

Nancy Perloff. *Explodity: Sound, Image, and Word in Russian Futurist Book Art*. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2017. 208 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-60606-508-2.

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Verbivocovisual, a tongue-twisting neologism coined by James Joyce in 1939 (*Finnegans Wake*) to denote a synthesis of the verbal, acoustic, and visual, provides a fitting conceptual basis for Nancy Perloff's *Explodity: Sound, Image, and Word in Russian Futurist Book Art*.^[1] An examination of the complex interplay between the creative illustrations, the neologistic transrational poetry (*zaum*), and the implicit guttural sounds and such encountered within various Russian futurist poetry books from the 1910s, Perloff's study underscores the unique *verbivocovisual* elements resonating through the rough pages of these hybrid, small edition publications. Drawing on her training as a musicologist, Perloff offers close analysis of several futurist books—most notably *Worldbackwards* (*Mirskontsa* [1912]) and *Explodity* (*Vzorval'* [1913])—to highlight the creative synthesis of sounds, words, and images that the Russian futurists (or cubo-futurists, as they often referred to themselves) produced at the height of the prerevolutionary avant-garde movement in Russia. Fervid, fruitful collaboration between “left” painters and poets at the time indeed anticipated Joyce's notion of “visual organization and musical harmony” (p. 155). Boasting an elegant design and ample reproductions, *Explodity: Sound, Image, and Word in Russian Futurist Book Art* presents its material in a compelling, cohesive fashion, as Perloff makes a

strong case for why Russian avant-garde book experiments deserve our attention today.

Rather than providing a survey of futurist books as has already been done by Russian avant-garde scholars, such as Susan Compton (*The World Backwards: Russian Futurist Books, 1912-16* [1978]) and Gerald Janecek (*The Look of Russian Literature: Avant-Garde Visual Experiments, 1900-1930* [1984]), or in The Museum of Modern Art's 2002 Russian Avant-Garde Book exhibition catalogue (*The Russian Avant-Garde Book, 1910-1934*) edited by Margit Rowell and Deborah Wye, Perloff explores at length two of the more groundbreaking futurist publications, *Worldbackwards* (featuring transrational poetry by Aleksei Kruchenykh and Velimir Khlebnikov, along with illustrations by Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova) and the two successive editions of *Explodity* (containing Kruchenykh's poetry alongside illustrations by Nikolai Kulbin, Olga Rozanova, and Kazimir Malevich), to probe the complex, rich experiments with *zaum*, handwriting, and book illustration that emerged in the early 1910s. As a way of highlighting the *verbivocovisual* elements at play in these and several other books, Perloff includes an online component for her study that offers not only digital reproductions of the futurist books in question but also ten audio recordings, performed by Vladimir Paperny, of the verse found in the various

books (Paperny serves up slow, careful recitation of Kruchenykh's famous transrational poem "Dyr bul shchyl" along with engaging readings of less well-known transrational pieces from *Worldbackwards* and *Explodity*). It is only when listening to the poems with the text in virtual hand that one can fully appreciate what Kruchenykh, Khlebnikov, and their fellow artists were after when producing such small yet explosive books.

Explodity: Sound, Image, and Word in Russian Futurist Book Art, it should be said, takes some time to ignite, for the author initially dwells at length on less-than-essential biographical information about the artists and poets in question. Perloff's subsequent analysis, however, hits its mark. Perloff provides fine insight into Khlebnikov's and Kruchenykh's interest in reversibility and the inversion of chronology—the basis for what she calls the "mirskontsa principle" (p. 60)—and her analysis of drawings, such as Malevich's *The Reaper (Zhnytsa)*, which appeared on the cover of Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh's *The Word as Such (Slovo kak takovoe* [1913]), helps her draw important distinctions between Russian and Italian futurist work at the time. Exploring "the mysterious polarity" between Russian primitive culture and Russian avant-garde experiments with abstraction (p. 27), Perloff at times places her finger on the scale to privilege avant-garde neoprimitivism, but she does devote considerable attention to the futurists' advocacy of a mystical fourth dimension aggressively espoused at the time by the Russian mathematician and hyperspace philosopher P. D. Ouspensky. Notions of nonlinear time and spatial extension, Perloff suggests, underscore "reverberations of the fourth dimension in futurist book art" (p. 81).

Even as Perloff makes the exaggerated claim that in avant-garde scholarship "the contributions of Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh, and of Malevich, Goncharova, and Larionov to the artist's book are scarcely recognized" (p. 28), she astutely delves into a number of valuable, underappreciated per-

spectives on the avant-garde book experiments. Along with her emphasis on the *verbivocovisual* and the fourth dimension, Perloff probes the proto-formalist nature of the futurist books, as she contends that futurists made the word "strange" through their emphasis on the "word as such" and "letter as such" (and, in the author's paraphrasing, "sound as such" [p. 69]). Futurist book experimentation, Perloff shows, led into the subsequent work of the Russian formalists (Roman Jakobson, Viktor Shklovsky, etc.), who in the mid-1910s "helped theorize the themes of the futurists, including their belief in the primacy of form over content" (p. 66). Hence Perloff dwells at some length on both the poetry and memoirs of Jakobson (who under the pen name of Aliagrov contributed to a slightly later futurist book, *Transrational Boog [Zaumnaia gniga*, 1915]), while she also highlights Shklovsky's involvement with the futurists. Some might take issue with Perloff's assertion that the cubo-futurist "shift" (*sdvig* in Russian) is a "formalist device" (p. 114), but she argues persuasively that the illustrations and poetry in Russian futurist books presaged Russian formalist theory.

In her detailed discussion of the two editions of *Explodity*, Perloff focuses in particular on the "semantics of sound" (p. 113), a term she takes from Scottish poet and *zaum* translator Edwin Morgan, and the semantic reverberations between image and text that occur throughout this short, eclectic collection of Kruchenykh's transrational verse. The nonreferentiality of word, image, and sound, Perloff asserts, proves especially pronounced in *Explodity*. Close analysis of the rapid bursts of Kruchenykh's poetry, such as his "Haul-horses" ("Tianutkonei"), "Scaredity: Gun" ("Pugal': pistolet"), and "Explodity of Fire" ("Vzorval' ognia"), indicate a crucial interdependency with the Rozanova drawings that accompany the poetic text. For just as Rozanova's visual work exudes a distinct apocalyptic tone, the poems simultaneously conjure up "sinister verbal references and enigmatic sounds" (p. 137), thus bolstering the two fu-

turists' mutual apprehension about modern society and its future.

In the final chapter of *Explodity: Sound, Image, and Word in Russian Futurist Book Art*, Perloff makes a sudden jump—a futurist-inspired shift, if you will—to more recent book experiments carried out in the Western world, be it Brazil, Scotland, Slovenia, or the United States. Whether all the attention the author pays to these more recent experimental works is that critical to her own book's central argument remains to be seen, but they do allow her to make the important, “surprising” point that the Russian experimentation with books has never been replicated and that the Russian futurists succeeded in achieving a creative multimedia synthesis of sound, word, and image that has proven elusive to subsequent artists in Russia and the West (p. 180).

With *Explodity: Sound, Image, and Word in Russian Futurist Book Art*, Perloff has taken full advantage of the extensive collection of Russian futurist books at the Getty Research Institute (where she curates the modern and contemporary collections), while also expanding on scholarship her mother, Marjorie Perloff, conducted on avant-garde art in 1986 (*The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* [1986]). At its core, Perloff's study does more than justice to the complexity of the Russian futurists' book experiments carried out some one hundred years ago. By opening up the discussion to the “semantics of sound,” Perloff allows the Russian futurist book to reverberate—or even explode—in our present day and beyond.

Note

[1]. The term comes from Book II, Episode 3 of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939).

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