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OPPONENTS'S REPORT:

re "ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM & RAYMOND ROUSSEL IN THE POETRY OF  
JOHN ASHBERY" by Olga Peková  
(BA dissertation, 2011)

Ms Peková's topic is immensely intriguing and one that deserves consideration, however it is doubtful that it is a practical one for the purposes of a BA thesis. The objective of the thesis is basically to identify key traits of AbEx and the work of Roussel within Ashbery's poetry. This is attempted by way of overview and close comparative reading of selected texts. However, no clear and persuasive reason is given for pairing AbEx and the work of Raymond Roussel in this way, and the whole thing suffers from the rather circumstantial character of this relation.

The problems with this thesis can best be appreciated by first examining the bibliography. Considering the topic, it is quite extraordinary that nowhere in the thesis is there any direct quotation from Ashbery's extensive art criticism. There is no mention of Ashbery's *Reported Sightings, Art Chronicles 1957-1987* (ed. David Bergman), nor of his work as an art critic for *Art International*, *Art News*, *New York* or *Newsweek*. Nor are there any references to the twelve issues of *Art & Literature* edited by Ashbery between 1964 and 1967. Additionally, there is no reference to Ashbery's 1961 introduction to Roussel's *How I Wrote Certain of My Books* (Roussel's text is mentioned, but not in the bibliography); nor to Ashbery's 1986 postscript "On Raymond Roussel" to Michel Foucault's *Death & the Labyrinth* (it took Google 0.16 seconds to locate the full text online; Peková instead cites a Czech translation, presumably without the Ashbery postscript).

Additionally, there is a sense of the thesis being too dependent upon secondary or tertiary sources. There are no direct quotes from contemporary critics of AbEx, for example, or even from the biographies of artists identified with AbEx, which could have helped elucidate Ashbery's relationship with the artists and their work and to prevailing attitudes about the work (indeed, the coverage of AbEx is mostly reliant on two very general secondary sources). The same applies to the New York School poets, who make cameo appearances only, with the notable exception of Frank O'Hara—like Ashbery, also an art critic and curator, and the poet most closely associated with Ashbery—who somehow does not seem to have warranted consideration at all. (Why, for example, is Elizabeth Bishop discussed, rather than O'Hara? Edwin Denby, a close friend of Willem de Kooning, also rates no mention). A long consideration of the work of Jasper Johns raises the question of whether or not the focus on AbEx is justified at all, and whether—despite the personal friendships of the NY school poets with certain AbEx artists—the real affinity is with the later kind of "neo-dada" work of Johns, Rauschenberg, Cage and others (there *is* a brief discussion of Duchamp and Warhol, but this doesn't take us very far). Dave Allen's intro to O'Hara's *Collected* would have been useful in this context, as would certainly David Lehman's study of the NY School, *The Last Avant-Garde*. Meanwhile Ashbery's relationship to the work of Roussel is examined almost exclusively by way of Mark Ford's analysis, begging the question of partiality, etc.

Crucially, the thesis suffers from a lack of theoretical apparatus (with the exception of passing references to Lacan, but this is not an apparatus). The consideration of Ashbery's poetics is rather superficial and given over to close or comparative readings of individual poems that are unable to build into anything more than isolated observations. The concept of "overhanging metaphor" might have become interesting had the logic of metaphor itself been

examined in some way. Similarly, the notion of the unpoetic could have developed into something of a linking paradigm, between Ashbery, Roussel and Jasper Johns (rather than AbEx), but it would have needed to take into account that the unpoetic is a feature also (and perhaps primarily) of O'Hara's poetry, among others, with additional genealogical considerations of the collage technique, perhaps. The consideration of collage that is given in Ms Peková's thesis is compromised by a number of questionable presuppositions concerning denotation (e.g. "Given the automatic denotation entailed in the Saussurean *signifié-signifiant* pair, it is as unrewarding to try to achieve pure abstraction in poetry, as it is in painting to represent a narrative..."). Elsewhere, critical terms, like "postmodern," circulate uncritically throughout the thesis, beginning in the very first sentence—raising the obvious question as to why Ashbery's work isn't in some way contextualised vis-à-vis the contemporary discussion of what that term might mean, beginning with Olson. Ekphrasis is a relevant concept that might have been addressed, but wasn't. Ditto "procedural poetics," as a general tendency stemming in part from Roussel and most certainly including Ashbery's "Europe" and his interest in sestina and other forms. Instead, viz Roussel, Ms Peková focuses upon the relationship between the "exotic" and "everyday," relying upon very general notions such as "the structure of real-life experience," whatever that is (I would very much like to have seen a proper examination of her opening proposition about "the plasticity of a fictional world divorced from reality yet strongly claiming realness is converted into the autonomy of thoughts").

With regard to Ashbery's own writings on poetics, Ms Peková relies entirely on the later collection of Norton Lectures; there is no reference, for example, to Dave Allen and Warren Tallman's important anthology *The Poetics of the New American Writing* (1973). And while Marjorie Perloff is quoted on one occasion, there is sadly no mention of her highly relevant book *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters*. Sadly also there is no reference to, or citation of, any of the second generation New York School poets, such as e.g. Ron Padgett (who has written extensively on art) or Ted Berrigan.

With a little additional direction, Ms Peková could easily have broached the issues raised above. The topic, however, implies a field more suited to a PhD thesis and certainly requiring of a higher minimal degree of *focused* research. While the research undertaken by Ms Peková is not negligible (perhaps more than satisfactory at BA level), it is in places *arbitrary*, and this has been to her disadvantage. While the thesis itself is more than competently written, and while it is evident that Ms Peková has the aptitude to undertake higher research, I cannot on this occasion, in good conscience, recommend a grade higher than a 2.

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