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Card File, or: Why Communism Looks Out of Their Eyes (50 Graphs on Conceptual Writing)

*for the Post-Conceptualism Group (PCG), forerunner
of the Matta-Clark Brigade (MCB)*

1. As everyone is now taught in school, Marcel Duchamp is the seminal father of Conceptual Poetry.
2. Though hardly anyone, anymore, names Rose Sélavy, the neglected mother.
3. There is, too, Pop Art from the early 1960s.
4. And there is Conceptual Art from the later 1960s.
5. As everyone is now taught in school, these last two are the foster homes in which Conceptual Poetry was raised.
6. It's rumored that discipline was practiced there, locked rooms and paddlings in the rearing.
7. But those were different times, different ways, old beliefs, early systems.
8. And anyway, as everyone knows, it is inappropriate, in the poetry and art world, to consort with hearsay and innuendo.
9. Perhaps the aging foster parents were benign, gentle, kind; no harm done, no real trauma induced—many, still, speak well of the foster parents.
10. And there is no doubt the wards grew up well-fed, became upstanding citizens, even moderately famous, beyond the quarter hour, and still talk warmly of their upbringing.
11. One day, one of them, the most prominent brother, said in all earnestness, "I believe Wall Street is the most progressive, revolutionary force of our times."
12. Though the next day, the Five Year Real Estate Plan imploded like a Matta-Clark housing project.
13. But of course, Revolutions have their cycles, and they cycle back.
14. For example, at the time, for the future foretells its past, whole installations of their foster homes, meticulously reproduced, were sitting in museums, compounding interest.

15. The key was in knowing how to recoup, how to take one step forward after two steps back, how to play the market on the upcycle.
16. A skill historically rewarded by the White House.
17. Not to mention the MoMA.
18. Where Duchamp, the purported Papa, lays embalmed with his dirty Bride, in a great pyramid, periodically infused with a pine-colored liquidity,
19. And this brings to his cheeks a flush of brilliant rose.
20. *C'est la vie*, some do say (and how could they not, the collectors and the curators?), his progeny go forth.
21. But let us get serious now, at this 21st graph, and return to 1962,
22. When Camilla Gray publishes *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863–1922*, exciting interest in the great Bolshevik artists Vladimir Tatlin, Alexander Rodchenko, and their Constructivist, Productivist, and LEF comrades of the early, heroic Soviet years,
23. Most specifically exciting the imaginations of the young artists Dan Flavin, Carl Andre, and Sol LeWitt,
24. Artists already somewhat aware, before Gray's book, of the Russians (echoes of Malevich and Suprematism are present in prior work by Flavin, and of Rodchenko in that of Andre), who now begin to adapt Bolshevik-Constructivist principles to their work like there's no tomorrow.
25. As Lukács would aver, it matters little how Bolshevik-minded the Americans were; in fact, in the big view, it matters not a whit.
26. Flavin will title a light-work as "Monument for V. Tatlin"; LeWitt and Andre will construct chaste, "negative space" artifacts in clear debt and homage to Rodchenko. (Remarkably, George Maciunas, independently and at virtually the same time, launches Fluxus; the group pursues a revived Dada ethos grafted onto an avowed LEF-inspired praxis, and their readymade, deskilling principles are a strong influence for later Conceptual artists.)
27. This concentrated moment is historically centripetal vis-à-vis what will come in the past-future.
28. For the Flavin/Andre/LeWitt constellation is the crucial antecedent in proto of Minimalism's codes, and the work of artists immediately following will radiate directly from it in spokes ambiguous as to their yearning (the dialectics of the superstructure are not so transparent): idealism or materialism?

29. In any case, the spokes can't be explained without the hub.
30. Donald Judd and Robert Morris, for example,
31. Who strive to erase the distinctions between painting and sculpture, now, proposing an expanded field of phenomenological apprehension, albeit deep inside the Museum, a move that for Morris, at least, seems a surprising step back into autonomy aesthetics, after his revolutionary "Card File" of 1962, which had shunted the "artwork" into linguistic, bluntly self-referential, auto-exposing dimensions, in ways not before seen.
32. And soon, inside this Minimalist fluorescence, in thoroughly dialectical proceeding (all of this happens in but a decade), Conceptual art arises, critiquing now, in manifesto spirit, the mostly unacknowledged Modernist premises of retinal visibility, physical concreteness, transcendental form, and aesthetic autonomy that stratify the Minimalist project like a layered-cake revenant (Morris himself follows suit, moving back toward the energies of his proto-conceptual work).
33. LeWitt, in somewhat art-world permanent-revolution spirit, leaps from his Constructivist phase directly into Conceptualism, bypassing Minimalism's unacknowledged sublations of his early 60s gestures.
34. He had already, in 1963, famously produced "Red Square, White Letters" (the Constructivist element still very present), turning the phenomenological/transcendental object of Minimalism into a mock-structuralist, Brechtian V-effect text that is offered for the viewer's/reader's deconstruction and ironic re-making,
35. No solemn singularity inhering in the object proper, now,
36. Or so would be the "intent"....
37. By and by, he composes his "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," marking the movement's decisive linguistic turn away from principles of opticality as the linchpin of a discrete, autonomous sphere of aesthetic production and experience.
38. But (and this is, yes, the big conceptual irony, and still with us) Conceptualism doesn't achieve escape velocity from the Museum.
39. For Conceptual art, despite its manifestoed, quasi-post-structural propositions, lacks the final propulsions to throw it free from the banal gravity of Institutional Art, and so it shatters into a thousand curated pieces.

40. Not even Marcel Broodthaers, Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren, or Andrea Fraser will be able to save it; some forces prove too strong.
41. And all this is happening while the Conceptual Poets are still in grade school, not yet even transferred to their foster homes, in their pataphysical late twenties and thirties.
42. Not yet having donned the mature court-jester raiment of their forties and early fifties.
43. But that time will have its day, as they say, for History has its laws,
44. One of them being (as the fate of the “historical avant-garde” and nearly all its “neo” offspring clearly shows; a fate so ubiquitous it is normal, high-invisible) that you can’t escape the gravity of it all unless you deal, deep down, with the ideological stuff of the Supplement *in full*, because that’s the hook, and if you don’t confront the paratextual, indexing mechanisms of the Institution Art, any “Conceptual” poetic gesture that takes the function of Authorship for granted as “frame” does immediately provide the means for its own banal hanging.
45. And so the most prominent brother (whose Authorship seems to be everything for him, and who is surely a good person, though that has nothing to do with it, as Marx would aver), for whom LeWitt is a key source of “inspiration,” writes, in 2005, his “Sentences on Conceptual Writing,” in proudly belated imitation of LeWitt,
46. Whose (LeWitt’s) Conceptual breakthrough, as we have seen (though it has never been foregrounded in the way we are doing now, with way too many parentheticals), flows dialectically out of an initiatory apprenticeship with, and homage to, the early Bolshevik artists of the heroic pre-Stalinist period of the USSR, only to be scrambled by forces much greater than their proto gesture can resist.
47. Which is to say that this is how the literal ghost of early Bolshevism inhabits Conceptual Art, at the belated, haunted end of which is Conceptual Poetry, though the Conceptual Poets (who avowedly love Wall Street, as they openly pursue canonization in the Museums that the Capital of Wall Street funds) seem hardly aware of their *key* art-historical past-future moment of origin: a line stretching back from a radical, institutionally critical Conceptual formation in the arts that was in self-consciously antithetical relation to a largely

political, autonomy-art Minimalism that was itself a deracinated *aufheben*, as it were, of a culturally repressed, mostly forgotten moment of American adaptation of communist-materialist aesthetics, i.e., a process whose emergence has, in first instance, only partly to do with Duchamp, and *more* importantly to do with the great Soviet-communist artist-producers from before the Stalinist Thermidor, none of whom had any way of knowing how complicated things would become, much more complicated than this very long sentence, even, thank you for hanging in there, as Morris says on Card #47.

48. And even though the corpse of Duchamp has been repurposed, for sure, now swaddled and mummified inside a giant steel balloon dog (this is the pyramid), the dog shall be released and float upward, through the great skylight, which has been smashed into pieces by young anarcho-communists of the Matta-Clark Brigade, who have elaborate two-foot braids of hair pointing horizontally out the backs of their heads, and who somehow have gotten on the roof of the MoMA, and are now scampering away, though in this far future, we are all long past, and dead,
49. Though of course the metaphor, if that's what it is, is totally wacky, a balloon dog in the shape of Capital(!), who would believe it, but that future is enfolded in our present, it is inside us, no less than the past, and has been for almost three hundred years, if you think about it, and isn't that strange, the Conceptual Poets now looking back in the picture as they are blown forward, with their little outstretched arms....
50. And this is why communism, *right now*, unbeknownst to them, runs up through their clay-like spines, and looks out of their blow-backed eyes.