

FILE SHARING: READING THE INDEX IN ROSALIND KRAUSS AND WIM CROUWEL

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“Discoloration and ratty dust jacket. Pen underlining. Moderate wear.”

—description on Amazon.com of a “Used – Acceptable” copy of Rosalind Krauss’s The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths

“this link seems to be broken -- or rather, the link works but the pdf is [not] loading. have others had success recently?”

—comment on a file-sharing site for a link to a PDF of Rosalind Krauss’s essay “Notes on the Index, Part 1”

One of the more interesting volumes of Vladimir Lenin’s *Collected Works*, which was published in Moscow (in English) in 1961, is volume number 38, *Philosophical Notebooks*. It is a selection of texts that were important to Lenin, reproduced with the annotations that he made in the margins. Notes alongside an essay by Hegel include simple things like “!!!” and “NB” as well as longer notes like “The idea is ... a process” and “remarkably correct and profound (cf. the political economy of the bourgeoisie)”. These notes suggest a kind of conversation, across time, between Lenin and Hegel. The inscriptions, made casually, offer insight into Lenin’s immediate reaction to the text he was reading. In another set of notes alongside passages from a book by an author named Shulyatikov, Lenin writes, “what nonsense!”, “ha-ha! eclectic / not true”, “hm?” and “a lie!”¹ The volume of reproduced marginalia and underlined passages reminds us of the intimacy of reading and the way in which it provides an opportunity for connection between a reader and an author, but also, more locally, a moment of contact between a reader and an actual, physical text.

As reading formats become more various – from photocopied texts to scanned PDFs, e-books and webpages — the record of the moment of reading shifts, or in many cases, disappears. The contact between a reader and a physical text becomes somewhat homogenized when that reading is happening on an electronic device that lends itself less easily to mark-making.² In comparing PDF reading to printed

book reading, however, I became interested in the way that the PDF, unlike other electronic formats, often refers back to the book form through visual cues like page dimensions and typographic layout. This is especially true for texts that were first published in print before the advent of digital publishing. In these, we often see traces of the life of a text during that period after it has been authored, but before it reaches a reader, as it passes through the hands of designers, computers, printers, scanners, librarians and other “file sharers”. In the next pages I will examine the marks that exist in copies of two essays published in the 1970s and read today, one in print, and the other in PDF format.

1.

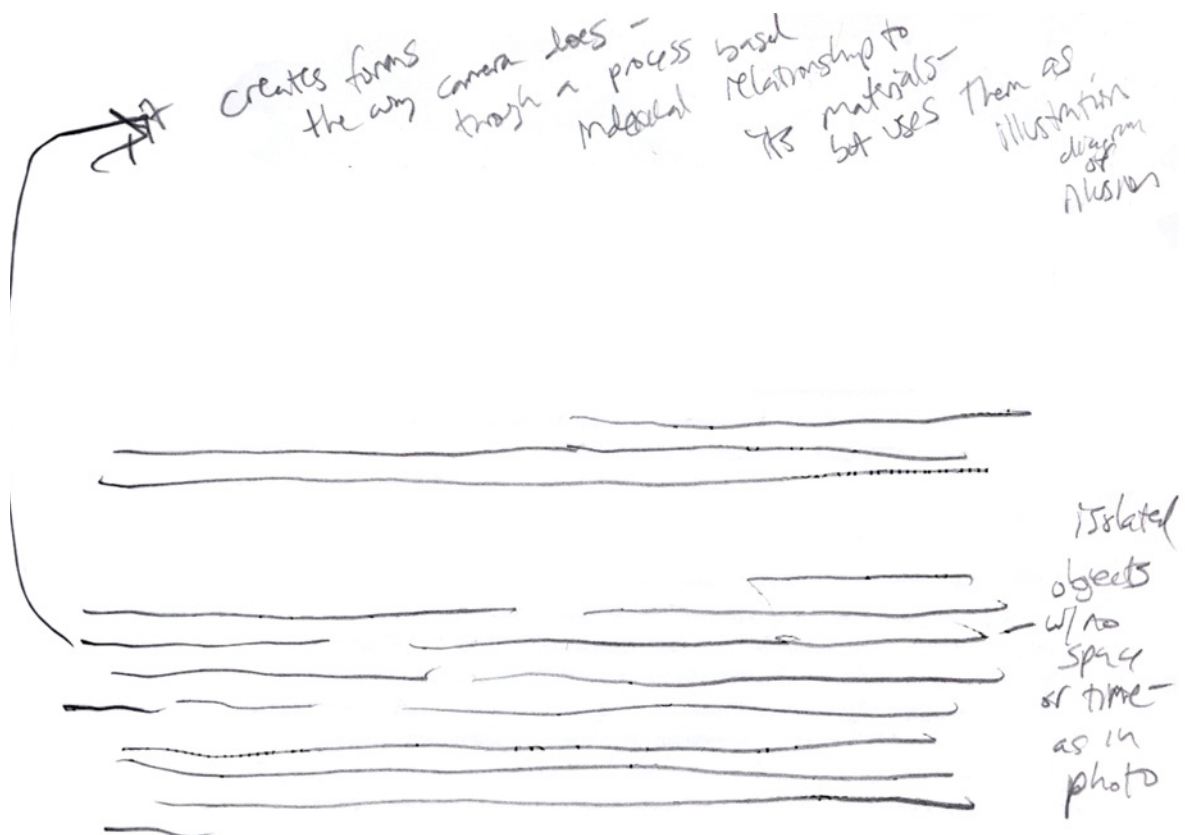
Several years ago I was a student in a seminar called “Language Enters the Studio” led by the artist Mel Bochner. One of the books we were asked to purchase was Rosalind Krauss’s collection of essays, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Bochner had us read Krauss’s 1976 “Notes on the Index, Part 1”, where she articulates the role of the index as a conceptual framework present in the artwork of the early 1970s.

The “index” is a linguistic term used to describe a sign that acquires meaning from its physical relationship to its referent. Indexes are “marks or traces of a particular cause” (footprints, smoke) that refer to something else (an animal, fire). In her essay, Krauss establishes the significance of the index in the work of Marcel Duchamp, and more broadly, in conceptual art practices that would come later. She describes Duchamp’s 1918 painting *Tu m’* as “a panorama of the index” – it includes images of cast shadows and a painting of a hand, pointing, with its index finger extended.

Later, Krauss discusses photography and its indexical relationship to an object – the photograph captures a particular object at a particular moment in time. She quotes Walter Benjamin on the growing importance of the caption in the late 19th century: “...picture magazines begin to put up signposts for [the viewer]—whether these are right or wrong is irrelevant. For the first time, captions become obligatory.”³ Photographs require text in order to confer meaning – to explain what the viewer is to see in the image. The need for interpretation is a result of its indexicality. It is not a fixed, autonomous sign, but a sign that points to something else – light captured in a particular place at a particular time. This is different from the relationship of the text of a title to a painting, or pictorial image. These are not dependent on text in order to be understood by a viewer. The photograph, on the other hand, requires explanation: “A meaninglessness surrounds it which can only be filled in by the addition of a text.”⁴

My own copy of Krauss’s book of essays is now discolored along the spine, and parts of it bear signs of having been read – passages are underlined,

there are a few notes in the margins. While I was enrolled in Bochner's seminar I was interested in the ways that class members interacted with their texts, and I asked some of the other students for their copies of Krauss's book. Many students in the class hadn't marked their texts, but for those who had, the words that were underlined or highlighted articulated ideas that seemed especially key or were harder to grasp, or that reminded the reader of something outside of the text. Notes in the margins often appeared to be in conversation with the text: they summarize ("referent is the index of shifter", "caption becomes equivalent in importance to image"), ask questions ("the symbolic is arbitrary by def.?"), comment ("pure representation"). These marks are themselves indexical – they trace the transfer of ideas from the author to the reader. They also record a particular encounter with the text by each reader – someone read these pages at a specific moment in time, they made notes with whatever pen, or pencil, or highlighter they had in their possession at the time. Certain things were on their mind at that moment (a passage in the text caused one person to make note of the band Guided by Voices). Their handwriting on the page was affected by the position they were sitting in when they read the text. They index a moment of interaction between a physical person and the printed text. The images on the pages that follow are a record of pen, pencil and highlighter marks made on "Notes on the Index, Part 1".



Underlines, an arrow and notes summarizing some key ideas in Krauss's essay.

withdrawal from
language as a form of communication by means of speaking in private allusions
and riddles.

the shitter- the problem of naming an individuated s
autist's problem with

Tu m'is

alter-ego

self that is split,

omission in the way that words denote

→ Referents

two
word/ sound

EROS. c'est le

of indignity

name/
sentence

estimons les ecchymoses des Esquimaux aux mots
exquis' (we esteem the bruises of the Eskimos with beautiful language
their sheer musicality for the process of signification.

upset the balance of meaning'

outrageous

→ Romanesque

form begins to erode the certainty of conte

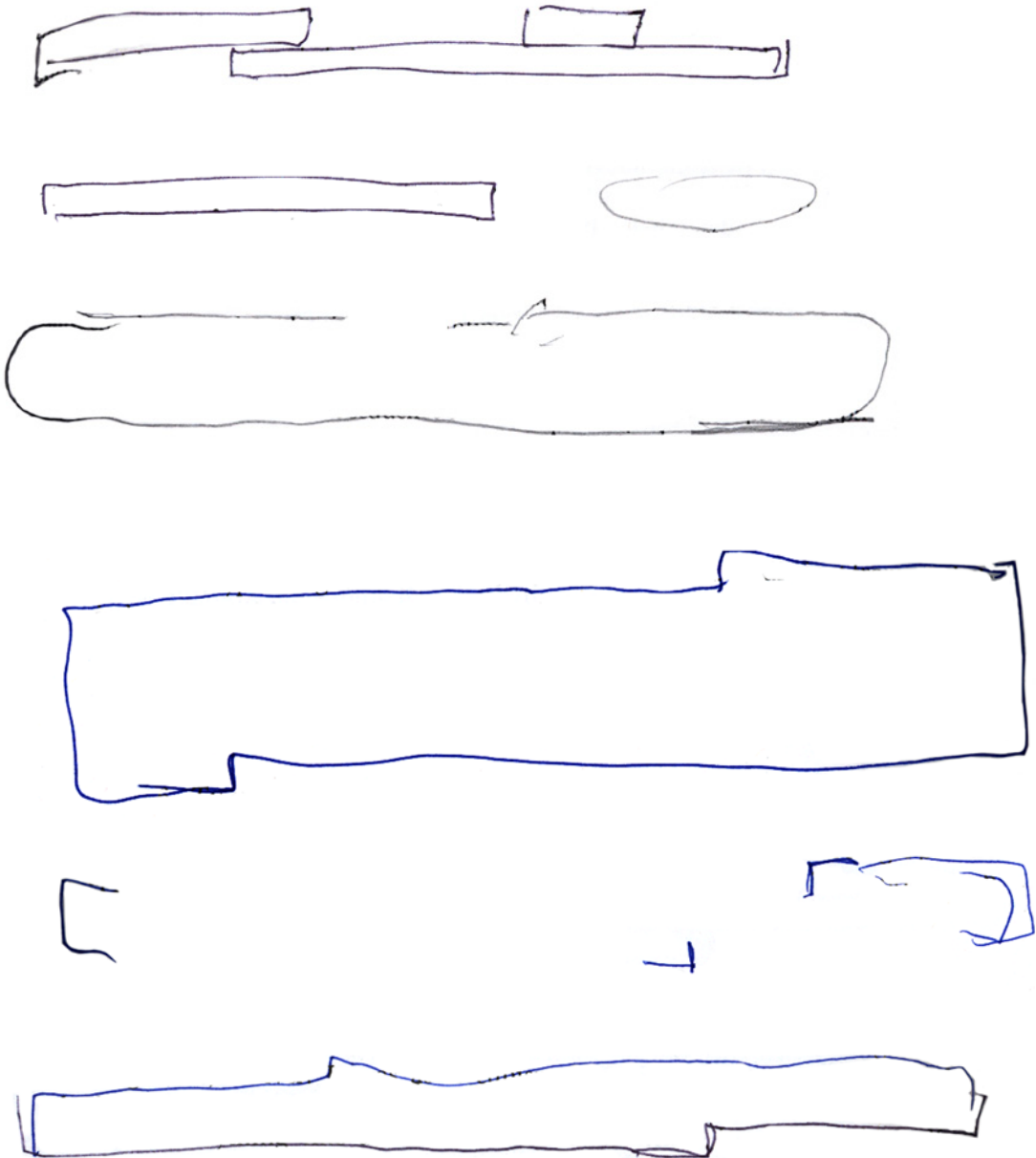
collapsed shitter and

doubled self-portrait.

poetic use of language

naturalism

A page from the book of a person who read
with a green highlighter and uniball pen in
hand.



Different ways to block off bits of text.

They/
We

index - (2 to 2)

From
Pierce

foregrounds

— refout is the index of shifter

Guided
by
Voices

A few handwritten notes.



Stars, arrows, a checkmark.

Styles of underlining.

2.

In re-visiting this project, and considering some of the ways in which the act of reading is affected by different media, I thought of the essay “Type Design for the Computer Age,” by Dutch graphic designer Wim Crouwel, published in volume four of the 1970 issue of *The Journal of Typographic Research* (now *Visible Language*). In his essay, Crouwel argued that the typography of the day was no longer contemporary in form because it failed to respond to the emergence of electronic media and the computer. “[W]e should soon be able to project letters into space with the help of laser beams... We have been so intent upon copying something from the past that we have forgotten to think of our own time.” The way our letterforms are shaped are leftover from print technology, and ought to be updated.

My university library did not have an actual, physical copy of the 1970 issue of *The Journal of Typographic Research* but I was able to request an electronic copy of the article. The file I received over email was a somewhat crude reproduction of the original printed essay – it appears as though a low-bit, black and white scan setting was used in order to keep the PDF file size down. The text cannot be selected, copied, or searched (the text is actually an image of text). The type itself has a degraded, pixelated quality. Crouwel writes of the effect of creating type out of “cell forms” that follow a “very simple system of yes or no, 1 or 2.” He anticipated that curved lines would be difficult to represent, and that an “unacceptable change of the sign in every size” would result. Therefore he proposed that the building blocks for the new typographical forms should be derived from straight lines of 90 or 45 degrees (and possibly 60 and 30 degree lines). The degraded quality of the type in the PDF of Crouwel’s essay illustrates his point precisely:

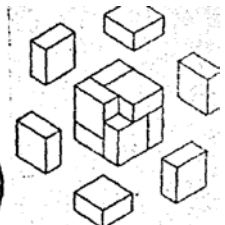
The asser
computer p

None of the text is perfectly straight — the journal’s binding pulled the pages away from the scanner glass, causing text to curve, and dark shadows to appear along the page edge. A segment of a person’s thumb is visible on five of the ten pages, an indexical sign that points back to

the library worker tasked with scanning this article (and calls to mind the finger in Duchamp's Tu m'). Crouwel may not have anticipated the presence of the hand (not the digits he was expecting) in the typography of the future.

The scanned PDF, it turns out, is a bit like photography – it might be described as a photograph of a piece of printed text. It captures an image of a text at a particular moment in time. Similarly to the photograph, it seems to require (or at least benefit from) some kind of caption. The PDF of Crouwel's essay I received included an extra page at the beginning that records various details concerning the file. This page might be described as a kind of "signpost" (to use Benjamin's word) that functions in a way that is similar to the caption on a photograph. The page includes the journal and article title and publication date, the article author name, the database that held the imprint, the physical storage location for the print version of the journal, the date the request for the electronic version of the article was made, the transaction number (#530878), a note on copyright law. The inclusion of this cover page emphasizes the need for providing explanatory text to help situate the PDF – without it we wouldn't know where and when it had been originally published, or what its original material format had been (a printed journal). It's as if it needs to give the text 'meaning', and to compensate for the lack of physical

expression
on the pr
For exan
Conrad \
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starting r



Thumbs.

TRANSACTION #530878 	CUSTOMER HAS REQUESTED: ELECTRONIC DELIVERY: Yes
Journal Title: The Journal of typographic research Volume: 4 Issue: Month/Year: 1970 Pages: 51-	Danielle Aubert (c)8807) 150 Community Art Detroit, MI 48202
Article Title: Type Design for the Computer Age.	Request Received 2/11/2013 Note: RAPID request held locally (Main Library)
Article Author: Crouwel, Wim Imprint: ProQ:	
Call #: Shelved as: Journal of typographic research	
Location: Storage Periodicals 1-4 (1967- 1970) Item #: Paging Notes: RAPID request held locally (Main Library)	
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presence of the journal object.

I have looked here at the indexical traces left on one specific kind of digital text, but there are other kinds of marks that would be worthwhile to examine in other reading formats that open up — for example PDF commenting, or notes made on piles of laser-printed pages, or the printer's crop and bleed marks left on exported PDF proofs.⁵ At an earlier moment, the process of production was somewhat more straightforward. An author's text was typeset, printed and bound in a volume. An effect of the multiplication of reading formats seems to be that the text 'object' itself acquires a life of its own. Crouwel's call for a contemporary typography — a "total typography" — suggested that the computer age would require something ephemeral and of its moment, a typography released from historical referents. In the case of the PDF, handwritten call numbers, parts of fingers, shadows, remind us of the materiality of text despite its digital incarnation.

FOOTNOTES

1. The title of Shulyatikov's book is *Justification of Capitalism in West-European Philosophy (From Descartes to E. Mach)*, so it is no surprise that Lenin took issue with much of its content.

2. There are increasingly sophisticated tools available to readers for making comments on electronic texts, and these would be worth examining in their own right. Although they don't record a person's handwriting, they can enable a digital form of idiosyncratic mark-making.

3. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 27.

4. Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Part 1" in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, the MIT Press, 1985, p. 205.

5. PDFs of essays published in the first issue of this journal, Book 2.0, bear marks that were probably left by the printer: the InDesign file name, time and date stamp of production, and printer's crop and bleed marks. The words "PDF Proof/Planman" at the top of the first page of the PDF indicate that it was the final digital version of the document that was sent to the publisher for approval before it went to press.