

## The Surreal Objects of an Unfound Science

### By Christian Bök

W. Mark Sutherland has produced an array of surreal objects whose formality truly concretizes the poetics of visual poetry. Sutherland blurs the mediated distance between text and an item in order to devise curios that not only make “scriptural” the readymades of Marcel Duchamp, but also make “sculptural” the found poems of Bern Porter. Just as Man Ray might create his own “Gift”, a Dadaist present, by affixing a row of tacks to the face of a flatiron in order to render the object useless, yet ominous, so also does Sutherland accent found items in order to produce a gift, whose anomalous gratuities provide a whimsical commentary about the history of art. Each item constitutes what Jacques Carelman might call an “objet introuvables”, a ‘pataphysical thing, whose existence is imaginary, yet potential (not unlike a chessboard sphere or sponge wine bottle, etc.). Even though the object is created only from what is found, the object itself is never found, except when it symbolizes the un-findable.

Just as every object acquires an emotional resonance for the person who possesses it (and thus becomes a metonym for all that is unique about the person, so also do some of these items encapsulate the sensibility of another poetic artist (be it Duchamp, Cage, Beuys, etc.), almost as if the artist has in fact owned the object through some hypothetical circumstances, experiencing the intimacy of its demiurgic formalism. Like memorabilia, each object becomes impregnated with an allegorical connotation. Each object represents a souvenir brought back from some mental domain of lingual enigmas. Each object is in effect an ironic device, whose aesthetic existence is predicated upon a ludic trait within language itself (its uncanny ability, for example to realize an unthought potential through a gag or a pun). The meaning of the object coincides no longer with its intended function, but with its extended allusion.

Like a readymade or a found poem, each object derives its auratic quality from (a minimally modulated) process of aesthetic selection. Each object simply embodies the smallest possible gap between a case of pragmatic use and a case of excessive art, as if to suggest that, despite any pretense of function, every object has the immediate potential to become poetic once its semic value has been correctly inflected (perhaps by a Daliesque paranoia or a Warholian lethargy). Each object becomes a satirical commodity that can criticize the fetishism of the commodity itself through a hyperbole of fetishism. Each object suggests that, for every aesthetic enigma posed by a medium (no matter how absurd), there is a technical answer given by choice of style. As Jean Baudrillard might suggest, “(t)here is a complete

(")pataphysics of the object awaiting description here, a science of imaginary technical solutions".

### **1913: Marcel Duchamp Gives Up Painting For Something Else**

1994, wood, glass, clocks, engraved metal plates, 6" x 3" x 1"

This object is a classical chess clock, whose twin stop watches have each been labeled with a brass plaque: the first, entitled "Aesthetic": the second, entitled "Indifference" – and, of course, the second clock has been activated. Such an object dramatizes not only the artistic invention of Duchamp's theory (by virtue of being a readymade), but also the temporal dimension of Duchamp's career (by virtue of being a timepiece). The rationalized scientificity of such a clock stands in for the dispassionate perspectivism of the artist himself: not only does the clock provide an allegory for the transition of Duchamp from his aesthetic engagement (with paint) to his aesthetic detachment (through chess), but the clock also conveys this fact by evoking the temporal structure of the chess game, in which Duchamp indulges in a calculated competition with his own wit.

### **M:U:S:I:C (Homage To John Cage)**

1993, wood, metal, vinyl, 9" x 20" x 12"

This object is an antiquary school bell, whose gilded surface has been engraved, like a memorial, with the name Cage and his dates 1912 - 1992 (the instrument then displayed upon a shelf that has in turn been labeled with the elliptical subheading "is golden"). Like Cage, whose soundless piano piece "4'33" performs the space in between the notes rather than the notes themselves, Sutherland uses a colon to score the gaps between the letters of the very word "music". Made useless by the removal of the clapper, the aphonic chamber of the school bell can now evoke its own aesthetic immanence, providing an allegory not only for the artistic invention of Cage's music (the silence of his concerto), but also for the temporal dimensions of Cage's death (the silence of his cenotaph). Such an object calls to mind the acoustic pedagogy of a mentor calling pupils to their lessons: in this case a Buddhist aphorism about the gilded nature of the unsaid.

### **Past Tense (for Joseph Beuys)**

1995, wood, felt, engraved metal, 7" x 5" x 5"

This object is a miniature recipe box, whose shallow interior has been lined with a felt sheet, the back wall labeled with the verb "Feel" on a brass plaque. Such an object

dramatizes not only the artistic invention of Beuys' medium (by virtue of it being felt in a textile sense), but also the empathic dimension of Beuys' theory (by virtue of it being felt in a tactile sense). Like Beuys, Sutherland solicits interaction, inviting the viewer not only to touch, but also to emote, in response to the work – to “feel” the temporal tensions between a medium (felt) and its demand (feel). Even though such an object resembles a box designed to hold a relic or a jewel (thereby evoking a tone of sarcophagal containment, in which one artist memorializes the achievement of another through the nostalgia of the past tense), such an object does not contain, so much as perform, Beuys. The box is empty, holding nothing, except for its own present desire to be filled by the emotions of everyone who opens it.

### **Block**

1994, wood, metal, 15" x 5" x 2"

The object is a C-clamp that holds together a short stack of alphabetic blocks, whose wooden letters spell the word “H E A D”. The title is polysemic, referring not only to a constituent of the object, but also to the arrangement of its medium, since both comprise a “block of type”: each “block” is an intaglio engraving that can be used to stamp a letter in resin, and the clamp is a frame that can be used to “block” this wood type in the manner of medieval printing. The infantile overtones of these letter blocks call to mind the context of linguistic initiation: not only does the object evoke the word for a lingual idiot, a “blockhead”, but also the form of a lingual idiom, “putting your head in a vise”. The clamp provides a metaphor for a disciplinarian superstructure that applies a machinic pressure to the childish excesses of language itself: the “C” of a capital regime holds each capital letter in place.

### **Voice Box**

1995, paper, wood, 2" x 4" x 3"

This object is a wooden lock box that contains a stack of executive file cards with nonsensical expressions imprinted on both sides. The title is polysemic, referring not only to the object that holds a record of the voice, but also to the larynx that lends a voice to such contents: not only does the small box contain the sound-effects for a sonata, showing all the parts of such vocal music, but the inner lid depicts a cross-section of the throat, showing all the parts of the vocal organ. The voice-box in each case contains the potential for a diverse variety of noises: just as the diverse tones of the larynx can be arranged in order to create a structured speech, so also can the various cards of the object be shuffled in order to create a randomized poetry. The voice - box portrays language itself as a onomatopoetic recombination of the already-written: a permutable repertoire of sonic atoms.

## **Phonology**

1995, wood, plexiglass, metal, plastic magnets, paper, 10" x 12" x 2"

This object is a wooden frame, whose sheet metal backing and a plexiglass fronting form a box that contains a large number of colourful fridge-magnets, all shaped like alphabet letters. When shaken vigorously, some of the letters adhere at random to the metal panel, whose surface depicts the vocal score to a lautgedichte. The object depicts language as a kind of phonological cloud chamber, in which letters become molecular particles that cling by chance to the textual surface of the already-written. The object permits the user to create a kind of magnetic graffiti, whose spontaneous inscriptions not only obscures, but also augments, a text that is itself composed of Typographic palimpsests. For such an allegory, then fenestral character of phonology provides only a semic, not an ontic, view of the world. The reader learns to look upon language itself as the disturbed accretion of a juvenile detritus.

## **12 Examples of Rejection**

1995, wood, plexiglass, paper, 12" x 8" x 2"

This object is a pine wood showcase, divided into a dozen cells, each of which contains a sheet of paper, crumpled up into a ball. Each wadded sample of paper depicts a rejected fragment of text from another writing project. Like a specimen on display in a museum of natural history, each sheet of paper becomes an example to be studied by a scientific philosophy: just as fossils might provide a clue about the abandoned path of evolution, so also do these samples provide a clue about some dismissed form of elocution. Like eggs in a carton, these wadded papers evoke the idea of unhatched invention – the aborted attempt to express a perfect thought. Such literary examples of *disjecta membra* ultimately allude to an, as yet, untried science: the study of creativity in terms of its unfulfilled possibility. Such a lingual science can only be 'pataphysical in its imaginary potential – since it too represents an option denied.

**Christian Bök** is a poet, sound poet, and language - based artist. He is the author of *Crystallography* (Coach House Press, 1994), *Xenotext: Book 1* (Coach House Books, 2015) and the Griffin poetry-prize winner for *Eunoia* (Coach House Books, 2001). His sound poetry is featured on many Cds including *Carnivocal: an anthology of Canadian sound-poetry* (Red Deer Press, 2000). Bök currently teaches at Charles Darwin University in Darwin, Australia.