

The Grand Piano: Ten Years After
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There is a problem with meaning; it's only getting worse. How can a reflection among ten authors of *The Grand Piano*, ten years after concluding its publication in ten volumes, six to ten years in the making, concerning six years of a decade two decades past, help in the present? When Language writing emerged, it was a radical critique, an attack even, on the processes of making meaning that we experienced in the distorted present. The rationalizations for the Vietnam War in the 60s and the destruction of anything like a believable public sphere with the Reagan Era in the 80s were proximate motives for our radicalization—we were the agonized middle of that history in the 70s. At its moment of intensest realization about 1978 or 1980, many of us achieved a form of writing that reduced the problem of meaning to the bare matter of the sign, the material text, language as poetic substance. The question then was interpretation: what does the turn to language *mean* if language itself is put forward as an end in itself? I will propose that a kind of short-circuiting resulted, between intention and meaning, on the author's side, and interpretation and meaning, on the reader's. The inadequate popular solution for this dilemma was that "the reader makes meaning," opening the door toward a radical openness of meaning as well as form, the inheritance of the New Americans. My claim is, first, that Language writing continued a prior ethics and aesthetics of "open form" by other means—through material signification or fluidity and indeterminacy of meaning—and second, that our recasting of "open form" continues in the serial, open, non/narrative form of *The Grand Piano*. There are significant moves between each of these moments, but in the larger horizon, our project was designed, implicitly, to make new meanings into the distant present.

That distant present is here and now; could we have anticipated it? This is not simply a matter of retrospective reflection, the tidying up and revision of all that indeterminacy into a kind of destiny. In a prescient moment of our early work, Kit Robinson explored "reading out" in a 1974 poem written after the visiting future Grand Pianists Steve Benson and Carla Harryman in Los Angeles:

7 Days in Another Town

Mesopotamian wind
blows the same way twice.

"Forever"

Two bullet holes:
one in the window
one in the arm.

"Something isn't happening
or isn't going to . . ."

Then, sun,
The Wedge

Writing on his return to San Francisco, Kit explained this parable of Los Angeles through a series of glosses: "Like I said the bullet hole in the window was really made by a pebble Larry threw up there to engage the attention of Rene Ricard who was talking on the phone. The force of the wind drove it through. The one in the arm is from another of [Chris] Burden's stunts" (he had himself shot in the arm as a performance piece). This condensed gloss of LA glam/art culture mimics Ezra Pound's "dichten = condensare," but the reading is in reverse: *condensare* to expansion, centripetal out of centrifugal. A process of autobiographical "reading out" from the material sign continued in our group, with Ron Silliman's *Ketjak* and Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*. I investigated the prose/poetry dyad in my 1980 sequence 1–10 (anticipating the decades motif of *The Grand Piano*). Later, Ron explored "reading outs" in his parallel text for *Albany*, while Steve Benson and Ted Pearson enact a continuous form of "reading out." With the important corollary that any work of import written by any of us might have been written by another, we were primed to write *Leningrad*, *Bad History*, *Adorno's Noise*, or *The Grand Piano*. Kit's poem was an *event* of meaning, with meanings yet to come.