

Alphabet Noir. By Nico Vassilakis. (c_L Books, 2016)

"Spell a word and everything starts to slow down," writes Nico Vassilakis in this extended meditation on visual poetics. As a long-time practitioner of poems to be seen, rather than read, Vassilakis has edited anthologies, instigated performances, and served as an ambassador for the Vispo community. This collection of short essays unpacks his debt to a range of writers, from the Franco-Romanian artist Isadore Isou to Vassilakis's own long-time collaborator Crag Hill (who provides the book's introduction). The author's own visual poems, which can be found in numerous anthologies in print and online, are spatio-temporal experiences. Densely layered with letters and letter fragments, they invite and resist reading, in many cases offering landscapes of language for the eye to roam. It's worth consulting the author's website (staringpoetics.weebly.com) alongside the text, since a number of these essays take shape there in visual renditions that blur poetry and poetics, reading and looking. An early essay in this collection compares the way the eye takes in both kinds of poems:

So, if the eye were tracked while reading a textual poem it might look like endless tide coming onto shore. What happens to the eye when it reads visual poems? It gets lost.

That "gets lost" gets at the two widely divergent responses visual poetry engenders. While for some viewers visual poems are an invitation to enter into a strange and diverting landscape, losing themselves there, for others visual poems are barred doors emblazoned "keep out," an injunction they gladly heed by getting lost. Vassilakis's goal, it seems, is to slow things down enough to allow reader/viewers to encounter the former, rather than the latter. Part commonplace, part notebook, Alphabet Noir places Vassilakis in dialogue with a history of visual poets from Mallarmé on through Dada, Lettrism, and Concrete poetry.

Among the most pleasurable pieces in the collection are his "Notes," which include a series of collages from Jack Spicer's work, "Spicer's LANGUAGE (foreshortened)," which writes its way through the author's poems selectively, yielding lovely juxtapositions, like this one from "Phonemics":

Over that land
There
Is more of it.
Empty fragments.
Found but not put together.
The/unstable/Universe

Vassilakis trains his gaze on "unstable" letterforms, impeding reading in order, as he puts it, to liberate letters from their words: "My interest is in watching Letters disincorporate from the words that contain or confine them." His liberatory

intentions, much like those of Isou, suggest a poetics dissatisfied with the systems of oppression in which language is bound and a desire to “abandon your terminology” and let letters take on decorative, dialogic, and other roles. Can the individual letter or, as Vassilakis suggests, partial letter, bear such weight? Vassilakis thinks so, imagining at one point a scene in which “[a]t night, the lower angled support scaffold of / the letter K would vibrate.” Whether such vibration channels movements within the earth below or reflects the effort required to buttress K’s extended armature we don’t know, but this poem and others interspersed throughout play with the potential in unmooring letters from words. Rather than bemoaning our inability to escape the way language structures our world, Vassilakis celebrates the potential for any visual material to transform into sound, from isolated letters to the length of the cords in a shag rug: “You can read anything as language is everything.”

—Amaranth Borsuk