

**Spatial Denotation: Towards a Schematic Reading of Vito Acconci's
"CONTACTS/CONTEXTS (FRAME OF REFERENCE): ten pages of reading *Roget's
Thesaurus* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965)"**

The logic of navigation rests upon the consonance of two scales. The first, to leverage Pierre Bourdieu's distinction, inheres in the 'Cartesian' space of the map, which represents a physical space as the "model of all possible routes...[a] potential, abstract space devoid of landmarks or any privileged centre."¹ The second, focused on the subject, derives from the 'practical,' physical space of "journeys actually made,"² through which the body moves and orients itself. The map entails a mutual translatability between the two spaces. Its navigational utility implies a mode of transposition that has the capacity to reciprocally render the latter scale in terms of the former. Ultimately, it enables the subject to establish her position by way of a simplified schema, which makes possible the tracing and reproduction of her route, and the subsequent replicability of her movement.

In *Notes on Conceptualisms*, Robert Fitterman and Vanessa Place cite the fundamental visuality of "highly replicative" conceptual writing that draws its material from a source text, and for which "the written word is the visual image."³ By enacting a form of mimesis, the mode of production they describe holds a measure of fidelity to the "pre-text" from which it obtains its content. If Bourdieu's map tends toward iconicity, the procedurally re-rendered text tends instead toward an anti-iconicity, representing its own construction by way of the visible displacement of its source material. Though differing in this manner from a purely geographic rendering, process-based mimetic composition selectively and methodically transposes an old space into a new, linking the two via the evidence of its progression. Whereas the pre-text comprises an area through which the process of writing moves and orients itself, the object it produces represents this movement as one possible route of many. The algorithmic poem thus embodies, rather than represents, its constraints, and its "idea," as Fitterman and Place suggest, "is exhausted in its execution."⁴ It embodies its own construction, and so represents this embodiment.

In "CONTACTS/CONTEXTS (FRAME OF REFERENCE): ten pages of reading *Roget's Thesaurus* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965),"⁵ Vito Acconci methodically transforms and represents the practical space of the *Roget's Thesaurus* in the Cartesian space of his own ten pages. This piece, I argue, invites a particular mode of engaging with the text, a *schematic* mode, through which the act of reading becomes a process of spatial navigation. Despite the rearrangement, deconstruction, and recomposition it undergoes in Acconci's piece,

1. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 2.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman, *Notes on Conceptualisms* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2009), 19.

4. *Ibid.*, 23.

5. Vito Acconci, "CONTACTS/CONTEXTS (FRAME OF REFERENCE): ten pages of reading *Roget's Thesaurus* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965)," in *Language to Cover a Page: The Early Writings of Vito Acconci*, ed. Craig Dworkin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2016).

Roget's Thesaurus remains conceptually intact throughout its progression. Indeed, it is only through the iterative nature of Acconci's methodical defamiliarization that a trace rendering of the thesaurus, its representation as a structure disrupted, can emerge.

Schematic reading understands the source text in relation to this transformed, transcribed, or appropriated state. It views the process-based recomposition as a replicable way of moving through the source material, examining its effects as the product of a series of fundamentally spatial machinations.

Acconci marks out the material space of *Roget's Thesaurus* through the meeting of two primary and distinct units of measurement: Roget's original pagination and his own ten pages of "reading." "CONTACTS/CONTEXTS (FRAME OF REFERENCE)" depicts the practical space of the thesaurus as a collection of elements in dynamic relation to one another, affecting and informing the reader's perception. The emergent structure of the thesaurus arises from Acconci's work gradually, in a manner not unlike the mental map described by cognitive psychologist Keith Oatley: "a navigator's mental map is a process, not a picture."⁶ As a picture, nonetheless, the piece bespeaks a process. The linearity of Acconci's composition reveals the spatio-temporal nature of its construction.

Roget's Thesaurus maps a lexico-semantic territory by delineating a space of equivalence and disparity. Rejecting the alphabet as an organizational construct, its text seeks to guide the reader by way of semantic classification, or the grouping of words based on the ideas they express, so as to enable language to "fulfill [its] function as an *instrument of thought*; not being merely its vehicle, but giving it wings for flight."⁷ *Roget's Thesaurus* is founded upon the conception of language as a shared expression of intrinsic epistemological categories. It adopts as its end the reconciliation of the space between conscious experience and its verbal representation. Recognizing both the impulse toward expression and the proliferation of terms at the prospective reader's disposal, Roget's categories, which assume "a pre-existing reality which is to be mirrored in the ordered arrangement of words,"⁸ provide a topical macrostructure analogous to an Aristotelian conception of perceptual experience that endeavors to assist in facilitating its representation.⁹ The ultimate impotence of Roget's reference work is nonetheless compounded by its utility. Idealizing linguistic precision, it obscures the impasse between world and word under a superabundance of both spatial and semantic intra-linguistic relations.

Vito Acconci's "CONTACTS/CONTEXTS (FRAME OF REFERENCE)" traverses Roget's text as both material terrain and conceptual territory. Reflexively tracing its route through a self-contained linguistic space, the poem enacts a perpetually stymied effort to break outside of the language that constrains it. Both structurally and spatially, it exemplifies the frustration to which the impossibility of unmediated linguistic reference gives rise, and to which the generative motion of the poem is testament. By leveraging language as a visual system, Acconci circuitously embodies both the expressive purposiveness behind *Roget's Thesaurus* and

6. Keith Oatley, "Inference, cognition, and cognitive maps," in *Thinking*, ed. P.N. Johnson-Laird (Cambridge University Press: 1977), 546.

7. Robert A. Dutch, ed., *The Original Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), xxix.

8. Werner Hüllen, *A History of Roget's Thesaurus: Origins, Development, and Design* (Oxford University Press: 2003), 284.

9. *Ibid.*, 146.

the expressive potential of the poem that finds its realization in the arrangement and interplay of signs.

In effect, “CONTACTS/CONTEXTS (FRAME OF REFERENCE)” expresses its resistance to fixed meaning by foregrounding its own exhaustion. Its use of and divergence from the thesaurus reveals a dynamism between the reference work, comprised of semantically-arranged individual entries, and the internally propelled reordering of its content. While the associative logic behind the construction of the thesaurus seeks to facilitate the retrieval of “the word, or words, by which [a given] idea may be most fitly and aptly expressed,”¹⁰ the procedural logic behind Acconci’s poem performs a network internal to its content and independent of its original spatial arrangement. It renders the volume a constellationary structure comprised of nodes (entries) and links (the references that connect them), explicitly traversable by way of intra-directional indices. Ultimately, Acconci’s use of the reference work positions his composition in dialogue with the ordering method it progressively dismantles. To rearrange the thesaurus as such is a performance of deconstruction through procedural generation, which refutes its goal of universality in the unavailing struggle for stable meaning.

The territory represented by *Roget’s Thesaurus* is linguistic rather than geographic, while the mode by which one navigates its content is indexical rather than iconographic. As a conceptual structure, the topical classes and subclasses that partition the text into sections terminate in the lemma, the discrete group of synonymous words, which forms the modular unit of Acconci’s work. Each lemma is preceded by a headword that points the reader toward a selection of terms symbolizing various nuances of its definition. To facilitate ascertainment, Roget has recourse to the space of the page as a tool for explicating, grouping, and differentiating meanings:¹¹

For the purpose of exhibiting with greater distinctness the relations between words expressing opposite and correlative ideas, I have . . . placed them in two parallel columns in the same page, so that each group of expressions may be readily contrasted with those which occupy the adjacent column, and constitute their antithesis.

While the geographic map demands reconciliation between visual representation and physical world, Roget’s map, if one considers it as such, seeks a reconciliation between lexical representation and conceptual world. It demarcates a space of signification that corresponds to a space of logical relation.

Roget’s focus on the placement of words coheres with the strain of experimental poetry concerned with the expressive capacity of spatial arrangement. Eugen Gomringer describes the impetus behind his conception of this “new poetry,” the aim of which is to “give poetry an organic function in society again,” as driven by the desire for text to be “perceived visually as a whole as well as in its parts,” such that the poem becomes an *object*, “to be both seen and used: an object containing thought but made concrete through play-activity.”¹² Octavio Paz similarly

10. Dutch, *Original Roget’s Thesaurus*, xxvii.

11. Dutch, *Original Roget’s Thesaurus*, xxxii-xxxiii.

12. Eugen Gomringer, “From Line to Constellation (vom vers zur konstellation),” in *zur sache der konkreten*, ed. Eugen Gomringer, trans. Mike Weaver (1954).

conceives of the constellation as “signs in rotation,”¹³ though arguably lends a stricter interdependence to the parts that comprise it. The constellationary poem, which, in the words of Marjorie Perloff, is “however fragmented...necessarily discursive,” allows in the sense described by Paz for “meanings [to] radiate from its material form.”¹⁴ As the manipulable source text behind Acconci’s piece, *Roget’s Thesaurus* is rendered both conceptual predecessor and compositional antithesis: it forms the material for a poetics that subverts the notion of expression by way of the singular term, the expression “best suited to [the reader’s] purpose,”¹⁵ while employing the space of the page as a navigational tool. The gestalt mode of textual composition posited by both Gomringer and Paz is inescapably spatial, dependent upon the sum(s) of its parts, and seeks expressive rather than instrumental ends. It stands in contrast to the secondarily expressive end of Roget’s text, the instrumentality of which seeks to assist communication, rather than produce meaning, through the spatial interplay of terms. Positioned in dialogue with Acconci’s method of reordering through the progressive erasure of its form, the thesaurus continues to assert itself as an alternate structure, giving rise to a kind of spatial logic that asks the reader to supply a rationale for its arrangement.

Focusing on the poem as an active device, Charles Olson posits his “projective or OPEN verse” as a kind of “kinetics”: “...the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge.”¹⁶ Olson’s concept of the poem as a transference of energy, “the energy which propelled [the poet] in the first place,”¹⁷ renders the arrangement of lemmas in Acconci’s work the evidence of his activity as both poet and reader. The poem embodies a repetitive motion of transcription which, in retaining the momentum of the progress of the poet through the thesaurus, translates and recapitulates the same momentum for the reader. Both the thesaurus-object produced by Roget and poem-object evoked by Olson and Gomringer recognize the meaning-making capacity of arrangement. For Gomringer and Olson, the arrangement as well as the interplay of words participates in meaning production. For Roget, this arrangement facilitates the means by which a reader may navigate a text for an expressive end. In Acconci’s poem, the rearrangement of an instrumental work by way of its own instrumentality generates meaning in the supersession of form, in the propelling forward of the frustrated desire for a stable referent, and in the structural repetition of the same lexical unit, modified from instance to instance.

Within “CONTACTS/CONTEXTS (FRAME OF REFERENCE),” language is a means by which Acconci marks a progression through a textual space. The page numbers parenthetically recorded next to each entry mark a path through the spatio-tactile presence of the physical book, to which the numbers of each headword are in variable concord. Each entry, in addition, retains the trace of its first arrangement: the page numbers and cited indices recall the paginated materiality of the original volume, making visible the displacement of the text on a different page, in a different volume. In this commingling of conceptual and material structures,

13. Marjorie Perloff, “Refiguring the Poundian Ideogram: From Octavio Paz’s Blanco/Branco to Haroldo De Campos’s Galáxias,” *Modernist Cultures* 7, no. 1 (2012): 41.

14. *Ibid.*, 41.

15. Dutch, *Original Roget’s Thesaurus*, xxviii.

16. Charles Olson, “Projective Verse,” in *Toward the Open Field: Poets on the Art of Poetry, 1800-1950*, ed. Melissa Kwasny (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1950), 345.

17. *Ibid.*, 345.

the page becomes a contingent unit, a tangible measure of distance between two linked points. Through its iterative fragmentation of Roget's highly structured compendium of terms, the poem communicates the flux of difference and synonymy that emerges from the linear arrangement of word clusters, arriving at a sense of both displacement and similitude. By forming a chain of links that comprise a semantic, rather than pictorial, network, Acconci collapses the materiality of the original text to reveal its conceptual structure.

Though it retains the subdivisions put forth in the original text, Acconci's poem neither mimics nor supplants *Roget's Thesaurus*, but rather transcribes a path followed by the thesaurus user. Roget, in an introduction to the original publication, is careful not to overstate his objective: "I could not have attempted to draw any strict lines of demarcation... My object, be it remembered, is not to regulate the use of words, but simply to supply and to suggest such as may be wanted on occasion."¹⁸ Acconci, as such, does not enact violence upon the text through his rearrangement of its content, but rather shifts its instrumental function from one of guidance to one of documentation.

The procedural method of equivalence behind Acconci's poem enacts a secondary rendition of concept-driven ordering, which borrows directly from the impulse behind Roget's first edition. Here, synonymy functions to draw disparate lemmas together, rather than form the basis for their grouping. Subsequently, the distance spanned by the poem is not merely spatial, but semantic: beginning at "1 Existence," it ends, after a chain of indexical references, in "503 Insanity." By treating the thesaurus as a territory for both traversal and reproduction, as a space through which to work out a progress of association, Acconci dispenses with the material page as a precondition for the thesaurus-system while elevating it as a navigational structure.

As an effect of the systematic nature of Acconci's method, a protracted tension between coincidence and machination casts the poet-reader against the computational rigidity of his trace, the transcribed process of reading. Each lemma, a plenitude of indices, summarily signifies its own exhaustion: the movement in the poem from one group of words to the next undoes the capacity of each preceding group to serve as a guidepost, a stable marker of progress. With each introduction of a new headword, the stamp of a distance traversed, "CONTACTS/CONTEXTS (FRAME OF REFERENCE)" leaves behind a growing pile of discarded signs, ineffectual within the alien space of a new set of pages.

Underlying Roget's effort is a persistent idealization of unmediated representation, as well as an implicit postulation of the visual as a powerful mode of signification, placing the thesaurus once more in alignment with the concision and visuality of conceptual poetry. In his preface to the 1965 edition of *Roget's Thesaurus*, the specific source text for Acconci's work, editor Robert Dutch goes so far as to lament the underdevelopment of iconographic language in English: "If, like the Chinese, we had adopted a system of pictograms to write our language, symbolizing words by sense not by sound, we should long ago have been forced to arrange our lexicons by categories of thought, and our dictionaries would, in effect, be thesauruses."¹⁹ His sentiment echoes the reductive appropriation of the Chinese ideogram by Pound,²⁰ and positions the aspirations of *Roget's Thesaurus* alongside the expressive concision of the Imagists. Here, the end of the thesaurus may be interpreted as consonant with the end of the Imagist poem. Each

18. Dutch, *Original Roget's Thesaurus*, xxxix-xl.

19. Dutch, *Original Roget's Thesaurus*, x.

20. Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991).

elevates the precise communication of an impression or an idea through the meticulous juxtaposition of terms.

Dutch's preface simultaneously positions the lemma alongside the pictogram, or rather portrays the lemma as a functional realization of the pictographic impulse, by positing a semantically organized text as more consonant with the proclivities of human perception than one organized by the characteristics of words that drive pronunciation and use (i.e. spelling, or part of speech). By recognizing the synonymy between disparate terms, he suggests, the lemma supplies the semantic grouping that would naturally arise from a linguistic system comprised of icons. Like Peirce's icon, which is distinguished by its capacity to "[refer] to the Object it denotes merely by virtue of characters of its own,"²¹ pictograms expressing sensorily similar objects might retain the similarities of the objects in their visual characteristics, facilitating the project of organization that the thesaurus undertakes. *Roget's Thesaurus* imperfectly carries out this project to the extent that the English language allows, and supplies the lemma as a unit of semantic consonance: a grouping by way of connotation instead of direct denotation. Without the stability of irrefutable ties to the sensory world, words have only the capacity to point to additional words, ad nauseam. This limitation, nonetheless, recalls the generative nature of Derrida's *différance*, "the very opening of the space in which ontotheology—philosophy—produces its system and its history."²² Recalling the "monastic fidelity to Word as Flesh"²³ through which Place and Fitterman describe radically mimetic writing, Acconci's piece, in its procedural mode of transcription, seems likewise to "[include] ontotheology, inscribing it and exceeding it without return."²⁴ Roget's lemmas, despite the conventional nature of their symbolic capacity, thus form the material for a self-reflexive, profuse mode of signification.

The referential power of the lemma approaches the tension between graphic and textual space that Perloff observes in her analysis of Pound's *Cantos*, which does include English translations for the numerous Chinese ideograms interspersed throughout its text: "The goal is not to have ideogram X translated but to allow that ideogram to function in its relationships to neighboring words—and to its own English equivalent."²⁵ In light of this conception, the lemma may be viewed as a kind of composite icon that is neither explicitly textual nor explicitly pictographic. It produces meaning in relation to the connotations of the text within which it is embedded, and by way of its own aggregate of connotations, to which the reader has access in translation. Haroldo de Campos offers an additional resonance in his description of "*semiotic iconicity*, which includes degrees of conventionality (codes of "stylization") and does not permit realization in a "pure" state, as Peirce stresses, but through "attenuated" ("degraded") mediations."²⁶ It is these mediations that undergird the relational interplay by which the lemmas in *Roget's Thesaurus* reciprocally produce connotations.

21. Justus Buchler, *The Philosophy of Peirce: Selected writings* (Routledge: 2014), 102.

22. Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), 6.

23. Place and Fitterman, *Notes on Conceptualisms*, 22.

24. Derrida, "Différance," 6.

25. Perloff, "Refiguring the Poundian Ideogram," 41.

26. Haroldo de Campos, "Poetic Function and Ideogram/The Sinological Argument," in *Novas: Selected Writings*, ed. Antonio Sergio Bessa and Odile Cisneros (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 309.

According to Fitterman and Place, “[a] crisis in signification...[would] mean there was an alphabet in the alpha sense: there are not empty signifiers any more than there are empty selves.”²⁷ A symbol, as such, is never empty, but suffused with its own symbolic function. This conception of representation foregrounds the visibility of denotation, while the “crisis” to which it alludes arises from the adamant opacity of the sign. The impulse to reduce language to a series of discrete, manipulable components resonates with the purely hypothetical universal mode of representation put forth by William Gottfried Leibniz, which undergirds the pasigraphic tradition preceding Roget’s project.²⁸ The symbols of this “truly philosophical writing,” Leibniz states, would reduce ideas to a kind of “alphabet of human thought,”²⁹ comprised of “the combination of signs representing their simple elements, such that the correspondence between composite ideas and their symbols would be natural and no longer conventional.”³⁰ The notion of a universal alphabet presupposes both the universality of human cognition and the discontinuity of ideas reflected in the structure of the thesaurus. Its fundamental visibility, in turn, seems an echo of the impulse conveyed by Dutch, despite his erroneous characterization of the Chinese system of characters as predominantly pictographic, as well as the presence asserted by the relentlessly *visible* structure of *Roget’s Thesaurus* as it manifests itself through Acconci’s process.

Leibniz, in describing the type of sign he deems a “real characteristic,” cites Chinese ideograms as exemplifying a “system of signs that directly represent things (or, rather, ideas) and not words.”³¹ His universal alphabet seeks a mode of translation that isolates and combines the representable attributes of concepts, rendering the ideogram a deductive tool, a symbol subject to manipulation, which has the ability to produce new knowledge through its juxtaposition with other symbols. At root, Leibniz’s alphabet relies on the visual correspondence between symbol and idea, whether direct or conventional. Its deductive power is predicated upon the same graphical facility of interpretation to which Dutch refers, and which escapes the insular tyranny of the written word, which only has the capacity to refer to others of its type.

By manipulating the conceptual units that comprise *Roget’s Thesaurus*, Acconci opens up a space for alternate epistemologies. The generative potential of “CONTACTS/CONTEXTS (FRAME OF REFERENCE),” though driven by the tabulated structure of the original text, derives not from the performance of rearrangement, but from the blurring of semantic boundaries that ensues in its wake. Acconci’s method of reading resists the stability of Roget’s “system of classification,” which is based on “principles of arrangement as appeared to [him] to be the simplest and most natural.”³² The poem recurrently skips between the classes into which the thesaurus is hierarchically divided, and under the assumption of synonymy, renders its divisions moot. “144 Permanence,” for example, which is located under “Section VII. CHANGE,” a subcategory of “CLASS I. Words Expressing Abstract Relations” in the original text, directs the reader after a series of synonyms to “600 Perseverance,” located under “1. Acts” of “I. Volition in General,” a subdivision of “CLASS V. Volition.”³³ The sequence of terms between the two

27. Place and Fitterman, *Notes on Conceptualisms*, 37.

28. Hüllen, *A History of Roget’s Thesaurus*, 38.

29. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, 204.

30. Louis Couturat, *The Logic of Leibniz* (1901).

31. *Ibid.*

32. Dutch, *Original Roget’s Thesaurus*, xxx.

33. *Ibid.*, vii.

lemmas takes on the characteristic of a gradual progression, which forms a bridge between the two disparate headwords:

144 Permanence: absence of change

N. *permanence*, permanency, no change, status quo; invariability, unchangeability, immutability 153n. *stability*; lasting quality, persistence 600n

(page 81)

600 Perseverance

N. *perseverance*, persistence, tenacity, pertinacity, pertinaciousness, stubbornness 602n.

(page 350)

Acconci's lemmas challenge the feasibility of semantic grouping by collapsing the space between categorically distinct words, performing *Roget's Thesaurus* as a text that undermines its own construction. To the extent that "CONTACTS/CONTEXTS (FRAME OF REFERENCE)" discretizes the contents of the thesaurus, it facilitates only deductions of equivalence. Structurally, in spite of its apparent physical and semantic traversal from "1 Existence" to "503 Insanity," Acconci's poem de-emphasizes difference by unfolding and flattening the organization of the original text. The notion of a universal language for thought, which is built upon distinctions between ideas, here appears structurally untenable in its conceptual interconnectivity. Each successive grouping of terms reveals itself as merely a different gradation of the preceding idea, and thus of the same idea.

The ideographic symbol represents a concept by way of tradition or convention, while the pictographic symbol embodies attributes of that which it represents. Ernest Fenollosa, in describing the "quality of vividness in the structure of detached Chinese words," describes this distinction in terms of the difference between a verb and a noun, the latter of which lends itself more readily to iconicity:³⁴

It might be thought that a picture is naturally a picture of a thing, and that, therefore, the root ideas of Chinese are what Grammar calls nouns. But examination shows that a large number of primitive Chinese characters, even of the so-called radicals, are short-hand pictures of actions or processes.

Fenollosa regards the compound nature of the ideogram as giving rise to a kind of connotative dialectic, which lends it a concrete quality. Recalling the deductive power that Leibniz envisions for his universal alphabet, he states, "Two things added together do not produce a third thing, but suggest some fundamental relation between them."³⁵ The compound sign is therefore not, in this light, the addition of two signs, but a generative amalgam that produces meaning through the interplay of connotations. Like the "play-activity" of Gomringer's constellationary form, or the "narrative mediation between image or 'figure' and meaning"³⁶ of the allegorical impulse detailed by Fitterman and Place, its interpretation is a function of a dynamic relation brought to

34. Ernest Fenollosa, "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: An Ars Poetica," in *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, ed. Haun Saussy, Jonathan Stalling, and Lucas Klein (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 81.

35. *Ibid.*, 82.

36. Place and Fitterman, *Notes on Conceptualisms*, 16.

light through spatial combination. The ideogram thus represents a break from the additive nature of alphabetic connotation.

Though the pictogram and the ideogram represent different modes of signification, the sentiment Dutch expresses in his preface finds an additional echo in Barthes' description of the haiku as a kind of pure index, "the designating gesture of the child pointing at whatever it is... merely saying: *that!*"³⁷ The haiku, a poetic form admired by Pound for its descriptive concision (and which he describes in 1913 as the artistic impulse behind "In A Station of the Metro," the Imagist poem describing his experience in the Paris Underground: "in Japan, where a work of art is not estimated by its acreage and where sixteen syllables are counted enough for a poem if you arrange and punctuate them properly"³⁸), enacts the compound referentiality of which the lemma seems an instrumental counterpart. Barthes describes the emptiness of its indexical function as a self-referential canceling-out: "its specialty short circuits: like a decorative loop, the haiku coils back on itself, the wake of the sign which seems to have been traced and erased."³⁹ The function of the haiku becomes, in this conception, a purely denotative sign, depleted in the instance of its denotation. Again, its mode of reference finds a counterpart in the adamantly denotative lemma, which points only into the text in which it is situated, invoking the unbounded loops of recursion.

Rendering the "counter-descriptive"⁴⁰ emptiness of the haiku an inverted *mise en abyme*, wherein "the symbol of the very emptiness of symbols...the mirror intercepts only other mirrors, and this infinite reflection is emptiness itself,"⁴¹ Barthes additionally highlights the impassive uselessness of the reference work: "for us, the clearest image of this ricochet effect without motor and without check, of this play of reflections without origin, would be that of the dictionary, in which a word can only be defined by other words."⁴² For the thesaurus to aspire to an index that points outside of language, into the objective reality upon which it is founded, rather than inward back toward language, which subsumes the capacity of the symbol to represent anything more than other words, seems its highest and most unattainable end.

Perloff cites a similar confusion in Paz's impression of the ideogram in Pound's Cantos, the "barbaric" appropriation of which drains the symbol of its ability to produce meaning: "What do Chinese ideograms signify inside a text written in English? There are only two possibilities: the citations demand translation which isn't ideographic, or the ideograms are magic traces, signs that have lost the power to signify."⁴³ Here, the transposed ideogram denotes itself: its presence within the text points flatly to its own foreignness. This mode of self-referentiality runs in parallel to the pointing inward of the thesaurus, the "magic traces" of Roget's intra-lemmal indices, which function in a system fundamentally independent to the phenomenal world the text seeks to describe. In a sense, Acconci nonetheless wrests the referential capacity from *Roget's Thesaurus* by arriving at the "Insanity" of its perpetual and incestuous self-referentiality. "CONTACTS/CONTEXTS (FRAME OF REFERENCE)" forms a kind of "emptiness itself," a

37. Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 83.

38. Ezra Pound, "How I began," *TP's Weekly* 6, June (1913): 707.

39. Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, 84.

40. *Ibid.*, 77.

41. *Ibid.*, 79.

42. *Ibid.*, 78.

43. Perloff, "Refiguring the Poundian Ideogram," 41.

gesture that signifies nothing but “the very inanity of any classification of the object”⁴⁴—in this case, quite literally.

The structure of *Roget’s Thesaurus* finds consonance and dissonance in the substructures that emerge from the progressive unfolding of its contents. The cascading internal abbreviations of “866 Repute,” for instance, echo the nested order of Roget’s abstract concepts. Each abbreviation revivifies a propulsion that percolates through a list of associated terms:

866 Repute

N. *repute*, good r., high r., reputation, good r., special r.; report, good r., title to fame, name, honored n., great n., good n., fair n., character, known c., good c., high c., reputability, respectability 802n.

(page 539)

The reduction of “*repute*” to “r.,” “name” to “n.,” and “character” to “c.,” a staccato shorthand of the redundancies each was put in place to avoid—the “repetition of some syllable or term common to each word or phrase in the same group”⁴⁵—relies upon a linear foreknowledge of the words they replace. As such, the abbreviations embed short instances of intransigent linear directionality within the overarching nonlinear path of the reader, whose movement through the pages of the original text remains largely unconstrained by the left-to-right construction of the English sentence. While propelling the list forward, the diminishing momentum of the group comes to an abrupt halt when the reader moves backward in the book to “(page 491),” the location of reference “respectability 802n.”

Abbreviation in “CONTACTS/CONTEXTS (FRAME OF REFERENCE)” represents a scaling down of the textual lens, first to the level of the letter, and then to the level of punctuation. The syntax of abbreviation gestures first toward the fractal, wherein a structural pattern, here the syntactic hierarchy, occurs at progressively smaller scales. In this conception, the letters occupy one point on an axis that extends from the minute (the dot of ink) to the immense (Roget’s hierarchical arrangement of concepts), along which, of course, sits the sentence, the lemma, the subclass, the class. The abbreviations seem simultaneously to form a disintegrating fragment of a broken order, the side effects of a stifled forward motion.

Individually, each grouping is drawn into counterpoint with Acconci’s process. Occasionally, the content of the poem echoes the process of the reader, and the mechanized detachment of the text becomes the sole combatant against a cloying cheekiness: “106 Repetition / N. *repetition*, doing again, iteration, reiteration; doubling, ditto, reduplication 20n. / (page 64).” Likewise, the nearly narrative “73 Term: serial position / N. serial place, term, order, remove 27n” appears to be a set of commands denoting the indexical extraction of each successive group. The entries “600 Perseverance,” “602 Obstinacy,” “599 Resolution,” and “608 Predetermination” seem a procedural reflection of Acconci’s own compositional resolve, and the tiers of self-referentiality introduced by “line- / jumping 283n” appear almost certainly intentional. To an extent, of course, they are. A certain paucity of authorship nonetheless emerges in the surfeit of appropriated text, which impels the reader to seek the agency of the poet in semantic meaning. By enacting a method of composition through the processes of navigation and selection, Acconci replaces the expressive capacity of the words with the symbolic capacity

44. Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, 83.

45. Dutch, *Original Roget’s Thesaurus*, xxxiii.

of excess. Against the palimpsest of instrumentality, his poem frustrates practical use at the same time as it offers a surplus means of interpretation.

The structure of the poem produces a rhythmic interplay between macrostructure and microstructure. The persistent succession and variable content of each lemma challenges the seriality of the text and the interchangeability of its units. Though “CONTACTS/CONTEXTS (FRAME OF REFERENCE)” results in rearrangement, its components are neither regular nor equivalent. The maudlin profusion of “925 Flattery,” for instance, seems to accelerate as it brandishes a growing list of synonyms to the reader:

925 Flattery

N. *flattery*, cajolery, wheedling, taffy, blarney, blandiloquence, blandishment; butter, soft soap, soft sawder, salve, lip-salve, rosewater, incense, adulation; voice of the charmer, honeyed words, soft nothings 889n. *endearment*; compliment, pretty speeches; unctuousness, euphemism, glozing, gloze; capitation, coquetry, fawning, back-scratching; assentation, obsequiousness, flunkeyism, sycophancy, toadying, tuft-hunting, 879n.

(page 584)

“879 Servility,” directly following, seems to decelerate deferentially in counterpoint, offering a short list of deflated states of being:

879 Servility

N. *servility*, slavishness, abject spirit, no pride, lack of self-respect 856n.

(page 550)

The inability of each word group to attain an expositional reference function produces a mode of meaning that dynamically recalls the semantic space between lemmas, and emphasizes the syntactic and rhythmic complexities that emerge from their chance juxtaposition.

Though the poem makes visible the presence of an ordering method on the original text of *Roget's Thesaurus*, the method by which it disassembles the method remains obscure. Acconci's process represents a gradual, dialogic departure from the system that underlies it, and from lemma to lemma, progressively dismantles the instrumentality of the thesaurus text by deviating from the implied numerical order of its pages. At the same time, the emergent combinations of terms compel the reader to supply semantic justification for their arrangement. The seemingly objective process thus becomes a critical, even revelatory one, pushing “Flattery...(page 584)” against “Servility...(page 550),” “Simpleness...(page 30)” against “Uniformity...(page 9),” “Vanity...(page 545)” against “Unsubstantiality...(page 2),” and so forth, each pair of linked terms demanding reconciliation.

In traversing *Roget's Thesaurus* by way of approximate equivalence, “CONTACTS/CONTEXTS (FRAME OF REFERENCE)” exhibits a lexical drift that undermines the possibility of pure synonymy. In Roget's words, the group of terms under each headword are “adapted to express all the recognizable shades and modifications of the general idea under which those words and phrases are arranged.”⁴⁶ And though, generally speaking, the terms do semantically cohere with the headword that precedes them, rarely do they approach interchangeability. The identity of a term with its pure equivalent would in fact cause the

46. Dutch, *Original Roget's Thesaurus*, xxviii.

thesaurus-system to short circuit: it would fix the ultimate destination of the intratextual network of synonyms to the word that means only itself. Acconci gestures toward this potential in “12 Correlation: double or reciprocal relation,” a lemma composed primarily of varying permutations of its headword:

12 Correlation: double or reciprocal relation

N. *correlation*, correlativity, correlation, mutual relation, functionality 9n.

(page 7)

The lemma contains, nonetheless, the assuring presence of “mutual relation” and “functionality,” incidentally both principles upon which the thesaurus is founded, to propel the reader to additional terms.

The strictures of procedural composition produce an abundance of potential routes. Acconci’s “ten pages of reading” represents merely one of a proliferation of possible paths through *Roget’s Thesaurus*. This freedom of traversal and composition deviates from the generative freedom that emerges from the deductive logic of Leibniz’s universal alphabet, which contributes to the philosophical groundwork, if not the practical object, of Roget’s effort. Leibniz views his hypothetical algebraic language as a tool through which one could theoretically derive new insights through semantic discretization and combination. In his summation, “all that follows rationally from what is given could be found by a kind of calculus, just as arithmetical or geometrical problems are solved.”⁴⁷ Roget, in turn, sees his project of classification as a step closer to providing the groundwork for a “strictly *Philosophical Language*... The probable result [of which] would be its eventual adoption by every civilized nation.”⁴⁸ In either case, the symbolic representation of ideas is founded upon a universal application of verbal and epistemological categories.

Acconci does, in a sense, use *Roget’s Thesaurus* to facilitate the expression of an idea, though his idea concerns the instrumentality of the text itself. As a mode of expression, the method behind “CONTACTS/CONTEXTS (FRAME OF REFERENCE)” paradoxically embodies the “programmatically denial of the dogma of linearity”⁴⁹ cited by Haroldo de Campos (and of which Brazilian concrete poetry, he asserts, is an “emphatic example”). What Acconci achieves in his procedural traversal of Roget’s reference work is not the rejection of linearity outright, but a neutralization of the meaning-making capacity of sequential connotation. Though the poem appears to inhabit a linear order, the transcribed lemmas, in their displacement and rearrangement, lose the capacity to signify once removed from Roget’s paginated method of classification. Detached from their original context, the lemmas become the marks of a contingent symbol system, and in the connotations that arise from their difference and combination, form the units of a new one.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Acconci’s work is the purported instrumentality of its source material. As a reference text, *Roget’s Thesaurus* prioritizes its own readability. The structure of the work is founded upon the object of facilitating the aspirations of “speakers and

47. Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, 204.

48. Dutch, *Original Roget’s Thesaurus*, xliii.

49. Haroldo de Campos, “The Ghost in the Text (Saussure and the Anagrams),” in *Novas: Selected Writings*, 282.

writers...concerned with the expression of ideas.”⁵⁰ The development of “CONTACTS/CONTEXTS (FRAME OF REFERENCE)” exhibits a process of reading unconcerned with the singular goal of expressing a particular concept, focusing instead on the expressive capacity of the process of navigation. The frustration of Acconci’s piece lies not in a “[struggle] with the difficulties of composition,”⁵¹ but in a sequentially deferred sense of referential stability. His work reframes the thesaurus as a material territory, an end in itself, superseding its more accustomed function as a means to an end. Allowing the structure of the work rather than a particular term or idea to propel his reading forward, Acconci performs the preconditions of the reference work upon itself, enacting its instrumentality.

To view Acconci’s poem as a rendering of the practical space of *Roget’s Thesaurus* implies a secondary transformation upon the essentially Cartesian state (in Bourdieu’s sense) of Roget’s organizational approach. His nested hierarchy of concepts, designed to schematize the practical space of human cognition, becomes a collection of interconnected elements that blur the boundaries imposed upon their connotative capacity. While “CONTACTS/CONTEXTS (FRAME OF REFERENCE)” makes present Roget’s schema by way of its own propulsive progression, the very possibility of process-based transformation bespeaks a context agnostic autonomy inherent to the algorithmic procedure. Under its sway, the structural foundations of the thesaurus form a contingent set of demarcations rather than an all-encompassing framework. By adopting Roget’s totalizing impulse for a highly specialized, inversely totalizing end, “CONTACTS/CONTEXTS (FRAME OF REFERENCE)” frees up the possibility for an embodied, decentralized knowledge within the “objective vision”⁵² of the reference work, and in its rigid adherence to a set of constraints, paradoxically reveals the potential for new epistemologies.⁵³

50. Dutch, *Original Roget’s Thesaurus*, xliii.

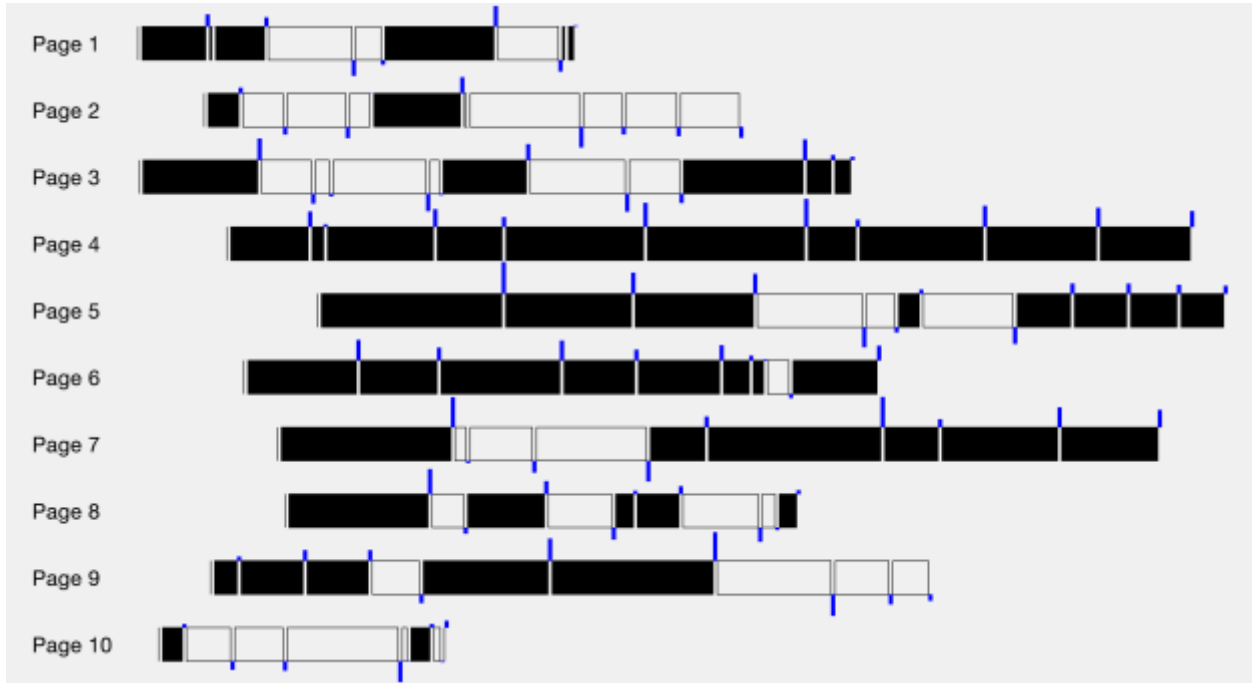
51. *Ibid.*, xxviii.

52. Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 186.

53. Thank you Nic Flood and Craig Dworkin for your thoughts and time.

APPENDIX

Visual rendering of the page and index distances within *Roget's Thesaurus*, as cited within each of Acconci's entries.



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