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**Erica Baum's "wild tumult, (...), of uncertainty,"
Or "series of ellipses, hung on around, (...),
very subtle in escaping..."**

AFTER making similar gifts to his daughter Geneviève (Made-moiselle Mallarmé), and his muse and lover (Méry Laurent), Stéphane Mallarmé dedicated to his wife on January 1st 1891, *A Fan (Of Madame Mallarmé)*, a sonnet written on a fan, literally.¹ The occasional poem, traced in red ink on a shiny, silver, paper panel decorated with hand-painted white daisies, begins with the following quatrain:

With nothing else for speech
Than a pulsing in the skies
Our future verse shall rise
From a precious lodging—rich.²

A material figure at the limit of immateriality (like foam or glass), the fan was Mallarmé's favored syncopal object, which he associated metaphorically with the creation of rhymes and verses, the very act of writing poetry. The French Symbolist delighted

particularly in the paradoxical nature of such a poetic machine, whose characteristic deployment, while allowing the concealment of expression (of its holder), progressively reveals poetic meaning (to the beholder): From the "unanimous fold"³ of the closed *éventail* (the closed book), poetry arises, folds in, folds out, in an elegant sleight of hand.

At the favor of a minimalist reduction of Mallarmé's kinetic vehicle, Erica Baum's *Dog Ear* series relies—one geometric fold of found words at a time—on a more vernacular trick: dog-earing. Inspired not only by practitioners of concrete poetry, conceptual artists, documentary-style photographers, but also her young son's preferred page-marking technique, the artist decided to stage photographically the unexpected results of her experimental appropriation of the common referencing system. Meticulously pulling down page corners of ordinary paperbacks, Baum creates strikingly haptic squares of folded paper revealing, in a formal mirroring effect, meaningful squares of texts. But here, instead of serving the usual hierarchical or mnemonic purposes of dog-earing—to indicate pages deemed important or save the reader's last place⁴—the artist's physical marks refer to nothing else than themselves. Promoted to autonomous signs, as self-sufficient as self-contained, Baum's dog ears make signifier and signified coincide perfectly in one fold, drawing our attention simultaneously to their visual and linguistic features.

At once poetry to be viewed, and imagery to be read, the artist's magnified portions of printed prose seem to adopt as their subject matter the destabilized conditions of their very reception. In an irresolute oscillation between cognition and contemplation, the beholder "who starts out reading the page [finds] himself or herself subtly but repeatedly alienated from it: as if the force field of reading was not to be undone but only subverted, or as if [the artist's] aim ... was a kind of severed reading that continuously compelled the viewer to renegotiate his or her relation to the page, and thereby the picture."⁵ Baum's distinctive dog ears thus disrupt not only the regular page flow of the books she manipulates, and the syntax of the texts she appropriates, but also the distance (optical and conceptual) separating the beholder from the art work. Through the evocative depictions of her equivocal narratives, the artist invites us to partake in a perceptual experience where language loses its transparency to its visual existence, and vice versa.

Like Andreas Gursky and his *Untitled XII (Musil)*⁶ (a monumental color photograph reproducing a seemingly homogenous page taken from Robert Musil's *Man Without Qualities*—where the German artist actually assembled various fragments, carefully avoiding proper names) Baum decided to keep her characters anonymous, diverting us from the temptation to identify the source material of her intriguing prose-poems. In fact, the artist herself doesn't keep track of her sources, since the paperbacks she

selects matter as objects—material entities—not discourses. The shapes, textures, color hues, fonts, typographical density, etc., in other words, the physicality and graphic design of the appropriated pages prevail. And it is through the assiduous repetition of her folding process that Erica Baum, as though by accident, manages to locate, rather than create, her minimalist compositions. Flipping through a book, Baum bends corners so that the crease of the folded page divides the picture plane (and the new textual unit) as evenly as possible, cutting more often than not the corners of each photographic square. But with lines on one hand, and pages on the other hand that rarely align exactly, Baum practices a delightfully approximate geometry, emphasizing the endearing irregularities of human manipulation and standardized mass-production.

Similar to Eva Hesse's rubberized pieces of mesh (*Seam*, 1968), or Richard Serra with a sheet of lead (*Folded/Unfolded*, 1969), Baum's pliages put to the test the behavior and resistance of her dual material: How will the paper react as it is being folded? Will it break ("Corpse," Plate XXIII)? How will it reflect ("Ribbon," Plate XV) or absorb ("Elegant Solution," Plate XIII) light? Will it even perhaps cast a shadow ("Mad," Plate III)? But also: How complete ("Geisha," Plate VII) or open ("Differently," Plate XVI) will be the square (or should we say cube) of text? What evocative sense or non-sense will rise from these semantic assisted ready-mades? What typographic accidents may occur when two letters collide

("Spectators," Plate II)? In any case, the artist seems to thoroughly enjoy the remarkable variety resulting from her deceptively rudimentary apparatus. And so do we, sharing by extension and after the fact the thrill of her bookish discoveries.

In Baum's series, the fold functions both as a method and a motif. The raised diagonal crease "determines and materializes Form"⁷ in three dimensions. Hence, within the flatness of the photographic depiction and its overt subject matter, several elements betray the volume, inherent or acquired, implied in each piece: the piled thickness of the book underlined by the inclusion of the edges of up to four pages ("How Long," Plate VIII); the depth of the page itself revealed by the somewhat ghostly apparition of prints, by transparency, on the reverse side of the exposed pages ("Buzzard," Plate IV), the projected relief of the fold, and the negative space it comprises ("Differently," Plate XVI), the bleeding of color inks ("Mad," Plate III), or the composite texture of older paper pulps ("Diverting," Plate XVII). In sum, the three-dimensional infrathin that emerges from the plane surface of the page becomes a threshold, a doorway between words, pages, and modes of apprehension.

As she records her acts of simple origami, Baum arrests in a fixed image the movement of her folds. Extracted from a raw printed material, unsuspected shapes and enigmas unveil new linguistic topographies, pointing to the essentially dialectic na-

ture of Baum's productions. As though by accident, her printed landscapes—where found verses and embodied geometry conspire to create a nagging unity of matter and meaning—expose the irrelevance of the disjunction between form and content. Furthermore, the photographs allegorize their very inseparability: Truncated sentences give way to poetic troves only at the favor of the projection of their own substrate. In the end, Baum's folding irreverence towards the conventions of the publication's integrity celebrates the reading experience as a polymorphic whole, a game of optical and intellectual adjustments, an interplay of the discursive and the sensual. This fold, or *Zweifalt*, to adopt Martin Heidegger's notion of in-between (literally a two-fold, an *entre-deux*), "is a fold that differentiates and is differentiated, ... in a coextensive unveiling and veiling of Being, of presence and of withdrawal of being."⁸ Baum's dialectical folds seem indeed reminiscent of the German philosopher's ideal *Falt*, as they allow, in their inherent paradox of simultaneous concealment and revelation, for "a new kind of correspondence, or mutual expression, an *entr'expression*, fold after fold."⁹

1 Over the years, the poet created twenty-two fan-poems.

2 Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, translated by Henry Weinfield (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 49. *Éventail de Madame Mallarmé*, 1891:

Avec comme pour langage
Rien qu'un battement aux cieux
Le future vers se dégage
Du logis très précieux

3 *Another Fan (Of Mademoiselle Mallarmé)*, 1884.

4 In an amusing *mise-en-abîme*, "Elegant Solution" (Plate XIII) bears the trace of a previous, more conventional dog ear. As the artist explained, she uses along with some new copies, mostly second-hand paperbacks she either purchased in vintage stores or found discarded in the street.

5 Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 179. Fried is discussing Gursky's *Untitled XII (Musil)*.

6 In order to preserve the appearance of homogeneity Gursky commissioned a typesetter and a printer to professionally produce a page of the constructed text.

7 Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, translated by Tom Conley (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 34.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 31.