

Trinity University

Digital Commons @ Trinity

Art and Art History Faculty Research

Art and Art History Department

10-2019

Shifting

Michael Schreyach

Trinity University, mschreya@trinity.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/art_faculty



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Schreyach, Michael (2019). "Shifting." *Brooklyn Rail*, October 2019, pp. 44.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Art and Art History Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Art and Art History Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.



FIELD NOTES

Editors Note: Let's Have That Recession! by Paul Mattick	8
Yellow Vests in a New Social Landscape by Jacqueline Reuss	9
IN CONVERSATION "All These Things Are Connected": Pavlos Roufos with G.M. Tamás	11

ART

ART IN CONVERSATION Amy Sherald with Osman Can Yerebakan	16
ART IN CONVERSATION John Zurier with Erik Lindman	21
ART IN CONVERSATION Henry Taylor with Laura Hoptman	25
ART IN CONVERSATION Mark Dion with Yasi Alipour	30

CRITICS PAGE

REALITY BY CHANCE by Richard Schiff	36
Pea Stones by Matthew Simms	44
Shifting by Michael Schreyach	44
As Chance Would Have It by Thierry De Duve	45
The Luck of the Draw by Suzanne Hudson	46
Comment on Richard Schiff's argument on chance and reality by Dario Gamboni	46
Twombly's Sophistication by Ross Posnock	47
"The Ruses of Chance" by Karen Lang	48
"...welcome factor of chance..." by David Reed	49
Chance encounters are my alibi by Marlene Dumas	50
Pareidolia and Signifying the Insignificant by Jessamine Batario	50
"Hasards de la rime" by Sima Godfrey	51
REWIRING NORA: A Chance Encounter with Something Unknown by Jonathan Fineberg	52
Rorschachian Chance in Flow and Ebb by Joseph Masheck	53

1 BY 1

Into the Mystic by Ann Mccoy	54
---	----

ARTSEEN

Richard Serra: Forged Rounds & Reverse Curve by Benjamin Clifford	56
Richard Serra: Forged Rounds & Reverse Curve & Triptychs And Diptychs by Tom McGlynn	57
Jacoby Satterwhite: Room For Living by Amber Jamilla Musser	59
Manfred Mohr: A Formal Language by Charlotte Kent	59
Lolô Soldevilla: Constructing Her Universe by Alfred Mac Adam	60
Another World Lies Beyond: Chinese Art And The Divine by Hovey Brock	61
Loie Hollowell: Plumb Line by Elizabeth Buhe	61
Wang Yan Cheng by Jonathan Goodman	70
Nick Van Woert: Body Parts by Robert R. Shane	71
Janiva Ellis: Tip Drill by Simon Wu	71
Forms Larger and Bolder: Eva Hesse Drawings From The Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College by Jessica Holmes	72
Elaine Cameron-Weir: Strings That Show The Wind by Valentina Di Liscia	73
Guadalupe Maravilla: Saga by Kathleen Hefty	73
Wyatt Kahn by David Rhodes	74
Bambitchell: Bugs And Beasts Before The Law by Esmé Hogeveen	74
Sarah Sze by Jan Avgikos	75
Sue Yon Hwang: Material Manifestation by Robert C. Morgan	76
Doug Fogelson: Anthem by Daniel Pateman	76
Xandra Ibarra: Forever Sidepiece by Madeleine Seidel	77

ART BOOKS

bpNichol's Nights on Prose Mountain by Megan N. Liberty	78
Rudolf Frieling, Lucía Sanromán, and Dominic Willsdon, eds. Suzanne Lacy: We Are Here by Jessie Robertson	78
Sophy Rickett's The Curious Moaning of Kenfig Burrows by Anna Souter	79
Merce Cunningham's Changes: Notes on Choreography & Alison Knowles and Annea Lockwood, eds. Womens Work by Madeline Weisburg	80

BOOKS

Saeed Jones's How We Fight for Our Lives by Deena ElGenaïdi	82
Jokha Alharthi's Celestial Bodies by John Domini	82
Boredom And "The Big-Timer": Mark Kingwell's Wish I Were Here by Zach Davidson	83
All The Unique And Terrible Ways: Carmen Maria Machado's In the Dream House by James W. Fuerst	84
Suzette Haden Elgin's Native Tongue & Nell Zink's Doxology by Yvonne C. Garrett	85
IN CONVERSATION Arthur Sze With Tony Leuzzi: Arthur Sze's Sight Lines	86

MUSIC

IN CONVERSATION Lighter and Heavier: Adrienne Davies Of Earth by Sheila Scoville	90
A Dance in the Aftermath by Ron Horning	91
Womad by Martin Longley	93
IN CONVERSATION Outtakes: Thomas Maury with Steve Dalachinsky	94

DANCE

A Dancer's Worth by Rennie McDougall	96
IN CONVERSATION Carina Ho with Sima Belmar	97

FILM

Locarno 2019 with James Lattimer	99
IN CONVERSATION No Evil Eye with Gina Telaroli	101
Every Situation Calls for Its Own Language: Gilberto Perez's The Eloquent Screen by Matt Turner	103

THEATER

In Their Changing Village, Two Artists Reflect On A Lost Hospital by Billy McEntee	104
IN DIALOGUE Anna Moench and Objects in the Apocalypse by Dave Harris	106
IN DIALOGUE LIT Council: Men of Color Called to the Stage by Marcina Zaccaria	108

POETRY

One by Ted Dodson	109
I Said Yes by Katy Lederer	109
Stitch by Kimberly Alidio	110
ab020577 by Ama I. Birch	111
One from Border Simulator by Gabriel Dozal	111
Incognito by Charles Borkhuis	112

FICTION

Most Dreaded Hell from A Dream Come True by Juan Carlos Onetti (transl. by Katherine Silver)	113
As Sad as She from A Dream Come True by Juan Carlos Onetti (transl. by Katherine Silver)	116
IN CONVERSATION You, Me, Larsen, Petrus, and Dr. Díaz Grey: Donald Breckenridge with translator Katherine Silver	121

Shifting

Reflecting on the significance of “reality” within representational modalities, Richard Shiff directs our attention to Roland Barthes’s discussion of the capacity of disjunctive or seemingly meaningless elements within a fictional narrative to foster the reader’s sense of its actuality.¹ An author’s deployment of such anomalous components, in their striking dissimilarity from more evidently purposeful features of the story, has a dual role. First, the interruptions impart to the entire text the character of non-literary reality by spreading, as if by contagion, their incongruous qualities—their general difference—to all other particular details of the narrative. Paradoxically, in disrupting the text’s fictive order, such intervening elements render it all the more credible. Thus it might be said that the second role of such devices is to suspend the reader’s awareness of the literary or artificial means by which the author has created the world represented by the text.

There is yet another way to describe this tactic. Including non-signifying elements is also an instrument by which an author or artist might self-consciously acknowledge the conditions under which their representation takes place, conditions that are both material and historical. Their presence thematizes a distinction between those actual constraints and the work as a virtual and creative proposition made in relation to the conventions of a medium. As Shiff points out, the gesture is not merely superfluous: the achieved totality of a work (a text, a painting, a photograph) secures the meaningfulness of incidental details that otherwise appear pointless. Barthes calls this the predictive structure of narrative. Shiff explains: “Retrospectively, a reader perceives how each element prepares for some other, connecting with it. Any detail that fails to connect might justifiably be regarded as an error of composition.”² But as he also intimates, even details that fail to connect begin to

signify once we are sensitized to the possibility that, within the representational order, “insignificance” means something.

It may seem odd to evoke authorial decision-making in response to Shiff’s discussion of the author who most famously interrogated the concept of authorship. I do so to underscore the point that experiencing chance—undergoing it as a disconnected sequence of happenings that affects one’s whole life—is different from experiencing the *representation* of chance. “Chance” as it takes form in a literary text or a painting requires an interpretation in order to reveal it as such within the parameters of the delimited work (as Shiff indicates).

Some commentators (not Shiff) reduce Barthes’s nuanced inquiry to a generic version of his infamous “The Death of the Author” (1967) thesis. Consequently, they insist on the fundamental instability of signification and

reference, and stress the reader’s experience of the text as essential to its meaning. What happens if following Barthes, we articulate the negative of a positive as a positive? Take as the first “positive” the postmodern commitment to the interpretatively open text (where meaning is not determined by authorial intent but is rather subject to the arbitrary associations experienced by the reader). Maintaining an extreme version of this view will entail a radical skepticism of expression and communication. The “negative” would then be a commitment to the framed and delimited text (where meaning is determined by authorial intent irrespective of the experience the reader). Here, the extreme is a belief in the fixed meaning of the work of art. The oppositional duality relaxes on application of Barthes’s formula: think of the first position—the doubtful one—as a *belief* in indeterminacy, a belief that chance—the meaningless—can be *interpreted*.

I am inclined to understand this revised formulation as implying the reader’s acknowledgment of the formal structures within which their experience of textual signification unfolds. Adopting this view refocuses our attention, in acts of interpretation, to the enabling conditions under which the content of a work of art is expressed. It thus restores to our picture of creative agency the circumstances that make communication possible. In everyday life, we drift toward expressing a meaning that—although not subject to predetermination and always open to revision—retrospectively seems to be the one we

intended all along. This is not to mystify “intent” as something that exists as a mental image or plan, transparently known in advance of its realization: it is simply to describe the typical structure of communication. Of course, being a master at one’s craft increases an author’s (or artist’s) chances of expressing (or discovering) the meaning that was intended all along. (If “mastery” is unacceptable, call it expert handling: the facility to extend, modify, improve, or transform a medium and its conventions toward an end.)

In an essay on the convertibility of physicality and visuality within modernist modes of representation, Shiff included the following sentence: “Metonymic drift operates like drafts of air in circulation.”³ *Drift* to *draft*: the first word shifts to the second by the substitution of a letter (and if voiced aloud, by a sound). On the printed page, their conspicuous proximity calls attention to the possibility of their exchange. In other words, the analogy used to define metonymy contains a metonymy, amplifying our sense of how the trope operates. Employing metonymy in its capacity to figure the abstract in concrete terms (ideation is symbolized by a lightbulb; emotions by the heart), Shiff converts the immaterial tropological processes of language into material breeze. Although the compounding resonance I have attributed to *drift* and *draft* might simply be the result of fortuitous happenstance, I speculate that Shiff crafted it after a momentary inspiration led him to see (or think, or feel) that the two words thematized the exchanges under discussion. Nonetheless the rhetorical effect is that

the line is writing itself, originating of itself, as if by chance. Its meaning is immanent.

Like Barthes and a few other distinctive writers, Shiff handles words and sentences like a painter handles marks and colors. The analogy is simple, perhaps predictable (“handling” is a major theme in his scholarship). But it is not simplistic. The medium of language (in its written form) and the medium of painting (in either its depictive or abstract forms) are both means of making meaning, each with a visual component. The lines of a text and the lines in a picture both move the eyes. To be sure, Shiff educates us. But his writing also expresses a tangible sense of the *experience* of thought, in all its indeterminacy and fulfillment. As a creative author, he captures the feeling of unfolding intention as an ideational, emotional, and physical process. Shifting sense, he alters us.

MICHAEL SCHREYACH is an Associate Professor at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. He is the author of *Pollock’s Modernism* (Yale University Press, 2017).

1. See Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect” [1968], in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 141–48.
2. Richard Shiff, “Reality by Chance,” *Ars Semeiotica* 37: 3–4 (2014): 191–206, at 192.
3. Richard Shiff, “Breath of Modernism (Metonymic Drift),” in *In Visible Touch: Modernism and Masculinity*, ed. T. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 184–213, at 192.