Unica Zürn: It lies in your hand

DORA MALECH
DECEMBER 19, 2016
COMMENTS 0

> *Enge, hier ist dein Land . . .*
> *es liegt in deiner Hand.*
>
> *(Narrow, here is your country . . .*
> *It lies in your hand.)*
>
> –Unica Zürn (Berlin, 1954)

Feeling the need to be deeply present and awake in our particular moment, my mind inevitably wanders. I've been reading and thinking a lot about Unica Zürn, a German writer and artist associated with the Surrealist movement, and thought of (even by herself) as often (or more often) as partner and muse of artist Hans Bellmer than as a creative force in her own right—though she most certainly was a singular writer and artist. (Jasmine Francis of Siglio Press notes, "Zürn's original manuscript of *The Man of Jasmine* even attributes the book to 'the wife of Hans Bellmer.') Her "automatic" drawing and anagrammatical poems share an obsessive quality—they seem to give external form to the depression and psychosis that plagued her her whole life (she committed suicide by jumping out of a window in 1970 at fifty-four years old).

I first encountered Zürn's work as I researched histories of the anagram as a formal device in poetry. I'll be presenting some thinking on the "new American" anagram at the 45th annual Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture Since 1900 as well as reading some of my own anagram poetry there in February, so I'll most likely have anagrams on the brain and be posting about them here in the next few months. While I have now come to think of Zürn's anagrams as an influence on my own work, I will admit that I initially discovered her art, and the writing of others working with similar constraints, on a hunt to "justify" this odd thread as it emerged in my own practices.

I hadn't thought through why I was writing in anagrams, I just suddenly *was*—and I initially found myself a bit irritated and mystified by this seeming diversion from my "real" poems. Though I have long had a broader interest in poetic form, it felt unjustified and out of the blue that I was drawn to the anagram (and other forms that one might associate with the structures and formulas of the OULIPO writers). I eventually came to think of my own anagrams and constraints as both an extension of my own obsessive visual art practices and as a kind of elliptical way of exploring my own autobiographical moment of "re-making" when a more straightforwardly linear "confessional narrative" approach felt frustratingly

melodramatic and even paradoxically dishonest to me. It sometimes still feels like I'm tapping into the worst of multiple aesthetic worlds when I work with the anagram—the guilty pleasure of a bad habit (nail biting, scab picking), the frivolousness of a game, the pretentiousness of a private poetics of inaccessibility, the superstition and obscure rites of the occult, and the sense that I'm actually revealing *more* of my own embarrassing inner workings and life than any more traditionally confessional poem I might write.

This is all to say, I found Unica Zürn as I tried to feel less aesthetically alone in this particular project. Though the OULIPO writers interested me, I found much of their work more theoretically and formally interesting (a display of structural virtuosity) than emotionally moving. There is a raw darkness in Zürn's work and a seeming urgency (*necessity*, even) to her methods that I hold close. She writes in *The Man of Jasmine* of "the old dangerous fever of the anagrams," defining anagrams as "words and sentences that come into being by rearranging the given letters within a word or sentence. No other letters can be called for help."[1] I love this phrasing, which renders each poem a kind of emergency of language—emergency both in the sense of a context under duress, and in the sense of the act of emergence therein—what might be born of that pressure.

In "Within One's Own Tongue: The Anagrams of Unica Zürn," Yanara Friedland writes:

> *The dissection of words bears the potential to gather and birth further instructions to the multilayered contents of language. The anagram is not primarily formed through the intent/content scripted by the poet but rather through the given openings and concealments of language itself. It is translation within one's own tongue, and reveals the poem as amorphous, in constant construction of its own becoming.*[2]

*

Read some of Zürn's anagram poems, as translated by Pierre Joris, on Joris's site Nomadics here.

*

1. Friedland, Yanara, "Within One's Own Tongue: The Anagrams of Unica Zürn," *The Denver Quarterly* 47.3 (2013): 113.
2. Ibid.

- Jeff Alessandrelli
- Rosebud Ben-Oni
- Aaron Gilbreath
- Caroline Hagood
- Jerry Harp
- Amit Majmudar
- Dora Malech
- Derek Mong
- Brian Michael Murphy
- Kirsten Ogden
- Douglas Ray
- Cody Walker
- Laura Maylene Walter
- Keith S. Wilson

KR Staff

- David Lynn
- Kirsten Reach
- Sergei Lobanov-Rostovsky
- Abigail Wadsworth Serfass

Blogroll

- Arma Virumque
- Arts and Letters Daily
- ArtsJournal
- Blog of a Bookslut
- Bookninja
- Books Inq
- Booksquare
- Chromasia
- Critical Mass
- Emerging Writers Network
- GalleyCat
- Harriet: Poetry Foundation Blog
- Language Log
- Lit Kicks
- Maud Newton's Blog
- OUP Blog
- Ready, Steady, Book
- SlushPile.net
- Spike Magazine's Splinters
- The Elegant Variation

- The Syntax of Things
- This Space
- Wired Campus Blog
- World Class Poetry Blog
- {reading and writing in} The Age of Sand

Contact

- Email us here
- Our RSS feed

Sites

- Academy of American Poets
- Institute for the Future of the Book
- Poetry Foundation
- Schoen Books

Archives

Archives Select Month

Sign up for Our Email Newsletter

GO

KENYONreview

Finn House
102 W. Wiggin St
Kenyon College
Gambier, OH 43022-9623
Phone: (740) 427-5208
Fax: (740) 427-5417
kenyonreview@kenyon.edu

The Kenyon Review is supported in part by The National Endowment for the Arts and the Ohio Arts Council

Ohio Arts Council

ART WORKS. | National Endowment for the Arts arts.gov