworkin all define conceptual writing from the perspective of its

creators, via authorial intentions, techniques, and methods, which are more often than not

procedural, which is to say, rule- or constraint-based, or in Dworkin's words, "arbitrary" and

"artificial." This shared perspective is not surprising; these procedural techniques *are* radical,

and many of those writing about conceptual writing are those who are also themselves

conceptual writers (Goldsmith, Place, Fitterman, Dworkin, to name a few). And because so

many of the responses to conceptual writing from outside the community have been

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[2] Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 1.

[3] Craig Dworkin, "The Fate of the Echo," introduction to *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, ed. Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), xliv.

unreceptive, if not downright hostile,[4] the questions of how, why and even *whether* one should

write conceptually have overshadowed the questions of how one could or should *read*

conceptually. Accordingly, what has thus far taken a backseat in considerations of conceptual

writing are the linked issues of form and audience. In other words, the ideas governing

conceptual writing have been well-articulated, but we still don't really know what conceptual

reading should look like. And conceptual writers aren't too helpful on this front; Goldsmith, for

example, deeply influenced by conceptual visual artists such as Sol LeWitt, suggests that we

don't actually need to read his books.[5] In his talk "Being Boring," he says that "my books are

impossible to read straight through.… You really don't need to read my books to get the idea of

what they're like; you just need to know the general concept."[6] Place and Fitterman agree,

writing in *Notes on Conceptualisms* that "conceptualism negates the need for reading in the

traditional textual sense – one does not need to "read" the work as much as think about the

idea of the work."[7] But how are we to "get" the "idea of the work" without reading it? What

other ways do we have to access a text? These unnerving but important questions seem to be

central to this new movement, even though they have more often than not been

overshadowed by questions of intentionality, technique, and procedural rationale.[8]

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[4] For a recent example, see Calvin Bedient, "Against Conceptualism," *Boston Review*, July 24, 2013. < http://www.bostonreview.net/poetry/against-conceptualism >
[5] For more on conceptual writing's relationship with conceptual visual art, see Dworkin, "The Fate of the Echo."
[6] Kenneth Goldsmith, "Being Boring," (2004). < http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/ goldsmith/goldsmith_boring.html >
[7] Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman, *Notes on Conceptualisms* (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2009), 25.
[8] For a strong example of a reading of production, intent, and procedure, see Molly Schwartzburg, "Encyclopedic Novelties: On Kenneth Goldsmith's Tomes," *Open Letter* 12.7 (2005), 21-36.

This is not to say that there have been no attempts to define conceptual writing from the point of view of its audience. Place and Fitterman have coined the term "thinkership" (as opposed to "readership") to describe conceptual writing's ideal audience, and this term has been picked up by the conceptual writing community at large. Goldsmith approaches the idea of "thinkership" by suggesting that we employ non-normative, which is to say, non-linear reading practices when approaching his books; he advises we read them as we would read the Internet. Goldsmith suggests that conceptual writing is "impossible to read in the conventional sense." He continues:

> 20th century notions of illegibility were commonly bound up with a shattering of syntax and disjunction, but the 21st century's challenge to textual convention may be that of density and weight. The Internet is mostly unreadable not because of the way it is written (mostly normative expository syntax at the top-level), but because of its enormous size. Just as new reading strategies had to be developed in order to read difficult modernist works of literature, so do new reading strategies emerging on the web: skimming, data aggregating, the employment of intelligent agents, to name but a few. Our reading habits seem to be imitating the way machines work: we could even say that online, by an inordinate amount of skimming in order to comprehend all the information passing before our eyes, we *parse* text-a binary process of sorting language-more than we *read* it. So this work demands a *thinkership*, not a readership.[9]

Parsing, skimming, and aggregating as opposed to reading: these are the methods of a "thinkership" that is charged with "getting" literature, not reading it. In other words, Goldsmith

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[9] Katherine Elaine Sanders, "So What Exactly is Conceptual Writing: An Interview with Kenneth Goldsmith." < http://bombsite.com/issues/1000/articles/4534 >

suggests that conceptual writing requires big-picture, non-detail-oriented reading practices that do not require anything resembling close reading. The thinkership approach to conceptual writing is not rigorous in its methods, nor in its analyses of the usual aspects of literature up for debate; form, diction, tropes, and themes are not of interest to a thinkership. A thinkership is invested in the concepts behind the creation of a text, not in its contents.[10]

The thinkership approach to conceptual writing thus not only eschews New Critical methodologies of close reading, but also many other approaches to literature developed in the past fifty years, from reader-response techniques of the 1960s and 1970s to the recent articulation of surface reading by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus.[11] All of these approaches to literature and criticism, no matter how different they may be, require linear reading of texts at some point. A seeming analog to the approach to literature that conceptual writers advocate might be Franco Moretti's brand of "distant reading," which, in an effort to draw broad conclusions about hundreds, if not thousands of texts, replaces close reading techniques with other "skills": "sampling; statistics; work with series, titles, concordances, incipits."[12] The fruits of Moretti's labors are not detailed close readings, but instead charts, graphs, maps, and "trees." But in order to produce the kind of knowledge about large swaths of literature that Moretti desires, he and his students more often than not must actually read, from beginning to end, the texts that they are analyzing.[13] The name "distant reading" in this sense, is misleading; it may not be close reading, but distant reading it is a rigorous approach to literature and a far cry

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[10] See Dworkin, "The Fate of the Echo," for the similarities between this approach to conceptual writing and approaches to conceptual visual art.

[11] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108.1 (November 2009): 1–21.

[12] Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso Books, 2013): 67.

[13] Ibid., 76.

from the parsing and skimming that Goldsmith advocates. According to Moretti, distant reading

is particularly interested in understanding and charting form, which "is precisely the repeatable

element of literature: what returns fundamentally unchanged over many cases and many

years."[14]

And it is form that has been largely left out of the conceptual writing conversation thus

far. As such, a curious commonality among conceptual works has been overlooked: a striking

number of them use the alphabetic sequence as formal scaffolding. The anthology *Against*

Expression collects selections from twelve conceptual works that feature alphabetization in

some way, and at least three of the texts that have garnered attention from literary critics and

emerged as key to the movement—Goldsmith's *No. 111 2.7.93—10.20.96*, Ara Shirinyan's *Your*

Country is Great, and Dan Farrell's *The Inkblot Record*—are organized by the alphabetic

sequence.[15] The sheer number of alphabetized conceptual works suggests that the alphabetic

sequence is not just any arbitrary organizational tool. It is, in fact, *the* arbitrary tool for

organizing language, and it connects these conceptual texts to other alphabetic precursors that

we need to see as both their history and context.[16] Though Place, Fitterman, Goldsmith, and

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[14] Ibid., 86-87. A recent article considers Gertrude Stein's writing in the context of these recent debates on reading methodology; see Natalia Cecire, "Ways of Not Reading Gertrude Stein," *ELH* 82.1 (2015): 281–312.

[15] The other alphabetized works in *Against Expression* are: Anonymous, "Eroticism" (41), Louis Aragon, "Suicide" (51), Nathan Austin, "Survey Says" (53), Claude Closky, *The First Thousand Numbers Classified in Alphabetical Order* (148), Gerald Ferguson, "The Standard Corpus of Present Day English" (211), Peter Gizzi, "Ode: Salute to the New York School" (236), Rory Macbeth, *The Bible (alphabetized)*, Gary Sullivan, "Conceptual Poem" (544), Wiener Gruppe, "11 abecedaries" (569).

[16] Other critics have argued that conceptual writers have overlooked other literary inheritances, particularly the legacy of Language poetry; see Barrett Watten, "Presentism and Periodization in Language Writing, Conceptual Art, and Conceptual Writing," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 41.1 (2011): 125–161, and Judith Goldman, "Re-thinking 'Non-retinal Literature': Citation, 'Radical

Dworkin (in his introduction to *Against Expression* especially) carefully locate conceptual writing's precursors in the visual arts, we can, and should, also locate them in literature. Perloff does this in *Unoriginal Genius*; she positions the literary inheritance of conceptual writing in Benjamin's *The Arcades Projec*t, in Brazilian concrete poetry, and in the Oulipo. While Perloff makes historical connections conceptually, I make them formally. Instead of seeing conceptual writing as constituting some sort of radical (post)modern break with literature and literary methods of thousands of years, as conceptual writers do, I see it instead as part of a long continuum which stretches back way before modernism and which becomes particularly clear when we follow the "repeatable element of literature"—in this case, the alphabetic sequence as a form—across genres and history. Following Bourdieu's theory of art, I want to suggest that conceptual writing is in fact no different from any other avant-garde that seeks to do something new by eschewing the methods, techniques, and aesthetics of the movements that have come before it.[17] Reading conceptual alphabetic texts as part of a longue durée of alphabetic writing reveals that conceptual writing's well-articulated stance against reading is more a strategy of avant-garde position-taking than it is a sustainable approach to literature.

With this in mind, I propose that we read a conceptual text such as Goldsmith's *No. 111*—a 600+ page book of alphabetized lists of words and phrases that Goldsmith heard and read over the course of three years—against the conceptual grain, which is to say, against the idea that it doesn't need to be read, that it needs only to be skimmed, flipped through, "gotten." I will go beyond the conceptual readings that Perloff produces in *Unoriginal Genius* by focusing

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Mimesis,' and Phenomenologies of Reading in Conceptual Writing," *Postmodern Culture* 22.1 (2011).
[17] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford University Press, 1996).

more on form and less on concepts.[18] Instead of seeing conceptual works as making a break

with literature, in the rest of this chapter I will make the case for reading conceptual works as

part of a continuum of texts (both literary and reference) that have *always* experimented with

form and reading practices through their employment of the alphabetic sequence. By

suggesting that we can "get" alphabetized conceptual writing through formal analysis and

traditional close reading practices, I will make a larger claim that conceptual writing is not

inhospitable to close reading, and that the practice illuminates the concerns of conceptual

writers and critics about procedure and intentionality that cannot be gleaned other reading

methods. Though conceptual writing imagines itself as requiring a thinkership, the rest of this

essay, by way of a focused discussion of the alphabetic sequence, will show the benefits of

actually reading conceptual writing.

The Alphabetic Sequence, Literature, and Reference

The alphabetic sequence has a long history in literature. It has appeared as the formal structure

of poems (known variously as the abecedarian, abecedarium, abecedary, and alphabet acrostic),

as the didactic form of children's reading primers, and as a structuring mechanism for a range

of other literary texts. In addition to making appearances in texts as varied as the Bible's Psalm

119 (ordered by the letters of the Hebrew alphabet) and the *New England Primer* (which begins

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[18] Perloff does actually read conceptual writing in *Unoriginal Genius*, but her discussion almost always leads back to the issues of Goldsmith's intents and procedures. See Chapter 7, "Conceptual Bridges / Digital Tunnels: Kenneth Goldsmith's *Traffic*" in *Unoriginal Genius*, 146-165.

with the memorable phrase "In Adam's fall / We sinned all,"[19] the sequence has had another life as an organizational tool for non-literary reference texts such as dictionaries and encyclopedias. While the differences between these literary and non-literary texts are many, these disparate genres do intersect at the point of a shared alphabetically-ordered form. The aspects of the alphabetic sequence that make it the ideal tool for structuring a print encyclopedia—its ubiquity, its arbitrary but fixed order, the fact that the organizational method is part and parcel of words themselves, and not an outside method grafted on to them—are also what give literary alphabetic texts their distinctive orderly aesthetic. In almost all literary texts, the sequence functions as a metaphor for order or power, the symbolic register, or even for civilization itself. But while encyclopedias generally have no reason to deviate from the orderliness of alphabetical order (that would, in fact, negate the very point of using them), literary texts do; in fact, the most interesting thing about alphabetic works are the ways in which they play with, alter, and even break down the conventions of alphabetical order.

Before I discuss the alphabetic sequence and conceptual writing in particular, I will first lay out the theoretical stakes of using the sequence as scaffolding for literature and reference texts, because I will go on to argue that alphabetic conceptual works—Goldsmiths *No. 111* especially—find themselves straddling these two genres, and thus straddling the different reading practices that they demand. I have sketched some of these issues already in the introduction to this study, but I will elaborate upon them more fully in this chapter. To begin, there are two competing ways of thinking about the alphabetic sequence; we can see it as a horizontally-organized, non-hierarchical trope of metonymy, or as a vertically-oriented,

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[19] Qtd. in Patricia Crain, *The Story of A: The Alphabetization of America from* The New England Primer *to* The Scarlet Letter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 15.

hierarchical trope of metaphor. The sequence's prevalence, as well as its power, in avant-garde

art and literature in particular is in part due to its inhabiting of these oppositional modes. Susan

Stewart has articulated the appeal of the alphabetic sequence as a metonymic mode; she

suggests that "it is a finite and fixed order that is both arbitrary and sequential.... Alphabetical

order epitomizes the elimination of hierarchy, the leveling of elements in the list.... It presents

us with a time without order, a sequence where before and after hold no hierarchical import."[20]

In Stewart's articulation, which argues for the alphabetic sequence's metonymic structure, the

sequence is an empty form of arbitrary sequentiality; it is a non-hierarchical form without

content. This version of the alphabet resists interpretation. It is not a site of meaning—it's pure

form. The alphabet's lack of hierarchy also connotes a lack of meaningful order. Z isn't worth

more than A is. It's just further along.

     In this perspective on the alphabet, the relationships between letters are about

contiguity, and not about similarity or meaning. The letters are positional, not meaningful; the

order of words in the dictionary has no bearing on their semantic content. There is no more

value in the word "zither" than there is in the word "accordion," whether we see those words

in a reference text such as a dictionary, or in a children's alphabet book about musical

instruments. This lack of hierarchy becomes particularly visible in texts such as Benjamin's *The*

Arcades Project, which is organized by the sequence. There is no one-to-one correspondence

between the letters and the subjects of its uneven sections or "convolutes;" Convolute A covers

"Arcades, *Magasins de Nouveautes*, Sales Clerks," while B covers "Fashion" and C covers

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[20] Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 190.

"Ancient Paris, Catacombs, Demolitions, Decline of Paris."[21] Benjamin's use of the sequence

avoids the creation of a hierarchy between convolutes.[22] The alphabetic sequence is the ideal

non-hierarchical tool for organizing, but not valuing or taxonimizing, units of language.

The alphabetic sequence may be formally metonymic, but it has an undoubtedly

metaphoric function as well. Roland Barthes neatly describes the alphabet's metaphorical

resonance; it is "an unmotivated order (an order outside of any imitation), which is not

arbitrary (since everyone knows it, recognizes it, and agrees on it). The alphabet is euphoric: no

more anguish of 'schema,' no more rhetoric of 'development,' no more twisted logic, no more

dissertations!."[23] The letters themselves may be "meaningless objects,"[24] as there is no

inherent connection between signifier and signified, but the alphabet is not devoid of all

meaning or content: it is known, recognized, and agreed upon by billions of people. It is

simplistic, it is "euphoric," it is the kind of thing that doesn't require "twisted logic" or

"dissertations." The alphabet is not developmental; it is teleological, but it doesn't evolve. What

Barthes articulates is that culture has given these meaningless letters meaning, and that though

the form may be organized metonymically, we cannot deny its metaphoric resonance.

For this reason, alphabetic texts from all genres—whether reading primers or

encyclopedias—routinely raise questions of cultural and institutional understanding, learning,

mastery, and genius. Even the phrase "the ABCs" is shorthand for foundational knowledge, and

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[21] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 29.
[22] Perloff reads *The Arcades Project* as part conceptual writing's lineage of "citational poetics" in *Unoriginal Genius*, 24-49.
[23] Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 147.
[24] Ibid.

is reflected in titles of texts as varied as Ezra Pound's *ABC of Reading* and the recent *The ABCs of Real Estate Investing*. In their titles alone, these very different texts draw on the cultural resonance of the alphabet as a site of, and symbol for learning, even though neither is actually structured by the sequence. Other texts play on the A to Z span of the alphabet and promise mastery, a totalized understanding of everything one could ever need or want to know on a given topic. Thus we find texts such as *The Alphabet*, Ron Silliman's 1000+ page book that he worked on for decades which has an eye toward the production of a totality (his post-*The Alphabet* project is, simply, *Universe*), and *L'Abecedaire de Gilles Deleuze*, an eight-hour documentary of interviews with the philosopher on subjects in alphabetical order from "Animal" to "Zigzag." While neither of these texts would fool anyone into thinking that they are, in fact, encyclopedias, they do share an implicit promise with the reference text: that they will recreate, organize, and make legible their world from A to Z.

What literary and reference texts share, then, is this basic fact of the alphabetic sequence: it is culturally-significant, though formally arbitrary. And it is this formal arbitrariness—the sequence's non-hierarchical structure—that always brings reading practice into question, whether we are faced with a literary or reference text. For example, alphabetized reference texts do not require, or even lend themselves to linear reading at all. It is the rare reader who sits down with the *Oxford English Dictionary* and begins reading at "A."[25] Hilary A. Clark goes as far as suggesting that the "allure" of the encyclopedia is its "very *unreadability*, the sense that one will never have the time nor the stamina to read and digest all its

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[25] Except, of course, for the one man who did and wrote a book about it: Ammon Shea, *Reading the OED: One man, One Year, 21,730 pages* (New York: Penguin Group, 2008).

contents."[26] Reference texts thus invite the types of reading practices that Goldsmith suggests

we use to apprehend conceptual writing—skimming, parsing, searching. These reading

methods weren't exactly invented in the Internet age; they've always been the methods of

reading reference texts. Not all of these texts are or have been structured by alphabetical

order; some of the earliest, such as Pliny the Elder's *Historia naturalis* (AD 77-79) were ordered

thematically. But from the publication of Robert Cawdrey's *A Tale Alphabeticall*, the first

monolingual English Dictionary, in 1604 onward, most print dictionaries and encyclopedias

were organized by alphabetical order.[27] This shift is at least partly attributable to the changes in

technology at the time; the advent of the printing press had the effect of saturating not just

printers but writers with the physical presence alphabetical order through moveable type.[28]

Alphabetical order renders reference texts modular in structure; though entries in a dictionary

may be cross-referenced in numerous ways, the dictionary presents what Howard Jackson calls

an "atomistic view of vocabulary."[29] And though it may be un-nuanced, and thus an argument

against alphabetically-ordering reference texts, it is this atomistic approach to language that

enables our very use—which is to say, our non-linear reading—of these reference texts.

Alphabetical order is in fact so synonymous with the reference text itself that lexicographers

often use the term "dictionary order" as a substitute.[30]

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[26] Hilary A. Clark, "Encyclopedic Discourse," *SubStance* 22.1 (1992): 95.

[27] For more on the history of reference texts, see Tom McArthur, *Worlds of Reference: Lexicography, Learning, and Language from the Clay Tablet to the Computer* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), Howard Jackson, *Lexicography: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002), and Sylviane Granger, *Electronic lexicography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[28] McArthur, *Worlds of reference*, 77.

[29] Jackson, *Lexicography*, 146.

[30] Ibid., 145.

In the past 20 years, technology has, of course, changed the form that reference texts take; the 1990s saw the publication of reference texts on CD-ROM, and lexicographer Michael Rundell has recently declared that "dictionaries at last have found their ideal platform in an online medium."[31] The Internet and digitization have altered the way we access reference texts; the *OED* is now a website coded in XML, and it is unlikely that the third edition will be released in print form.[32] They have also allowed for the cultivation of other reference texts, for example, the collaboratively-written and edited Wikipedia which is structured by the mySQL database system. Despite all of these innovations, alphabetical order continues to hold sway in these reference texts. Wikipedia allows us to browse entries from A to Z on its site, and the *OED*'s alphabetical listing of words is extremely prominent on its interface. Even in these online reference works, alphabetical order, though now bolstered by advance search functions, still enables our non-linear reading.

If the alphabetic sequence enables non-linear reading of encyclopedias, can we say the same of literary texts? Is the atomistic view of language that the dictionary puts forth also present in literature? These questions are complicated by the sheer amount of variation between and among the forms that alphabetic literature takes. Unlike the rigid form that the alphabetical sequence takes in a reference text, the alphabetical sequence in literary texts proves malleable. It can be employed by writers in almost infinite ways; it can be loose or rigid, it can be narrativized, broken apart, or strictly adhered to. The form is simultaneously closed

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[31] Mark Rundell, "The road to automated lexicography: An editor's viewpoint." *Electronic lexicography*, Ed. and Sylviane Granger,(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 15.
[32] Press Association, "Third Edition of OED Unlikely to Appear in Print Format," *The Guardian*, August 29, 2010. < http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/aug/29/oed-third-edition-unlikely-print. >

and open; the alphabetic sequence always has twenty-six letters, and they always appear in the same order. The sequence is a container that can be filled an in endless number of ways. Each letter may have a one-to-one correspondence with something in the world, as in the familiar children's form of the "alphabet array"[33] that Edward Gorey's morbid *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* takes: "M is for Maud who was swept out to sea / N is for Neville who died of ennui."[34] Or, the alphabetic structure may recede from the fore and provide only the barest of structures, as in Harryette Mullen's *Sleeping with the Dictionary,* or Bruce Andrews's *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up*. The poems of both collections are organized alphabetically, and while Mullen plays all kind of alphabet games in her book, Andrews's use of alphabetical order seems to be a gesture of pure arbitrariness.

Alphabet books with narratives, such as the children's classics *A Apple Pie* (Kate Greenaway) and *The ABC Bunny* (Wanda Gág) insist on their linear reading; they have overarching narratives that propel us through them. Other books, such as Gorey's, do not have a narrative but instead a rhyme scheme that leads us from one letter of the alphabet to the next. In the field of avant-garde literature, some abecedarian poems, such as Denise Levertov's "Relearning the Alphabet" are clearly thematically, as well as syntactically linked. But can we say the same thing for other alphabetical texts? Does the alphabetization of Mullen's poems in the Table of Contents make us more or less likely to read *Sleeping with the Dictionary* from cover to cover? We can ask the same question of Silliman's more committedly-alphabetic *The Alphabet*; most of its sections were published separately in smaller editions or chapbooks (*ABC*

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[33] This term is Patricia Crain's coinage in *The Story of A,* 91.
[34] Edward Gorey, *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997), np.

in 1983, *Demo to Ink* in 1992, *Jones* in 1993, and so on).[35] Now that they have been collected as

The Alphabet, is there an imperative to read them linearly, even though there is no narrative

through-line, and the sections are wildly different from each other? Or do we think of the

poems of *The Alphabe*t as modular? Does the alphabetic sequence demand a totalizing or

atomistic view of literature?

These questions are not exactly new; Plato uses the letters of the alphabet as a

metaphor for determining the units of knowledge and understanding in *Theatetus*. The

alphabet has always been a site around which we pose basic questions of epistemology, and

meta-discursivity is inherent to the form itself. This becomes particularly clear when we

consider that the alphabet has a dual function in these texts as both a form and a medium.

Alphabetically-ordered texts call attention to their alphabetic medium by making the sequence

constitutive of their forms. There is a doubling in every text that makes use of the alphabetic

sequence formally, as the words that make up the text's content are made out of the same

material from which the form is created. The children's alphabet book, for example, has a

particular way of rendering its medium visible through repetitions uncommon in any other

genre; just think of Greenaway's nineteenth-century *A Apple Pie*: "A Apple Pie / B bit it / C cut it

/ D dealt it / E eat it."[36]

The abecedarian thus differs from other traditional forms of poetry. The alphabetic

sequence, unlike the sonnet, for example, is not abstract. The alphabet is a form that is always

complete; it is, by definition, always materialized by its twenty-six letters. As a point of

comparison, we might for example imagine a blank, 14-line schema for the sonnet waiting to be

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[35] Ron Silliman, *The Alphabet* (Tuscaloosa: University Alabama Press, 2008), 1057.

[36] Kate Greenaway, *A Apple Pie* (New York: n.p., 1886). < www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/15809 >

filled in with words. There is no corresponding blank schema imaginable for the alphabetic sequence; the alphabet, in this sense, has no formal possibilities. Unlike the sonnet, every iteration of the alphabetic sequence will be exactly the same, because the sequence has always already been materialized: the alphabetic sequence will always run from A to Z. And because of this doubling of signifiers—for example, the As of *A Apple Pie*— texts that are structured by the alphabetic sequence are characterized by a palpable density. The alphabetic schema that structures a text is every bit as material as the words that fill it, and this is as visible in the *OED* as in *A Apple Pie*.

Alphabetically-ordered literary and reference texts then, have several important similarities: they call attention to their alphabetic medium through their alphabetic forms, they are formally arbitrary but culturally meaningful, they enable both totalizing and atomistic views of words and their worlds, thereby calling linear reading practices into question. And while there are hundreds of dissimilarities (regarding authorship, audience, genre, and tone, to begin) between the *Oxford English Dictionary* and an alphabetic book or poem such as Levertov's "Relearning the Alphabet," there is one distinction regarding their use of the alphabetic sequence that crystallizes the concerns of the conceptual writing movement in particular. A literary text such as Levertov's relies not on citations, reproductions, or appropriations, but on original language that the poet works into lines and stanzas scaffolded by the alphabetic form. The dictionary, meanwhile, is engineered in the reverse manner. The reference text features atomistic or modular entries that have been alphabetiz*ed*, not lines that have been written alphabetically with an eye towards a poem's totality. In the alphabetized dictionary, content precedes form, while in an alphabetical poem, form precedes content. The alphabetization of

entries in a dictionary or encyclopedia is thus procedural. While there may be infinite ways that

poets make use of the alphabetic sequence as a form, there is only one way to alphabetize the

words in a dictionary.

We can reframe this distinction using the vocabulary of conceptual writing. Despite

being scaffolded by the same form, Silliman's *The Alphabet* is "creative," while the *OED* is

"uncreative;" *The Alphabet* is original whereas the dictionary is unoriginal. These distinctions do

not seem particularly revelatory until we remember that they have the exact same structure,

and that this structure is also the medium of all of our discourse. There is nothing quite as

universal as the alphabetic sequence, and the questions that it raises whenever and wherever it

is put to use are strikingly similar to the kinds of questions that the conceptual writing

movement is asking both implicitly and explicitly. The distinctions between the alphabetical and

the alphabetized, the creative and the uncreative, the readable and the skim-able (or maybe

even "get-able"), at stake in *all* alphabetic texts, are of particular concern to conceptual writers

who are invested in exploring new methods of producing and consuming writing. What are the

literary possibilities of an arbitrarily-ordered text assembled with found language? Are

procedures such as alphabetization necessarily mechanistic and rigid? What are the differences

between an alphabetical text and an alphabetized one? In the next sections, I will discuss

conceptual writing's commitment to these sorts of questions by close reading the alphabetized

(or is it the alphabetical?) *No. 111*.

Getting *No. 111 2.7.93-10.20.96*

Kenneth Goldsmith's *No. 111 2.7.93-10.20.96*, one of the most committedly-alphabetic texts of

the conceptual writing movement, is not easily reduced to summary. The text consists of words

and phrases that Goldsmith collected between February 7, 1993 and October 20, 1996 that end

with a (loosely determined) "r" sound. Goldsmith organizes the words and phrases of the book

into alphabetically-ordered sections by syllable count; the first section consists of alphabetized

one-syllable words, the second of alphabetized two-syllable words and phrases, the third of

alphabetized three-syllable words and phrases. For example, the first section of the text begins:

"A, a, aar, aas, aer, agh, ah, air, är, are, arh,"[37] while the second section begins, "A door, à la, a

pear, a peer, a rear, a ware, A woah!, Abba, abhorred, abra, abroad, accord" (3), and the third

begins, "A few hours, A is for, a keeper, a kipper, a layer, a liar, a lotta, a nice pair, a real bore"

(14). The units of each section (in the second section, for example, two-syllable words or

phrases, in the third, three-syllable words or phrases) are separated by commas, and each

section ends with a semicolon, except for the last, which ends in a period. The section titles (I, II,

III) denote how many syllables there are in each section; the final section has 7228 syllables and

is a verbatim transcription of D.H. Lawrence's short story "The Rocking Horse Winner," which

ends with the word "winner."[38] In the text's later pages, there is not a corresponding section for

each possible number of syllables; the first time this break occurs is between sections LXXX and

LXXXII; there is no section LXXXI. These breaks become even more drastic toward the end of the

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[37] Kenneth Goldsmith, *No. 111 2.7.93-10.20.96* (Great Barrington, The Figures, 1997), 1. All
further references will use in-text citations.
[38] For a reading of *No. 111* that considers the "The Rocking Horse Winner," see Schwartzburg's
"Encyclopedic Novelties," 24-26. For the story of Lawrence's inclusion in the text, see Geoffrey
Young, "Kenny," *Open Letter* 12.7 (2005): 48-51.

book; the antepenultimate section has 1913 syllables, and the penultimate has 2737 syllables.

Finally, it is also worth noting that *No. 111* is the final text in a series; earlier texts such as *No. 109 2.7.93-12.15.93* and *No. 110 10.4.93-10.7.93*, are similar to *No. 111* in terms of their ethos of word collection and arrangement, though neither has gained nearly as much critical attention as *No. 111*.[39]

    No. 111 is 606 pages long, and Goldsmith has remarked that its length was not arbitrary, but that he wanted it to be at least as long as "any dictionary worth its salt."[40] Goldsmith is not the only one to describe his book within the framework of the reference text; art critic Raphael Rubinstein describes it as "attempting no less than a complete reordering of the things of the world," and writes that "the work is also intentionally, a weirdly constructed Baedeker to late-20th-century American society, and a compendium of raw material for an autobiography of the artist."[41] Poet Tan Lin has described it in a similar vein, writing that "*No. 111* suggests a re-cloning of the nineteenth century archive, a tour-de-force of amnesia and un-jogged memory systems; hence the idea of the work as a weirdly backwards reference book, a kind of disco party of a dictionary of all our various lives lived in reverse."[42] This positioning, by both author and critics, of *No. 111* as a reference book—even a "weirdly backwards one"—lends the text a sense of totality and authoritativeness, even if that authoritativeness is rendered only as control over found language ending with a certain sound over a certain period of time.

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[39] These texts are available online: < http://www.ubu.com/contemp/goldsmith/index.html >
[40] Kenneth Goldsmith, "I look to theory…." <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/ goldsmith/theory.html >
[41] Raphael Rubinstein, "Visual Voices," (1996). < http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/ rubinstein.html >.
[42] Tan Lin, "Information Archives, the De-Materialization of Language, and Kenneth Goldsmith's *Fidget* and *No. 111 2.7.93-10.20.96*." < http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/lin.html >

But is a personal and idiosyncratic list of words and phrases really that much like a reference text? Is it possible that critics, blinded by the alphabeticality and size of *No. 111*, look past all of the ways in which *No. 111* is *unlike* a reference text?[43] The book may be uncreative and alphabetized, but it has no entries or definitions, nor does it provide information about meaning, usage, history, context, or pronunciation of words, ideas, or things in the world. *No. 111* may ape the dictionary or encyclopedia in terms of its size, its sheer quantity of language, and in its use of alphabetical order, but, on the surface, it appears to be indexical to nothing other than Goldsmith himself. Might we read *No. 111* as a sort of autobiography, as Rubinstein suggests? As a personal history cloaked in the conceit of an encyclopedia? Keeping these questions in mind, I will first read *No. 111* conceptually by using Goldsmith's recommended methods (parsing, skimming, aggregating, searching) in at attempt to "get" the text. I will then take the opposite route and close read *No. 111* with an attention to form, diction, even meter and rhyme. In doing so, I will walk the line between uncreative and creative, referential and literary, conceptual and formal approaches to Goldsmith's work.

To begin conceptually: as even a glance at the first page of *No. 111* proves, it's almost impossible to talk about the text without mentioning Goldsmith himself and his procedures, because the text begs the question: where do *No. 111*'s words and phrases come from? How have they been transcribed? The answer to these questions have been addressed by Goldsmith

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[43] For several perspectives on what might make a work of literature "encyclopedic," see Edward Mendelson, "Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon," *Comparative Literature* 91.6 (1976): 1267–1275; Hilary A. Clark, "Encyclopedic Discourse," *SubStance* 21.1 (1992): 95–110; Jed Rasula, "Textual Indigence in the Archive," *Postmodern Culture* 9.3 (1999).

and critics elsewhere: the words are culled from Goldsmith's daily life.[44] He reports that he

carried a tape recorder and notebook around with him to record words and phrases ending in

the "r" sound, and that the advent of the Internet is what really kicked the project into high

gear. The Internet gave Goldsmith access to unlimited language that was easily manageable

with the handy cut-and-paste tool.[45] *No. 111* thus continually points us back to both Goldsmith

and his cultural milieu, which together form what Place and Fitterman would term the "pre-text"

of *No. 111*.[46] But this pre-text is not something we can locate, as we can quite easily locate the

pre-text of, for example, Fitterman's conceptual work *The Sun Also Also Rises* in Hemingway's

The Sun Also Rises. The indexicality of *No. 111* is more theoretical than actual. It points us back

to a time that we can just begin to apprehend through our access to dense lists of alphabetized

words and phrases, not through our access to another tangible text. There is no way for us to

compare Goldsmith's *No. 111* to its nebulous pre-texts; we have nothing to measure his

alphabetical (which is to say, his procedural) gestures against. We have no choice but to put our

faith (or lack thereof) in Goldsmith's accurate rendering of his pre-textual material.

Skimming through *No. 111*, we notice a list of increasingly expansive words and phrases.

The text is littered with a mix of snippets of mid-1990s commentary about the O.J. Simpson trial,

MTV's *The Real World*, *Murphy Brown*, and Kurt Cobain. It features a number of personal

references to Goldsmith's wife (artist Cheryl Donegan), and it repeatedly returns to topics that

we can only assume are Goldsmith's personal interests; references to punk rock, masturbation,

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[44] The works in *Open Letter*'s special issue on Goldsmith are very attentive to his procedures and this line of inquiry; see *Open Letter* 12.7 (2005).
[45] Goldsmith, "I look to theory."
[46] Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman, *Notes on Conceptualisms* (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2009), 21.

and the art world permeate the text. As many critics have suggested, even the uncreative act of transcription leads to the creation of a highly personal work; as Goldsmith says, even in the most uncreative act, "the suppression of self-expression is impossible."[47] Dworkin goes as far as suggesting that *No. 111* is "quite unguardedly confessional: it locates a single subject at the intersection of an overwhelming mass of social discourse and triangulates him through exactly what he heard, what he was reading, what chat rooms he visited, and so on."[48]

It follows that each reader of *No. 111* necessarily has a different phenomenological experience when skimming the text. That a single reader could have access to the complete compendium of pre-texts behind *No. 111*—each book, each conversation, each bit of newsprint, each email Goldsmith wrote and received—is impossible. So many of the pre-texts of *No. 111* are personal, ephemeral, or both, and the only person who has this kind of privileged access to the book is Goldsmith himself. As such, the text only begins to cohere in moments in which our cultural experience overlaps with Goldsmith's and we can differentiate phrases from among streams of language. The alphabetic, non-hierarchical ordering of words and phrases enables this piecemeal understanding of the text; it encourages us to skim, to give up on expectations of narrative or consistency, to pay attention to what we already recognize and understand rather than to take in new information or to learn. Despite its alphabetic affinities with reference texts, *No. 111* only reinforces what we already know.

For example, as a literary critic skimming *No. 111*, I notice quotations from novels and poems; Goldsmith quotes the first lines of *Lolita* (318), Polonius in *Hamlet* (282), a few lines from the Ithaca episode of *Ulysses* (378), Pound's *ABCs of Reading* (398), several lines from

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[47] Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*, 9.
[48] Craig Dworkin, "The Imaginary Solution," *Contemporary Literature* 48.1 (2007): 34.

Gorey's *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, and David's Moser's "This is the Title of the Story" (565) which

is reproduced almost in its entirety. These references are scattered among personal ads, song

lyrics, nonsense, proverbs, and hundreds of thousands of words that mean nothing to me

outside of their context in *No. 111*. While there are a number of meta-textual phrases in the

book, such as "an alphabetic and syllabic order" (148) and "one syllable rhymes A to Z then a

semi-colon then two syllable rhymes A to Z then a semi-colon then three etc." (342), for the

most part the language of *No. 111* is utterly without context—and thus, as a reference text, is

fairly useless. The alphabetic sequence here doesn't so much enable the transfer of knowledge

as thwart it. While I may be able to determine a little bit about, say, Goldsmith's reading tastes,

or, at least, his reading habits, so much of *No. 111* remains opaque.

This opacity becomes even more obvious when we stop skimming and zero in on a

chunk of *No. 111*. Take, for example, the beginning of Section XIII:

A dog may bark but his legs will never grow longer, a good place to meet a man is at the

dry cleaners, a great-grandchild nibbles of the liver of another, a holy man long white

beard and hair sits in wicker, a light-reddish colored metal of brittle texture, a piece of

string or a sunset possessing neither (182).

While each of these thirteen-syllable phrases is *not* nonsensical in and of itself, this list of

alphabetized phrases is just that: an arbitrary list of context-less language. Using what we might

think of as uncreative methodology, I can, with the help of Google, provide context to some of

the unfamiliar phrases and locate their pre-texts; a quick search reveals that "a light-reddish

colored metal of brittle texture" begins *The New Websterian 1912 Dictionary*'s definition of

"bismuth,"[49] that the phrase "a piece of string or a sunset possessing neither" appears in John Cage's "Lecture on Nothing,"[50] and that "a dog may bark but his legs will never grow longer" is a proverb (documented by several sources). The only hit for the phrase "a great-grandchild nibbles of the liver of another" is in the pages of *No. 111* itself; its pre-text remains inaccessible to us. Maybe the phrase is something Goldsmith said or heard, maybe it came out of a chat room conversation. While Google, along with Goldsmith's offering of *No. 111* for free in (an easily searchable) PDF form on UbuWeb, creates new possibilities for accessing the text in non-linear ways, the fact remains that much of the language in the book, such as the tantalizing phrase "a great-grandchild nibbles of the liver of another" remains impenetrable.[51] *No. 111*'s "alphabetic and syllabic order"—its procedural foundation—organizes the text's discourse, even monumentalizes it, but does not create meaning out of it.

Reading *No. 111* 2.7.93-10.20.96

When we switch gears and close read *No. 111*—when we begin paying real attention to its form and read every word on its pages—a number of things about the text become immediately clear. First, we discover that its organizational framework (its alphabetic and syllabic scaffolding) is not as sturdy we might imagine it to be. Its alphabetical order, in particular,

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[49] Noah Webster and Harry Thurston Peck, *New Websterian 1912 Dictionary: Based Upon the Unabridged Dictionary of Noah Webster: with a Reference Library and Treasury of Facts* (Syndicate Publishing Company, 1912), 107.

[50] John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings, 50th Anniversary Edition* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 110.

[51] UbuWeb is a website founded by Goldsmith in 1996. It is a repository of experimental and avant-garde literature, visual art, music, and film, and much of the material from Goldsmith and Dworkin's *Against Expression* was drawn from it. For more on UbuWeb, see Agnès Peller, "Kenneth Goldsmith's UbuWeb: An Artist's Contribution to the History of the Humanities," trans. by Francesca Simkin. 2015.

shows signs of splintering, and each instance of deviation results in what seems to be a

purposeful relaxing of the text's alphabetical rule. Unlike, for example, Goldsmith's book *Traffic*,

which consists of transcriptions of radio traffic broadcasts, *No. 111*'s strict rules are always

visible; alphabetical order (or disorder) is clearly recognizable, and the text's syllables are easy

to count. We can't tell if Goldsmith made changes to the pre-texts of *Traffic* without accessing

them (and doing so is unlikely given the ephemeral nature of a radio traffic broadcast), but we

can very easily see the mutations in *No. 111's* procedure. In this section, I will read *No. 111* by

beginning at the level of the single word, and I will move up to considerations of the text's

larger units, the phrase and the section. In doing so, I will enumerate several ways in which

close reading—particularly a close reading of *No. 111*'s alphabetic structure—reveals aspects of

the text that are inaccessible from the perspective of the text's procedures alone.

Goldsmith begins to break the rigors of the alphabetic sequence on the very first page of

No. 111 with the sequence of words "Ford, ford, fore, fors, four, IV, foure" (1). Goldsmith slips

"IV"—the Roman numeral for the word "four"—into to the F section, even though it does not

begin with an "F." This is not so much a mistake in alphabetization as it is a deliberate non-

standard alphabetization that privileges the aural over the visual; the procedure mutates into a

comprehensible, if "incorrect" alphabetization. We find other similar moments all over *No. 111*.

For example, in section II, we find the sequence of phrases: "4 hours, four hours, four score,

* * * * , four stars" (6), in which Goldsmith "alphabetizes" the number "4" among instances of

the word "four," and "alphabetizes" the asterisks as an aural reading of them might sound (thus

insisting that we vocalize them as "four stars," drawing on the conceit of movie review—

instead of, say, "four asterisks,"—as well). Goldsmith similarly toys with punctuation in the

sequence "nullah, numbah, #, number, Numbers" (8), and once again alphabetizes a symbol by the sound of its linguistic equivalent. In section VI, we are faced with an emoticon, an entirely different type of symbol. Goldsmith writes, "I am sad however, I am the new Buddha, :-D I am wearing garters, I am your worst nightmare" (69). Instead of "translating" the smiley face symbol into words, Goldsmith ignores it completely, and doesn't engage with it as something to be alphabetized or put in syllabic order. The emoticon that prefaces the phrase "I am wearing garters" is excluded from the phrase's syllable count and effectively silenced.

In moments such as these in which *No. 111* has to deal with extra-lexical symbols that exceed the strictures of alphabetic and syllabic order, we cannot help but intuit Goldsmith operating beyond the bounds of the constraint. He refuses to submit completely to the concept and practice of alphabetical order. Craig Dworkin has suggested that *No. 111*'s schema is reliable, that "since the procedure is transparent readers know precisely where a given phrase must appear, both within the book and then within the appropriate chapter."[52] But reading *No. 111* closely shows this not to be the case. A traditional readership notices things about the text that a thinkership cannot realize by "getting" a one-, or even five-sentence introduction to the book. And Goldsmith's presence is felt in *No. 111* not just because he is at the center of its discourse, but because the mutations in alphabetical order are not aleatory; the alphabetization of "* * * *" and "four stars" reads as deliberate on Goldsmith's part. Though we might assume *No. 111* to be a strictly procedural work, in moments such as these we sense the presence of the author in the text's creation. Alphabetization is one of *No. 111*'s rules, and when we see that rule repeatedly bent or broken, we cannot help but think of the agent of

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[52] Dworkin, "The Imaginary Solution," 34.

their breaking, and turn to Goldsmith himself. The procedural text that breaks its own rules is even more invested in projecting a figure of the author than a non-procedural text, and intentionality becomes a surprisingly important issue at the micro, as well as the macro level of conceptual writing.

The rigidity or malleability of *No. 111*'s constraints is also a concern at its syllabic or phrasal level. The language of *No. 111* was culled by an exceedingly arbitrary constraint; it collects phrases that end with an "r" sound, and these phrases, whether they contain three syllables or three hundred, are the foundational units around which the entire text is organized. But this constraint is extremely vague; Goldsmith and many others refer to it as a loose "r" sound, while Dworkin[53] and Perloff[54] refer to the constraint as a "schwa" sound. These sounds are close, but not exactly the same. Take, for example, this sequence of words from the second section: "Cold War, coler, coleslaw, colmar, color, coma, comma, compeer, concord" (4). As we can see here, Goldsmith's "r" constraint is very loose—Perloff calls it "dubious"—and it differs greatly from the strict procedural writing promoted by the Oulipo.[55] Oulipian forms such as lipograms, univocalics, and palindromes leave no room for such ambiguities. Next to a text such as Perec's landmark novel *La Disparition*, a lipogram on the letter "e," *No. 111*'s most visible constraint looks like not much of a constraint at all.

No. 111 also raises many questions about the procedure for determining its phrase lengths. When we read *No. 111*, it quickly becomes clear that there is no constraint that demands where a phrase begins and/or ends. Reading the text proves that Goldsmith does not

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[53] Dworkin, "Zero Kerning," *Open Letter* 12.7 (2005).
[54] Perloff*,* 150.
[55] Ibid., 151.

necessarily stop a phrase with the first "r" sound that he encounters at the end of a word, nor

does he attempt to include only "complete" phrases. For example, in section IX, we come

across "Yes Virginia there is a Santa," (130). The phrase, is of course, a partial rendering of the

title of the famous editorial and film *Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus*. Goldsmith is not

interested in preserving the whole title—he omits the "Claus" and includes the rest of the

phrase anyway—but he could have stopped the phrase at "Virginia" (as he does end a different

phrase with the word "Virginia" in Section IV) (38). There seems to be no constraint at work

when it comes to the length of phrases. Another example of Goldsmith's idiosyncratic and non-

constrained phrasing is spread out throughout *No. 111*, which contains many iterations of

different lengths of the "Betty Botter" tongue twister. The phrase "Betty Botter" first appears in

section IV (65), and then appears several more times, surrounded by increasingly longer

portions of the tongue twister ("Betty Botter bought some butter" in section VIII [99]), until the

whole thing is eventually rendered in full. When we look at the "Yes Virginia there is a Santa"

and the "Betty Botter" entries in *No. 111* in tandem, we realize that the text is not consistent in

its determination of phrases, and that it has no discernible scheme for their lengths. There is no

rule for this aspect of phrasing in *No. 111*, and we have nowhere to look but to Goldsmith

himself in these moments in which the text is not dictated by its alphabetic and syllabic

constraints. The more constrained a text is, the more visible its non-constrained aspects

become. Once again, the malleable procedure of a constraint-based text has the effect of

turning us back toward the author of that text.

A related issue that comes to the fore when we examine *No. 111* at the level of the

phrase is its use of punctuation. Each phase, whether it consists of two syllables or two hundred

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syllables, is separated by a comma, and each section ends with a semicolon. Goldsmith strips

the pre-texts of their commas while retaining the other punctuation (with the exceptions of the

penultimate section which, as far as I can tell, is garbled Internet-speak with non-standard

lineation intact, and the final section, which reproduces D.H. Lawrence's "The Rocking Horse

Winner" faithfully). The effect of this move is that familiar phrases are de-natured. The commas

of "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus," that indicate the phrase's addressee in a patrician

manner are removed, and some of the affective content of the phrase is lost when it is

rendered as "Yes Virginia there is a Santa." The removal of commas from their pre-texts has the

curious effect of neutralizing language here and throughout *No. 111*. Goldsmith treats language

as material to be molded throughout the text, and moments such as these highlight the

diminishing affect of language, and a lowering of semantic value in the text.

Finally, we can consider *No. 111* at the level of the section. It is at this level where *No.

111's* literariness is most strongly felt. Many critics, including Dworkin, have remarked on the

text's musicality, and the syllabic arrangement of the text can be incantatory, especially in its

early sections. These early sections are aesthetically pleasing to the ear for the same reason

that so much children's poetry is. Consider the anapestic rhythms that appear across many of

the phrases in Section IV: "Backstabbers, bad actor, bad manners, bad mutha" (14), "Joan

Rivers, Jocasta, jock fodder, Joe Mama" (20). Or consider the trochaic sequences that also

appear in the fourth section: "Doogie Howser, doppelganger, doubleheader, down on uppers,

Down with winter!, Dr. Bronner's, Dr. Pepper" (32). The tenth section, which contains a number

of phrases written in iambic pentameter, features many more that are written in trochaic

pentameter, such as "Soon To Be A Major Motion Picture" (142)—a familiar phrase whose

meter I had never noticed until its appearance in *No. 111*. Finally, because each phrase ends in, if not an identical, than at least a similar sound, *No. 111*'s pages are filled with unrelenting rhymes and slant rhymes.

When we close read the beginning of *No. 111*, it becomes obvious that the text is organized around sound. *No. 111's* rhymes and slant rhymes, its syllabic organization, and its alphabetical organization (which results in much of the text being alliterative) are obvious from the start. Goldsmith's attention to the aural aspects of language above and beyond the visual or semantic aspects of language encourage us to read *No. 111* aloud with attention to the materiality of the signifier, and its exploitation of these aural possibilities of its form may lead us to conclude that *No. 111* is much more like a literary text (or a poem in particular) than it is like an encyclopedia. However, we can't help but notice that the sonic quality of *No. 111* changes as the book goes on and its phrases become longer. The rhythms that appear in the fourth section are very different from the rhythms (or lack thereof) that appear in the fortieth, and many late sections of the text include only one phrase. The aural qualities, which is also to say, the pleasures, of the early sections of the book disappear into long phrases and sentences without legible scaffolding. Alphabetical order and syllabic order are not very noticeable when there are only two long phrases being ordered. In Section CVII, for example, we find only one textual unit:

At the farmer's market an old farmer was being interviewed by a film crew. He was asked about pesticides microwaves and finally about corporate involvement in the food industry. "They poison us" he said. "Where money is involved the food becomes spoiled." He was

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then asked what his view was of the future. He looked directly into the camera with a

glint in his eye and said "Things will not remain this way forever." (449)

In this late moment, the alphabetic and syllabic structures, while still technically in use, have

lost their sense of presence in the text here and elsewhere. A reversal begins to occur, and as

the alphabetic and syllabic constraints are occluded, there is more and more room for

signification, and even for narrative.

While the excerpt above, and many others, can stand on their own as a sort of flash

fiction, other late sections in the book are not as narratively or even semantically cohesive.

Section DXXVIII, for example, is a difficult-to-read account of an LSD trip (possibly spoken by

someone with a German accent):"Leeke-a zee sooddee deep clereety ooff un LSD treep ell zee

thuooghts und feeleengs I'fe-a elveys hed ebuoot my budy ere-a noo shuooteeng tu me-a et

fooll blest" (532). Section CMIX, meanwhile, consists of the first lines of limericks—"There once

was a girl from Alaska. There once was a tart named Belinda" (551)—while the penultimate

section is eleven pages of jumbled internet speak, ranging from "Time limit is four hours. 9 out

of 10 rottweilers prefer JehovahYou now own 19 Juice Tigers" (577) to obscured instructions for

making a large bong: "S0 wh4t y0u h4v3 1s 4 l0ng (3 f33t 1s g00d) 4cryl1c tub3 w1th 4 st3m

4nd b0wl st1ck1ng 0ut" (585). In contrast, we have the final section of the book, which, as I've

already mentioned, is a verbatim transcription of D.H. Lawrence's "The Rocking Horse Winner."

While each of these sections is distinct from the others, in all of them, the alphabetic and

syllabic constraints, while still technically in use, are imperceptible. The text that begins as all

arbitrary structure and no meaning eventually—if very unevenly—morphs into all meaning and

indiscernible arbitrary structure with the performative inclusion of "The Rocking Horse Winner" at *No. 111's* end[56]

The takeaway from actually reading *No. 111* is that it seems very unlike the mechanistic text that we might expect from an enumeration of its procedures alone. Reading *No. 111* reveals its vastly variable texture; the first and last sections of the text couldn't be more different, as we move from a dense nonsensical list of alphabetized one-syllable words in the first to a D.H. Lawrence short story in the last. While some of the text's variability comes from the ways in which Goldsmith toys with the alphabetic structure (such as privileging sound over sight when it comes to alphabetizing roman numerals) the rest of it comes about because the constraint itself begins to lose its power as *No. 111*'s language exceeds its structure. Alphabetical order is an effective tool for organizing small units of language, but it proves insufficient for the organization of larger units, whether those large units are chat room conversations or a D.H. Lawrence short story. What is first an experience of the visual and aural materiality of language devoid of signification (especially in the first ten or so sections) eventually becomes an experience of language organized by the semantic structure of English syntax. We begin with arbitrarily-ordered raw language, and end with semantically-ordered modernist fiction that shows no hint of its placement within the text's alphabetical schema. While this can also be said of the text's other constraints—the "loose r" endings of words and the syllabic pattern are also submerged by the end of the text—the lack of the alphabetic structure is *No. 111*'s most conspicuous absence at its end, because, unlike the end-sounds of phrases or the number of syllables in phrases, alphabetical order is easily visible on the page.

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[56] For more on the performative aspects of *No. 111* and Goldsmith's work in general, see Schwartzburg's "Encyclopedic Novelties."

When we compare *No. 111*'s sixth page to its 600th, what jumps out immediately is the formal,

alphabetic shift that occurs throughout the book.

In this sense, Goldsmith differs from the writers of the Oulipo, arguably conceptual

writing's constraint-based forbears, who claim to value their constraints above and beyond the

texts that they produce. Oulipian constraints do not fade as Goldsmith's do in *No. 111.* Francois

Le Lionnais, one of the founders of the Oulipo, explains that the group's "goal is to discover new

structures and to furnish for each structure a small number of examples "[57] and that "the only

text of value is the one that formulates the constraint."[58] Unlike the Oulipians, Goldsmith in *No.*

111 is interested in familiar constraints; the text has no claim of novelty in its employment of

alphabetical and numerical order. In fact, Goldsmith's use—and then dismantling of—

alphabetic and syllabic forms, the foundational forms of order of reference texts and poetry, is

a powerful statement about the extent to which procedure (alphabetic or otherwise) can

contain language. In the beginning of *No. 111*, Goldsmith renders language inert in the face of

powerful literary structures, but by the end of *No. 111*, Goldsmith has rendered powerful

literary structures inert in the face of language. And it is only by actually reading *No. 111* that

this shift becomes evident.

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[57] Francois Le Lionnais, quoted in Warren F. Motte Jr., ed., *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2008), 38.
[58] Ibid., 12.

Conceptual Writing and Alphabetization

No. 111 is just one conceptual text among many that uses the logic of the alphabetic sequence as an organizing rule.[59] If we were to arrange all of these texts in a spectrum from most rigidly constrained to least, we might begin with Claude Closky's *The First Thousand Numbers Classified in Alphabetical Order* (1989). Closky's strictly alphabetized text, which Goldsmith and Dworkin call "a model of conceptual literature" is a difficult read;[60] Brian Reed suggests that it "estrange[s] the very fundamentals of the reading process."[61] As one might expect, *The First Thousand Numbers Classified in Alphabetical Order* delivers on its title; it begins,"[e]ight, eight hundred, eight hundred and eight, eight hundred and eighteen, eight hundred and eighty, eight hundred and eighty-eight, eight hundred and eighty-five, eight hundred and eighty-four."[62] In Closky's work, numbers, themselves an organizational structure, are first rendered useless by their transcription into words, and then rendered even more useless by their alphabetization. Closky's work is conceptual writing par excellence; its alphabetic procedure is clearly defined, solitary, rigorous, and mechanistic. There is no doubt that Closky's text is the result of alphabetization, and it's difficult to imagine a less creative text.

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[59] For a comparative reading of twenty-first century alphabetic texts *The Inkblot Record* by Dan Farrell (who is associated with the conceptual writing movement) and "Zealous" by Joshua Clover (who is not), see Brian M. Reed, *Nobody's Business: Twenty-First Century Avant-Garde Aesthetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press: 2013), 59-72. Making similar distinctions (though with a different vocabulary), Reed suggests that Farrell uses the alphabetic order as "a convenient organizational tool," while for Clover, it "symbolize[s] the alpha and omega of world invention" (67).

[60] Dworkin and Goldsmith, *Against Expression*, 148.

[61] Brian M. Reed, "Textbook Uncreative Writing," *American Book Review* 32.4 (2011): 6.

[62] Claude Closky, "The First Thousand Numbers Classified in Alphabetical Order," *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, ed. Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 148.

If *The First Thousand Numbers Classified in Alphabetical Order* is on the most rigidly

procedural end of this spectrum, *No. 111* is on the other. Compared to Closky's work,

Goldsmith's seems downright creative. Even though both writers are dealing with pre-texts of

found language, Closky is working with a closed, universally-recognizable set of language, while

Goldsmith's set has been chosen very loosely, and is arbitrarily expansive, personal, and

idiosyncratic. Closky's text is rule-bound, where Goldsmith's is rule-breaking. Closky's is

uncreative, where Goldsmith's is, in comparison, deeply creative. In between these two texts,

we might place other alphabetic conceptual works; texts such as Caroline Bergvall's *VIA* (an

alphabetic list of all of the translations of the first lines of Dante's *Inferno* in the British

library),[63] Dan Farrell's *The Inkblot Record* (an alphabetic list of responses to Rorschach tests in

psychology textbooks),[64] Ara Shirinyan's *Your Country is Great* (a collection of alphabetically-

ordered poems, each consisting of results of Google searches for the phrase "[country] is

great"), all use the sequence with varying degrees of rigidity to organize sets of language of

varying complexity.[65] None of these texts are as severe as Closky's, nor as loose as Goldsmith's,

and, by thinking about conceptual work on a spectrum of procedural rigidity, we can see that

alphabetization has the possibility to create a wide range of texts, each which takes a different

form and has a different appearance on the page. For example, *No. 111*'s alphabetizing

procedure is conspicuous in its early sections, whereas *VIA*'s is not; Bergvall's work takes the

form of numbered, alphabetically-ordered stanzas, and the first letter of the stanzas never

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[63] Caroline Bergvall, "VIA: 36 Dante Translations," in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, ed. Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 82-86.
[64] Dan Farrell, *The Inkblot Record* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 1994).
[65] Ara Shirinyan, *Your Country Is Great: Afghanistan-Guyana* (New York: Future Poem, 2008).

progress past the "M" of the word "midway."[66] The same alphabetic procedure has created two

formally different texts, and we see that there is as much (if not more) formal variation among

conceptual texts created by the same procedure as there is among non-conceptual structures,

such as the sonnet. Bergvall and Goldsmith may use the same procedure, but the forms that

their alphabetized texts takes are vastly different. A thinkership's discussion of procedure alone

would do justice to neither of these texts.

What close reading conceptual texts teaches us is that the lines between the

alphabetized and alphabetical, the encyclopedic and the literary, the uncreative and creative,

the procedural and non-procedural text, are not as clear as conceptual writers would like (us) to

believe. Procedure can be as lax as it can be severe, and a description of procedure is an

inadequate account of a conceptual text's form—and thus an inadequate account of a

conceptual work in general. Furthermore, that so many conceptual texts use alphabetization as

a procedure—and that these texts are so varied—is no mere coincidence. The alphabetic

sequence will always begin with A and end with Z, but *No. 111* and other conceptual texts show

us that even alphabetization has its ambiguities, loopholes, and opportunities for anti-

procedural intervention that transfers textual authority or governance away from rule-based

procedures and back toward the author. Alphabetization is the most basic and ubiquitous

method of organizing sets of language, and even it proves to be tractable, and, in the case of *No.*

111, usurp-able. Goldsmith's initial choice to structure his text alphabetically is as important a

symbolic gesture as is his choice to ultimately undermine and show the limitations of that very

structure.

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[66] Bergvall, "VIA," 82-86.

No. 111 has earned its reputation as one of the foundational texts of the conceptual writing movement. By foregrounding the procedure of alphabetization, Goldsmith doesn't just raise the issue of rule-based writing's limitations, but also raises the issue of its distinctly creative possibilities, no matter what the author has said about creativity in his prose writings. By scaffolding each section of *No. 111* with the alphabetic sequence, Goldsmith has harnessed the trope's inherent traits—its metaphorical resonances, its affiliations with literary, didactic, and reference texts alike, its liminal generic position, its meta-discursivity, its association with learning and language acquisition—and lent them all to his strange, encyclopedic, poetic, (un)creative tome. The alphabetic text—which is always asking how, why, for what purpose, and by whom it should be read—thus finds an ideal home in conceptual writing, a movement that is persistently posing the exact same questions.

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