

2014

Diagrammatic And Stochastic Writing And Poetics

Johanna Drucker

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Drucker, Johanna. "Diagrammatic And Stochastic Writing And Poetics." *The Iowa Review* 44.3 (2014): 122-132. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.7538>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Diagrammatic and Stochastic Writing and Poetics

Diagrammatic Writing (*Eindhoven: Onomatopée, 2013*).

Stochastic Poetics (*Los Angeles and New York: Granary & Druckwerk, 2011–12*). *Out of print but available to download on www.johannadrucker.com.*

What are the identities and functions of poetry and poetics at this point in cultural time? And how do we understand the way a book works, now that we look at its familiar form through eyes accustomed to navigating the formats of linked, networked display? How can we even recognize a work of poetry when we encounter it among the heated energies of rapid communication exchange, the escalating rates of mediation and remediation, and the complex landscapes of noise culture and technological hyperbole with their pumped-up expectations supported by dubiously grounded realities? Extremes of plentitude and poverty suffuse the aesthetic domain as surely as they organize the economic and political ones of our “advanced” and “late” conditions of culture. And yet, in all of this highly charged and frenetic activity, the production of specialized texts and organized discourses around their operation and value continues to create its own nodes of attention. Fractious, fragmented, contentious, or riven as the communities of production and reception may be, the dedicated engagement with poetry and poetics creates its unique vortices of attraction. Questions, crucial and compelling, continue to arise from this generative field.

In some ways, these are concerns that have charged all of modernity, the epoch in which industrial processes threatened to erase the boundaries between craft and product, between individual voice and mass culture, between tradition and commodification. Indeed, ever since the full-on advent of modern aesthetics as a field, in the work of Alexander Baumgarten in the eighteenth century, the terms of distinction by which an aesthetic work might be distinguished from other objects or discourses in our culture and then its operations recognized as integral to that distinction have been either implicitly or explicitly reformulated by every instance of poetic expression. For whatever else it may be, a book is always an argument about what a book is (as object, text, discourse), as surely as any novel, poem, painting, sculpture, performance

always proceeds from an assumption about what that form performs in its initial coming-into-being.

Diagrammatic Writing and *Stochastic Poetics*, two of my recent projects, were each made to examine aspects of poetic and aesthetic issues that are central to my engagement with books and visual epistemology in their current cultural condition. *Diagrammatic Writing* makes explicit investigations I've been involved in with critical and creative practice through printing, research, and historical study about the way the book works as a complex field. *Stochastic Poetics* takes up theories of complex processes and events as they form an understanding for the very ground on which aesthetic objects gain identity and value. They share certain properties. They are both graphical arguments, works that make use of the visual and spatial features of page, opening, and bound codex as active elements of their semantic field. Each makes a case for the ways a book works at a moment in cultural history when the codex is frequently characterized as an outmoded format, eclipsed by the technologies of screen and networked devices. Each proposes to explore unfinished aspects of modern poetics, the potential for the diagram to be the paradigm of poetic production, and for questions about the identity of poetic language to be central to poetic practice. Beyond that, the similarities end.

Diagrammatic Writing is a meta-study of the workings of a book. It is designed to demonstrate that a book is not a static object but a dynamic space, not a fixed and final expression but an organized arrangement of elements whose spatial relations encode semantic value. The work is a completely self-referential examination of the codex as a graphical space in which the structuring principles of its format features are explicitly exposed and described. It has precedents in other printed works I've produced, namely *From A to Z* (1977) and *History of the/my Wor(l)d* (1989), though it is the first fully self-referential articulation of the dynamic relations that constitute a codex. The earlier projects were demonstrations of these principles, not explicit statements of them.¹

Stochastic Poetics was provoked by a different question: how does poetic language register against the larger field of language practices? This project also has precedents within my work, particularly in *Prove Before Laying: Figuring the Word* (1997), whose theoretical premise is a formulation of a problem I track back into childhood when my mother told me that all the words and statements in our language could be formed from the finite letters of the alphabet. But unlike *Prove Before Laying*, *Stochastic Poetics* is not about the combinatoric potential of letters (and the apparent paradox of the infinitude of expression that arises from a limited set

of elements). Instead, it focuses on the cultural identity of poetry and the legacies of conceptual writing as practices that edge toward erasure of the distinction between aesthetic production and other uses of language. *Stochastic Poetics* also asks and answers another set of questions about the nature of poetics as a probabilistic process and the identity form of aesthetic activity in our current culture and spectacular matrix of sound-language-graphic possibilities.

Diagrammatic Writing is a formal, analytic project, *Stochastic Poetics* an emergent compositional one. Each has historic precedents whose poetics define specific coordinates in the realm of aesthetic practices by which I locate and calculate my own position. The difference between the terms *diagrammatic* and *stochastic* is not one of binaristic opposition. These are not two poles of a single system against which one defines the other. They are two very different modalities. But insofar as the instantiation of any inscriptional work becomes embodied in graphicality (whether in digital or analog trace), the analysis of formal features of format that are the substance of *Diagrammatic Writing* applies to its performance on the page, screen, book, surface, or substrate. The organization of a text, its graphical encoding as a text within a space that plays with the delimiting principles of boundedness to any degree, is subject to the systematic play of these semantically structuring elements. Precisely what that means, and how the diagrammatic comes to epitomize these principles in ways that are recognizably distinct from other graphical modes, has to be teased out a bit. But I would suggest that the diagrammatic is the condition of any poetic work in its inscriptional instantiation.

By contrast, the concept of the stochastic mode goes to the crux of aesthetic identity—how does the figure of poetic work emerge from the broader field of linguistic potential? Our era is characterized by a seething, spectacular, hypertrophic extreme of noise distraction and frenetic activity. Against such a ground, the challenge of an aesthetic work is to figure its identity. The activity has ontological dimensions—what *is* and *makes* a work an aesthetic work—and epistemological ones—how do we *know* or *sense* (to pose this phenomenologically) that we are in the presence of an aesthetic object or experience? Each of these questions could be answered by drawing on a different intellectual lineage, and the various transactional, participatory, political, and exchange-driven currencies currently in vogue in the various arts would align around them. This is an exercise worth doing, but it is not the task here. Instead, I want to sketch the anecdotal and theoretical frames from which these two works arose.

I came to the study of diagrams through a longstanding interest in problems of visual forms of knowledge production and to stochastic processes from an equally longstanding interest in issues of emergence, complexity, and the relation between poetics/making and aesthetics/perceiving.

Start with diagrams. What is a diagram? How is it different from other images and/or visualizations? To put it simply, diagrams are schematic drawings that *work*—they *do* something rather than *represent* something. The squares of opposition used in classical and medieval philosophy to construct syllogisms are diagrams—drawings that can be used to advance an argument. They are generative because they structure possibilities for thinking. They do not represent an already extant bit of knowledge; they are not pictures of things in the world. They are not visual representations of knowledge that exists *a priori* or *a posteriori*. They are schematic structures that use spatialized organization to construct semantic value. They are structures that bear semantic values in their graphical organization. And they articulate relations through the play of elements within that structure. Though they are apparently static images, they are dynamic because the readings they generate do not stand in a single, static relation to the image.

The codex book, the page, the graphical organization of layout on the screen—these are all diagrammatic formats. How they work, how they make use of the specific properties of graphically structured relations is the subject of *Diagrammatic Writing*. Diagrams belong to the world of visual epistemology, to the domain of knowledge design and production. They are part of the technologies and instruments through which knowledge becomes tractable, conventionalized, formalized, and used.

Stochastic processes belong to the physical world, the realm of emergent, complex systems. They have a mathematical identity that distinguishes the ways they can be modeled as nonlinear, probabilistic processes. Unlike linear processes, which progress in predictable ways according to the changes in value in a variable, probabilistic systems (think of dice games or weather) do not. The mathematics of stochastic systems are complex, but the phenomena that conform to these models are common—the fluid dynamics of the atmosphere, social systems and relations of influence, traffic patterns, and chaotic behaviors are stochastic. Poetry, I suggest, is fundamentally stochastic along a historical continuum, but also as an emergent phenomenon in any linguistic cultural field. *Stochastic Poetics* is the study of poetics as an *event space* in the field of language.

Diagrams and stochastic processes are both probabilistic, and both find their most renowned precedent in Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés* (*A Throw of the Dice*). This means that we can also think about diagrams as a start point for an imagined alternative history of modern poetry. The dominant paradigm of early-twentieth-century Anglo-American poetry, Imagism, imprinted its formulation of the poem as a thing meant *to be* and to be as self-evident an image as possible. What if—as all good counterfactual tales begin—the course of history had taken its inspiration from a diagrammatic exemplar? Imagism famously, rightly, wrongly, mistakenly, but dogmatically took up a theory of the ideogram as one of its aesthetic principles. Modernist Imagism starts from the misunderstanding by Ernest Fenollosa that Chinese ideograms were self-evident signs whose meaning was immediately communicated through visual form.² (This extended a long tradition in Western culture that imagined Egyptian hieroglyphics in the same way.)³ Ezra Pound used the concept to anchor a theory of poetic communication in form, make it concrete (in terms the Noigandres group would exploit). Abstractions were to be expressed with the greatest possible economy of means. Juxtaposition, collage, and visually specific evocative terms were the instruments of Imagism. Its compositional approach was deliberately antidiscursive and distinctly designed to reject the thematic sentimentality and expansive, even decorative, rhyme structures of late Victorian verse. It was also a reaction against the emotional themes and excesses of Late Romantic poetics, emphasizing formal properties of poetic work rather than its capacity to express interior life. Pound's concept of the ideogram dominated Anglo-American modernism. William Carlos Williams's "no meaning but in things" and Archibald MacLeish's succinct modernist formulation, "A poem must not mean but be" express this approach and demonstrate its impact. Pound's dislike of the Symbolist aesthetic is well known, justifying his desire to get away from its vaguenesses and metaphysical aspirations and, in short, to concretize poetic imagery.

But the diagrammatic operations of Mallarmé's work offer a radically different set of possibilities for poetic expression.⁴ They do not depend upon the representational and concrete vision of the ideogram but instead suggest a kinetic, mobilized field of articulated *relations* that expresses the belief that the very condition of poetic form is its suspension between the arbitrariness of language ("*hasard*") and the temporary configuration of meaning ("constellation") through the figure of the poet ("master"). The themes that run through Mallarmé's unprecedented and unparalleled work, *Un Coup de Dés*, first conceived

and sketched in 1896, reflect the poet's interest in statistical analyses of chance processes. His work is far from random; it instead answers the challenge of chance by creating a work that produces meaning probabilistically. It presents the reader with a diagrammatic format, one that uses fragments and phrases suspended in a field of dynamic possibilities—the poetic problem staged by the work. That problem is repeatedly expressed as a tension between the probabilities of meaning production and those of entropic dissipation held in dynamic play by the structure of a poem whose main—perhaps only—objective is to reflect upon the way poetry can be expressed in linguistic form as a field of potential meaning. Mallarmé shifts our engagement with philosophical questions of necessity (mechanistic determinism) onto the field of language, where the problems of chance are all posed as challenges to meaning as form. If deterministic models of linguistics actually explained the operations of language (they do not), then the problems of the arbitrariness of language would never have reared their scary heads with such vengeance.

While Mallarmé does not write explicitly about diagrams or diagrammatic forms, commentators on his work have drawn attention to the way the graphical format of his design articulates relations among elements of the poetic work by making use of spatial organization. Probably the best critical engagement with *Un Coup de Dés* in this regard is the Marcel Broodthaers artist's book that consists of translucent vellum sheets on which the individual phrases of the French poet's text have been translated into solid black bars.⁵ The weight, movement, organization, and dynamism of the whole work leap into view. Broodthaers makes it glaringly evident that Mallarmé's poem is designed to demonstrate the way poetry creates meaning in a field of potentiality staged as and through spatial relations.

Mallarmé's work was posed against the background of substantive philosophical discussions in the 1880s and 1890s. The chemist James Clerk Maxwell, for instance, a devout Presbyterian, was deeply engaged in trying to think through the troubling connections between mechanistic rules at work in the design of the universe and evidence of probability.⁶ Chance posed a threat to meaning, to design, to a divine organization of the universe that was still on the mind of Albert Einstein when he declared that God did not play dice with the universe. In 1892, Charles Sanders Peirce, the American philosopher and logician, published a paper in the philosophical journal *Monist* titled "The Doctrine of Necessity Examined," challenging the "common belief" that the natural world was precisely determined by law.⁷ The confrontation between

mechanistic and probabilistic materialities was unsettling to the natural scientists and philosophers, but Mallarmé chose poetry as his instrument for investigating these debates.

The concept of the diagrammatic that comes forward from Mallarmé meets another tradition in which the study of reading, bibliographical description, and book design produces a different probabilistic encounter. While the study of book structures and formats is largely mechanistic (both forensic and formal, descriptive of the material object and of its structured features), the study of reading provoked by such codes stresses probabilistic outcomes. A book, like any highly structured graphical work, is an encoded space of meaning production. It provokes a reading, and the reading produces the work anew in each instance. Reception is production, and the production of the work always sits somewhere within the bell curve of a normal distribution. Ever since the format features of the codex began to emerge from the *scriptura continua* of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages in the West, the recognition that the design of a text was part of its semantic operation as a meaning-producing field has been implicit in its graphical structure. The development of the elaborate conventions for the paratextual apparatus, the separation of text into header and footer, chapter and section heading, footnote and marginalia, table of contents and index, title page and half-title, and so on, all evidence the set of codes by which a text is composed. Each zone, each line, each fragment and phrase is already designated to a role and given a semantic inflection even before it is placed on the page. But then, its meaning is circumscribed and determined by that place, that role.

Diagrammatic Writing combines these two—the probabilistic compositional techniques of the spatialized poetic work and the highly structured composition of the codex book. It is a fully self-referential work—at least, as much as possible. The book is about its format features, about the graphical relations that provide an armature for meaning that is in itself meaningful. It came into being because my engagement with book design and practice over four decades had always been infused with this understanding, but the understanding had been implicit, a set of rules, rather than explicit, a self-referential description of the operations in play. *Diagrammatic Writing* is the explicit expression of the rule set of graphical relations encoded in the familiar format of the codex book.

The origins of *Stochastic Poetics* were very different. This project was inspired by an experience I had during the first summer I lived in Los Angeles, when I went to a poetry reading at L.A.C.E., a space for contem-

porary art in Hollywood. The night was warm, and the circulation from street to gallery was lively. The crowd for the event cut across the hipster downtown scene; some old regulars and many young people milled in and out. On the sidewalk, a man riding an exercise bike spoke into a microphone, pedaling away and painting canvases while he hawked his wares. A number of impersonators, including Superman and Marilyn, were wandering forlornly, exiled by some whim of the police from the area near Grauman's. A huge fire truck, part of some installation, sat outside, and there were food trucks and other vehicles, traffic of course, and noise, lights, constant motion. Inside the gallery, the storefront space was filled with pseudo-gift-shop paraphernalia, parodic commodities, but for sale all the same, self-consciously critical of the very items they themselves became. Further into the actual exhibition space were installations by three poets, one using Charles Reznikoff's Holocaust testimonials, one invoking the history of slavery and racism in relation to the recent eco-disaster of an oil spill in the Gulf near Louisiana, and another appropriating transcripts from sexual abuse cases as the unedited and unmediated content of works written on the wall in soft putty. The Holocaust works were projected to fit inside the shape of a Hello Kitty profile, and the oil spill was represented by an enormous fall of black, dripping paint almost covering the text on the wall. People were everywhere, and on display stands throughout were cakes decorated to reference celebrities—black and red decorations for O.J. Simpson, white and gold for Liberace, etc. A cook and public art activist had arranged a scavenger hunt that would send volunteers into the neighborhood to forage for ingredients for a dish he would cook when they returned. He was organizing the teams through a microphone and directing them to their tasks while trying to engage the audience with the purpose of the entire foraging-through-food-surplus exercise. Though there was going to be a reading, no chairs were in sight, and the noise, chaotic activity, and sheer density of the psychic atmosphere were overwhelming.

The reading did eventually begin, and I was with old friends, including a very senior critic whose own history involves emigration from Vienna in the years when Hitler's aggression was already being felt. The critic, dedicated to art, aesthetics, poetics, was a living extension of the European elite culture of modernism, sincere in its subscription to the belief in the value of esoteric work. A champion, but unable to hear the poetry being read, or, if seated on the one chair provided out of respect, to see the readers. The noise was impossible. The readings were overshadowed by the event. And it dawned on me that if work pitched at such a high level of emotional intensity—abuse, holocaust, slavery,

ecological disaster—could not gain purchase on an audience, then how could more delicately nuanced observations or formations ever be perceived, recognized even, within the swarming mass of distractions and disregard? Meanwhile, the critic, disappointed and distraught, was run over by the philistine mood, completely crushed and done in by its brutality. Conceptual writing, difficult, resistant, attached to the lineage of the politics of aesthetics, could not even be heard, let alone register any meaningful critical comment or engagement. Thus does negative aesthetics meet its structural impasse. These were the incidents that spawned *Stochastic*. How, I asked myself, how does aesthetic work come to figure against the jealous ground of noise culture? And be perceived? Identified? Given place and value?

Stochastic was undertaken with these issues in mind, but also with a straight-on engagement with the theories of complexity and emergent processes. Convinced that poetics is an emergent activity, a formation that arises out of and against the field of language, I was interested in showing that in graphic form. The coming into and out of configured and meaningful organization—at the level of letter, word, line, stanza, verse—within an ever-shifting field of stochastic processes became the central theme of the project. I staged its printing to enact some of those processes, setting type with a certain negotiation between rules and randomness, wanting to make a work that could not be accounted for by the constraints under which it was composed. These themes connect *Stochastic* with Mallarmé's fascination with chance and configured meaning, with the productive and generative tension between potentiality and probability.

The texts in *Stochastic* include a rewriting and paraphrasing of Aristotle's *Poetics* in which I substitute the words *gravity* and *levity* for *tragedy* and *comedy*. Other appropriated phrases and vocabulary come from texts on stochastic processes, into which references to poetic processes and aesthetic principles and figures are inserted. A narrative that describes the events of the original art event and then poems composed of reworked and misheard snatches of works performed a few months later at a large poetry reading in Los Angeles are juxtaposed in the central signature of the book, which is structured in three movements: the opening announcement of the theme, the full-blown, onstage poetry readings, and the final recapitulation and summation. The themes are distinguished by their fonts and their layout, their graphical treatment, and their sequencing and the separation of the folded leaves into sewn signature, the basic physical groupings of the codex book. The active, generative field of language, as a kind of primal mass of letters, creates a

randomly moving cloud from which words emerge and back into which they dissolve. The graphic demonstration of dissolving boundaries as blurring perceptual and cognitive categories reinforces the themes of the work.

The technical features of the book's production are interesting mainly to printers, since the forms laid onto the press had to be deformed in order to be printed. Set with leads and spacers, which were removed once the lock-up was partly secure, the forms were pressed and pressured into nonalignment. No lines in the book conform to the rules of quadrature that are the fundamental requirements of letterpress. Instead, the lines wander and roll, moving across the page with a certain random motion. Overprinting creates a sense of dynamic motion as well, and the forms were rearranged between print runs so that the movement would appear more dynamic. No two printed pages are the same, and the edition is an entirely and fully inconsistent edition. A bibliographer's dream? Or nightmare . . . Figuring the word against the jealous ground—neither mechanistic nor probabilistic, strictly speaking, but motivated by a humanistic impulse—the work moves toward realization, animism, self-perceiving teleology, to show the combined forces of sentience and sentiment.

In summary, the two works define the poles of my practice, two radically distinct approaches to composition and the graphical semantics of the codex as a spatialized field of production. *Diagrammatic Writing* is a structured exploration of structure. *Stochastic Poetics* uses the volumetric field of the codex as a site to perform the processes of nondeterministic composition that produce the work. Each, as I have said, has precedents in other books I've produced, and each, of course, also resonates with historical works that provide the aesthetic coordinates by which I locate my own practice within a larger field of poetics, aesthetics, and the composition of the book.

Notes

- 1 See also my critical writings on this topic, "The Virtual Codex from Page Space to E-space," *Philobiblon*, 2003, <http://www.philobiblon.com/drucker/>; and many of the texts in *What Is? Nine Epistemological Essays* (Austin, TX: Cuneiform Press, 2013).

- 2 Ezra Pound's completion of Ernest Fenollosa's essay "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry," see: http://www.pileface.com/sollers/IMG/pdf/The_Chinese_Written_Character_As_A_Medium_For_Poetry_Ernest_Fenollosa-Ezra_Pound_.pdf.
- 3 Erik Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and Its Hieroglyphs in European Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
- 4 Robert Greer Cohn's *Mallarmé's Masterwork: New Findings* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1966) remains a milestone. Other useful references include Michael Pierson's edition of *Un Coup de Dés* on vellum with Ptyx (2004) and the recent volume by Anna Arnar, *The Book as Instrument: Stéphane Mallarmé, the Artist's Book, and the Transformation of Print Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
- 5 Marcel Broodthaers, *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard* (Antwerp, Wide White Space Gallery; Cologne: Galerie Michael Werner, 1969).
- 6 For discussions of probability debates, see David Howie, *Interpreting Probability: Controversies and Developments in the Early Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) and Deborah Coen, *Vienna in the Age of Uncertainty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); for more on James Clerk Maxwell, see Johanna Drucker, "Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés* and the Poem and/as Book as Diagram," *Journal of Philosophy: A Cross-Disciplinary Inquiry* 7, no. 16 (2011): 1–13.
- 7 The journal is still in existence and cites its prestigious legacy on the current website, accessed 10/4/14: <http://themonist.org>.