

HANNAH WEINER'S OPEN HOUSE

Hannah Weiner
 Edited and Introduced by Patrick F. Durgin
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The sentence is always interrupted. Mind 1 that speaks out loud, or writes, is interrupted by mind 2 that is simultaneously preparing the next sentence or answering a question. Therefore the correct form to represent both minds or the complete mind, is an interrupted form.... My writing above and below the line incorporates some of this simultaneity. Linear writing must leave out many simultaneous thoughts and events. I am trying to show the mind.

—Hannah Weiner,
 “Mostly About the Sentence”
 (with Andrew Schelling)

An artistic statement accompanying the announcement for “Hannah Weiner at Her Job,” a 1970 performance series, begins: “My life is my art. I am my object, a product of the process of self-awareness.” The performances took place in New York’s Garment District where she then worked part-time as a lingerie designer and consisted of a sale of such garments on three successive Wednesdays in March. The piece had to do with the making (and so poeticizing) of a living: “Art is live people,” she writes. “The bikini pants I make sell for 49¢ and \$1.00. If things can’t be free, they should be as cheap as possible. Why waste time and energy to make expensive products that you waste time and energy to afford?” Following a short professional biography, listing the sites for her Code Poem Events (pieces enlisting nautical International Signal Code Flags), the announcement gives a phone number, “for further information.” At 8:32 AM, Monday, June 18, 2007 (37 years and some months late), I tried it, and a machine answered in the voice of a seemingly young woman, and reiterating the phone number went on: “If you’d like to leave a message after the beep, please do so. Thank you.” (I did this so that you wouldn’t have to.)

To write about Hannah Weiner is overwhelming, principally due to dislocations, including the temporal one above. In part, her aberrant sensory and thinking process in roughly the last third of her life (from the early 1970s to her death in 1997), diagnosed with schizophrenia, makes this so. This period covers her main writing period (following on her sixties’ performances), making “split mind” the easy and uneasy radical, or “root” (as in “rad-ish”), through which her work is ungrounded, or exposed. In fact, one historical reading might posit that “Hannah Weiner at Her Job” marks the beginning of her turn into radical “self-awareness,” which began with the first of her early journals in October of 1970. From around that date, her art bears almost exclusively on written compositions—performances of self—and since near coincident with the start of her hearing and seeing things, including eventually words, which became integral to her clairvoyant (or in her own words “clair-style”) writing, they are collaborative, too. The text of the cover image of

her 1982 *Code Poems* (based on the Signal Code performances) evokes this in a question central to phenomenology and to reading: “When does it or you begin?”

But practically speaking, dislocation figures most in the logistical fact many of her books are out of print, even while most of her production was still in manuscript or notebooks when she died. Immediately, *Hannah Weiner’s Open House*—which the editor Patrick F. Durgin calls “a representative selection spanning her decades of poetic output”—goes some way toward rectifying that. Coupled with the “Early and Late Clairvoyant Journals,” also edited by Durgin and available online through UC-San Diego’s Archive for New Poetry, there is now some initial basis to pattern a “whole” Hannah Weiner, though not an “un-split” one (“self” meaning at its root “apart”). Both *Hannah Weiner’s Open House* and the journals include welcome introductions by Durgin, with the former leaning toward her work’s context while the more discursive online one poses a critical reading emphasizing in part her unique ability. Both include a compass of critical writings on Weiner, which, while all terrific, reveal a relative paucity in light of her importance. Much remains to do.

A great boon of Hannah Weiner’s Open House lies in gathering her career-wide formal inflections in one place for the first time.

Working near the end of the age of formal manifestos—from Karl Marx’s to Joseph Buey’s 1970 signing of George Maciunas’s 1963 Fluxus “Manifesto”—Hannah Weiner took the “time and energy” economy of her performance art to expose what such a “making a living” might mean in the quickness (in multiple senses) possible to word works: How such might make a self and how we are each a “manifest” when our attention is there. There is certainly a transfer of sixties’ art processes: Hannah Weiner’s use of found objects (“WORDS I see”); collaboration (her voices); “happening” forms, mimicking natural operations (chance) as they apply to mind’s nature but distinct from John Cage, say, in her use of achingly personal material; and immediacy, so that the act of writing/reading is integral to what is written/read. Particularly, the last attribute gives her work a counter-intuitively nonliterary (and so in part contemporary) edge. Her writing projects offer almost no rhetorical points of purchase, and it is not naiveté on the part of Weiner, a Radcliffe graduate, but of utility, eschewing distraction: A poetics of immediacy—one might even posit of “ternality,” as from her writing there is no turning (in or out), except to face the con implicit to language itself—such a strain patent, say, in Herman Melville’s 1851 letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne that concludes: “Take God out of the dictionary, and you would have Him in the street.”

That’s in Weiner’s simple statement, “My life is my art,” but again the unique vector she took to its radical limit seems to lie in part in “self-awareness” as process, the product of which, “my object,” is “I am.” In this objectiveness, words lose intermediality: If “I am” is an object, who is writing “I am”? Exploding that, text becomes flat, and rather than proving the world so, it forces a reader into her or his own curvature, albeit “does it or you begin?” Such language-squashing works may be found in a boarder company of artists local to her scene; for example, in Ugly Duckling Presse’s recent compilation of the



Detail from cover

late-sixties literary journal *0-9*, edited by Vito Acconci and Bernadette Mayer. With Mayer, Weiner’s works in turn have been reckoned one of the cardinal bridges between the sixties’ poetry scene in New York and the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movements (indeed, Charles Bernstein is her estate executor): In that one might persuasively pose that aspects of New York (School) performance art carried into letters literally—not literarily, if such distinction may hold—set L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E’s key or at least its New York timbre. In terms of contemporary importance, Durgin himself posits that Weiner’s “influence can be seen today in the so-called ‘New Narrative’ work stemming from the San Francisco Bay Area,” while in turn the current “non-creative” writing tranche bears her mark.

This play of lineage, however, pales to what is spoken to our own immediacy out of Hannah Weiner’s writing, and a great boon of *Hannah Weiner’s Open House* lies in gathering her career-wide formal inflections in one place for the first time. It signals another way in which Hannah Weiner overwhelms, as reading one scrambles to place the leaps between, say, the leeching of text by number sets in “The Zero One,” significantly with the first-person pronoun “I” displacing the number “1,” treating the Mayan genocide in Guatemala; her meditation “Written In” (subtitled “Written in a blank book called Homo Futurus by Barbara Rosenthal”) on the “bound” book—

Not to tease the mind
 Not to blip the alpha wave
 Not to challenge the language
 Just get from side to side
 Get to another bottom
 Realize limits

ON THIS PAGE

—a work set by Durgin as Weiner typewrote it (as is “The Zero One”), respecting those occasions in which her work as formed through act are naturally inviolate; her late-70s series *Little Books/Indians*, happening (as in Cagian) transcripts of what Weiner saw on the page in her synesthetic clairvoyance as well as literally on the inside of her forehead, set in nervy, paratactic, and tightly enjambed sans-punctuation (or what might slow and so lose razor breadth of breath) jolts, so that the mediums (including our selves) have no place to go it is so close; and the psyche-raking groundwork of *Clairvoyant Journal 1974: March–June Retreat*, which is among the twentieth century’s last revolutionary sustained acts of conscious composition.

— Truitt continued on next page

In this clairvoyant work, coming after and to a certain extent fulfilling the early journals, Weiner works out the “self-awareness” methodology through which *Little Books/Indians*, among other later works, was realized. In the excerpt above from “Mostly About the Sentence,” which Durgin terms “Hannah’s major statement of poetics” (albeit perhaps sanitized by Andrew Schelling), she relates that her interest in *Clairvoyant Journal* was to render “complete mind”—an awesome artistic ambition, like unified field theory. Her attempt, though, distinct from Nikola Tesla, is not to bring together disparate observations but to “split” that to which we assume a unity: As she relates, “mind 1” from “mind 2,” and so on, with the assumption of a multiplicity of minds in the hive of an invisible becoming. In “The words in CAPITALS and underlines are words I see,” an artistic statement Durgin places as an entry to the volume’s ten-page *Clairvoyant Journal* selection, she states: “I am trying to understand through my continued writing which of these WORDS I see are 1) my own ordinary conscious thought; 2) from my developed superconscious mind which has precognitive, clairvoyant powers; 3) telepathic connections with living people; 4) BIG QUESTION communications from non-living forces.” While to “understand” such might lie outside the text, what we have in *Clairvoyant Journal* are records of sessions in which she seeks to render meticulously what she experiences in her mind in language as they bear. There are three text streams woven like French braids, though not symmetrically (what is the shape of the mind?), identified in part by typography: the capitalized words are those Hannah Weiner saw in her forehead (from inside her mind); in italics, a second heard voice; and in regular type, her own voice. The three voices may be further identified, as Weiner does, by quality, wherein the first tends to order and advise (a futurity); the second, to comment (a reflexive past); and the third, her own voice, to relate what’s on her mind (at present), noting it describes more often than not what is happening as she writes in her environment, including riffs off the voices occurring in/to that, viz. her May 4th entry:

HANNAH THIS IS THE BEST PAGE
HANNAH THIS IS MAY

M 4 p 2

*no sex appeal 3 more ears
realize write something you are documenting
it you hear GINSENG over the*

radio rather than see it You buy a plant
that flashed even after it said IT WAS
JUPITER

A WARNING you’ve been up since 7 and
haven’t stopped yet

What is striking is that while the distinctions that allow for the text appearances are unique to her particular synesthesia, as perhaps hearing voices with its schizophrenic tag is not so much, what those (dis)abilities make possible is common: Namely, we have competing thoughts (voices), the distinction of which we have managed to suppress (reminiscent of *Little Books/Indians*, with its “I” for 1, our Western acronym for a totality). In fact, Weiner’s tri-vocal form may even be grossly Freudian, though what belies this is Weiner insistence on another possible verbal stream, viz. “somehow I forgot, ignored or couldn’t cope with in the speed I was seeing things, a fourth voice, underlined capitals.”

What also interests is that the number of voices (three or four—or fourteen or twenty-six) is seemingly immaterial to her task of poeticizing “complete mind.” What “appears” key is the splits between minds through which flares the work potential on a temporal energetic field, which in textual poetics

is reminiscent of Stéphane Mallarmé’s “space” or *espacement*. As readers, this includes each of us, who are overwhelmed. “I am” is. “To overwhelm” means commonly to overthrow, or turn upside down, but the Middle English word *whelmen* from which the verb derives means itself on its own “to turn upside down.” As a verb, to say a thing overwhelms, then, equals “to turn upside down over”—like taking, say, what we each see in a mirror of our eyes and face and becoming the mirror seeing ourselves. In spatial terms, this would be an operation of taking what is (which already in words is a turn, or tropic) and pass it through a flip, returning “it” as it was, though charged (more than changed) through that act. Words are words, so it is implausible to identify a change on a surface except “self” (“I am”) reflexively, but it is related to location, a flip-split. To call the *Clairvoyant Journal* overwhelming, then (and revolutionary in this specific sense), means that there exists in it, as well as in later works emerging along its vector, something topical, as of the Greek “place.” It is the nature of that topicality, achieved overwhelmingly, that interests.

One way to touch on that is through the 1980 essay “Language-Centered” by Jackson Mac Low, Weiner’s colleague and friend. In this, he proposes that the consciousness-bearing load of a literary product is “perceiver-centered,” suggesting that the mind of the reader is a work’s “object of imitation.” He posits: “There is certainly a sense in which perceivers are perceiving their own minds at work when they sense meanings in these verbal works.” A poem, then, might operate to objectify mind—and perhaps to do so completely—as an act (performance) in a temporal (and so entropic) field. Or following on “energy,” from the Greek word meaning “at work,” one might place such a perceiver-centric stance as *enargia*, in the Greek meaning “shining” (“visible, palpable, manifest”), employed as a rhetorical term for “visually powerful, vivid description which recreates something or someone, as several theorists say, ‘before your very eyes’; vigorous ocular demonstration.” Similar to ekphrasis, the description of a static object, such as a work of art, *enargia* is differentiated by its characteristic immediacy, as of a sudden confrontation. While it may in language appear phenomenally, word to word, in time, *enargia* denotes the sudden—its operation more a process of catching up to a moment than refusing sand grains into a mirroring description. Along with its visual registry—the fact of Weiner’s synesthetic ability (“I SEE WORDS”)—it is the above-quoted “speed I was seeing things” suddenness that I would distinguish as energic.

But what occurs to Mac Low’s reader “perceiving their own minds” if the “object of imitation” is “complete mind” and so includes them? The transcriptive process itself is plausible (even clear and cogent): It is the fact of its execution (Weiner’s “ability,” as Durgin emphasizes), including the necessary attention to catch and render it, and its result (our reading, and perhaps inability) that is complex—and from a normative purchase perhaps infinitely so.

What characterizes *Clairvoyant Journal*, and much of what followed of her work, is that its reading requires a similarly energic immediacy. First, her writing’s flat surface, absent mimicry—it doesn’t recall—makes this so, continually subverting outward reflection. The writing is non-referential in a substantive way: You can, for example, switch out many proper and improper nouns without diminution of information. Switch but not reverse, because work is being done here and so occurs in entropic irreversibility. What is transmitted in an energic word grid is energy (including our own) as the information worth locating and reading. While one might posit then that words interrupt—or as she writes, “The sentence is always interrupted”—they don’t because they hold

it and us. But erasure is involved: burs (words) and blurs (sentences). But what if mind is a series of interruptions (attempts to render which typographically result in intercessional and slashing/slanting words between and through fragments) is a reader reading? If Weiner is transcribing text as found objects (via eye and ear), could one say that in fact she is rendering a manifest of her reading? If so, where and so what is the mind in this phenomenological transaction?

Concretely, I would say that for Weiner her “object of imitation” is metaleptically the page—or as I quote above, “realize limits / ON THIS PAGE.” In imitation lies mind’s infinity, contextualized as randomness (chance potentiality) versus a fixed pattern. Such calls again to Mallarmé and his “ONE TOSS OF THE DICE,” a work of conscious composition that started the last century:

FROM THE DEPTHS OF A SHIPWRECK

WHETHER

the

Abyss

whitened

becalmed

furious

under an inclination
glides desperately

with wing

—wherein those words’ spacing “is” is. In *Clairvoyant Journal*, you can almost talk over the waves to Weiner in the clarity of a spatial music that is the magic of a secret world—its recognition launching toward that simultaneity that is immediate apprehension—of the splashes, spurts, and blurs words and the phrases they constellate co-hear, weave, out of and in time. They imitate energy: frame our own. The root topicality of Weiner’s experiment/experience is that. Weiner sees energy, and its rendering into *enargia* that which overwhelms, the time of which words mark, reflecting “self-awareness,” a flicker (splash, spurt, and blur).

Or this is a reading, partial and un-split, which is never whole because always a start, or natural (*natus*, “born”). And there remains much to say to the fire. I would only add what Bernadette Mayer told me in conversation some months back: “Hannah did what she did so that we don’t have to.” She was referring in part to what I would read as Weiner’s wheel of root, extremity, and pain (with the last term somewhat complicated), but what is important is for each in and on his or her own to locate “what she did.” In her *Hannah Weiner’s Open House*, a way there is now here to find.

Sam Truitt is the author of Vertical Elegies 5: The Section (University of Georgia Press), Anamorphosis Eisenhower (Lost Roads), as well as the forthcoming Vertical Elegies: Three Works (Ugly Duckling Press), and Street Mete: A Work in Vertical Elegies (Palm).