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## INTERVIEWS

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## Bookforum talks to Wayne Koestenbaum

## Felix Bernstein



Ludwig Wittgenstein noted that in representational writing, “one thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing’s nature . . . and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it.” In Wayne Koestenbaum’s “trance journals”—*The Pink Trance Notebooks* (2015) and the newly released *Camp Marmalade*—both the frame *and* the off-frame are folded into his trans-perspectival impressions. *Camp Marmalade* deep-focuses on the color orange, but like the best procedural works, the tangents are as crucial as the concept. References kaleidoscopically come together with edge-by-edge precision. In one

breath, juxtaposing opera stars with avant-garde artists from Sturtevant to Cage to “William-Carlos-Williams-influenced / arm hair,” to Wagnerian dicks and a “cut-up dad.” This “schvitzing polyphony in spiked heels” uncannily rhymes Nuremberg with Peter Altenberg and cruises the lost orifices of memory—the “kitchen’s orange bar stools— / loving orange but knowing orange is vulgar or wrong or us.” Never neglecting the “delirium of not knowing / how to frame or contextualize / the process,” as when he writes— “nervous that / my method of describing / AIDS isn’t the proper method.” We are never out of step, or out of breath, with his coming in and out of reference and fervor. Koestenbaum has a “fluency in jaggedness,” and his style of surplus “lunches on his own oblivion.” The coming and going of each icon is illumined with startling vividness. But his mythopoeic drive is coupled with a photographic attunement to daily life and minor affects—*Marmalade* starts with the anxious observation, “guy said ‘fag’ / under his breath as I walked by.” Koestenbaum’s reflexivity is uncanny and gathers pathos from the very task of writing, which for him is tantamount to assembling a self. As Foucault put it, being gay “is not to identify with the psychological traits and the visible masks of the homosexual, but to try to define and develop a way of life.” This book presents a hallucinatory glimmer of what that life might be without granting precedence to any single method. Rather, his hyper-awareness leads to haunting meditations on the stakes of experimental writing—“What good is our knowledge / of how to sift, if / we can no longer / find the halo / whose luminous enigma / drove us to divide / useful from useless droplets?” The question of composition is never extricated from the composition itself, in his meta-theatrical style that recalls the dexterity of John Ashbery’s *Flow Chart*. Koestenbaum cracks “the fossil carapace of ‘writer’” and shows behind the authorial edifice an assemblage of durations with operatic simultaneity. After all the references pass, the text itself becomes an iconic figure, moving rhythmically across the pages with a singularly Koestenbaumian time signature.

Your first teaching job was at a yeshiva, where you taught late Henry James to high school students. And while you're hardly a religious person, your work in cultural criticism overtly explores the devotional—high fidelity to an icon plus your exegesis. But in *The Pink Trance Notebooks* and *Camp Marmalade*, the

**icons are much more dispersed and infinitely recombined. The exegesis becomes autotelic and impressionistic—taking on a world of its own. By the end of the book, you offer a mystical theory of the halo in art, but all specific references disappear. This feels very much in the radically aestheticized Midrashic spirit of Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* and Derrida’s *Glas*. Throughout, there is a blurred distinction between dreamed and real encounters with the countless names in the book. Why, then, no footnotes?**

I’m seeking shade or protection under poetry’s umbrella. In one antique version of poetry, the genre was so pure that it didn’t need footnotes. Or, once upon a time, in 1922, there were footnotes, and then ... they were shoved off-stage. I wrote my undergraduate thesis on Ezra Pound. His unavailable footnotes are a constant imaginary companion to any reader of the *Cantos*. I like the glamour of a phrase shorn from its context. I’ve always been interested in allusion and name-dropping. Frank O’Hara’s poems don’t have footnotes. In *Camp Marmalade*, I push namedropping to an extreme—sometimes six names per page. Some are slightly fictionalized, so not even Google-able.

**The “not-Google-able” nature of the book is part of the delightful obscenity of it. The references are all obscene, in the sense of off-stage—pointed to, but ultimately inexistent. It’s the opposite of the information overload of digital culture, since your references point to a private, untenable knowledge. Even your early fondness for orange is remembered as an obscene attachment and identification, “orange is vulgar or wrong or us.”**

I don’t contextualize or explain the names; I don’t render them knowable or cozy for a reader. Unglossed worship is my impulse, though I used to worry about performing worship without an object that could be countenanced by other people as worthy of worship; in fact, I often chose objects not quite worthy of the amount of worship and exegesis that I gave them. I love your reading of the *Camp Marmalade* as untethered exegesis. Hats off to the Jewish exegetic tradition. My great-great-grandfather translated the first books of the Bible into Yiddish. I do have some sort of OCD, or a reverse ADD: I pay *too much* attention to one object.

**The notebooks parody, and openly loathe, the strife of intellectual systematization. You write, “I despise / always pretending to be an / intellectual rather than / an assembler.” And while the notes accrue meaning over time, there is certainly no thesis. Your prose books, however, often have a sweeping, comprehensive systematic nature; whether it’s cruising the expansive canon of opera in *The Queen’s Throat*, or nailing each shot of Harpo Marx in *The Anatomy of Harpo Marx*. How does this project differ from similar explorations of yours in critical prose?**

My systems, from the beginning, had a built-in preposterousness and hyperbole. I’ve never aligned with a recognizable system that other people practice. I lack macro-vision, the overall view. But I like the grandeur afforded by coherence’s trappings: its sonorous crescendo.

**As in Gertrude Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditation*, your authorship is being assembled while being dissembled—and disassembled. Reference becomes as important as sound, and every thought is split into atomistic units—there are cut-up fathers, cut-up movie stars, and cut-up colors. Even the thought of how to recombine or recut a certain phrase becomes a very part of the “delirium.” How would you describe the process of recording and retransmitting the external world in the notebooks?**

*Camp Marmalade* renders fossil imprints, scratches, as in Michel Leiris’s *Scratches*. “Scratches” implies a kind of interpersonal violence, a poetics of laceration. The buried

references, the unfootnoted objects, have left scratches in my linguistic unconscious. My trance books are, I hope, an accurate yet artful transcription or map of that scratch-pattern. While writing *Camp Marmalade*, I read a haunting article about the scratch marks made by gas chamber victims when they were dying. I'm not dealing with agony and atrocity overtly, but you brought up Jewishness, and the book's title summons the shadow of the camps, however ambiguously and obliquely.

**Scratching is a really potent metaphor for the intrusive nature of references, how the obscene is folded into the work, but never in a neutral way. Even though so much of *Camp Marmalade* seems private, you're also recording moments that convey an interpersonal shock. And even though figures shift so quickly, certain emblems and visages seem to pierce through.**

The off-stage obscene is important, since this book is a kind of autobiographical poetry that is so hinged on cultural objects and so decentered from a story about "me" that everything is pushed off-stage. The obscene, the personal, and the sampled are all, I hope, on the same frequency—"outside the room." Although the book houses my voice, the "I" is kept to a minimum through syntactical abbreviation and quick splicing. I call my compacted clusters "noun clumps": "I can't help my / clumpiness, noun-clump / rather than clarity." Clumpiness fruitfully confuses narrative coherence.

**Yes, your noun clumps serve the function that ellipsis typically would and create a paradoxical enigma of vivid condensation. A reader could first assume that the book must be full of things you like or things that tasted good, early formative tastes, what you call "the search for lost orifices"—the Minute Maid frozen orange juice, the kitchen's orange barstool. But at a certain point, the overwhelming fount of references breaks the bough of fact. After all, Proust substituted the madeleine for what had been toasted bread. How much of the book conveys your own taste?**

In the trance mode, writing in a more limber fashion, I was freed from my likes and dislikes. All sorts of things occurred to me just because I knew the words. That became the liking: vocabulary itself. In my studio, my paints are my lexicon, but because I'm not a trained artist, a happy sensation of lack surrounds me: I relish childishness. Writing *Camp Marmalade* I felt the fullness of language as an in-dwelling possession. And I was more attached to that fullness than to any specific topic.

**How would you describe the kind of wordplay that occurs in the books? The references are so unstable, and the signifiers are not linked by any structural procedure, or constraint. So are you following a chain of pungent signs?**

Yeah, pungent signs. I've always exaggerated my love of stars so I could catalyze the kind of interpretive work I enjoy doing. And I've always pretended to like guys more than I do so I could get my homotextual work going. I like the bit of star that is stranded on the beach of the star's name. But the star can go. I mention "Vic Mature's / nature-lovin' porch phase." I don't care about porches. I don't care about Victor Mature. I can't even picture Vic, or his porch.... And yet, Vic is a star whose italicized gorgeousness makes him eligible for the gay signification game, and his last name is "Mature"—so I'll make him mine. I'm going to throw him in the poem, and put him on the porch. It's kind of an insta-cinema but a cinema of attractions rather than plot. I talk about Elliott Gould and how I wanted to see Gould naked. That's true, I would like to see 1968 pictures of Elliott Gould naked, and I did spend half an hour Googling in search of pictures. That's true, but it's not so true that I could write a memoir about it. My Gould truth is accidental, not continuous.

**Yes, or the abjective truth that William James spoke of in his classes, according to Gertrude Stein. I wonder how you see the book relating to the tactile world,**

**since, as with Stein, there are so many descriptions of objects that are nearly exact, almost familiar, and yet never naturalistic.**

Stein makes the things she says about the physical world true through her clarity in handling words. She puts the words down on the sentence's table with such a justness and adequacy that the words fulfill their grammatical function and their "meaning" function with more fullness than we usually get in life from any realm—philosophical, conversational, spiritual, nutritional, or gastric. She satisfies the human need to see the sentence handled properly, even if what is designated is both there and *not there* at the same time. And I want my poetry to have a concise no-nonsense tactility and definitiveness of enunciation—for each word to have its characteristic look and personality. And then it's over. After the words are put into their proper places, I don't have any more responsibility. We all have learned from Stein—and from pre-Stein authors, whom we read retroactively through the lens of her exactitude—that there's a kind of ethics in laying the semantic goods honestly on the table. The theoretical statements that I make in the book have a clam-like, holy-fool preposterousness, but I think they're sort of true.

**The convex reflexivity of the book is really striking, as when you write of "language forming / texture, not explication." You bring into focus your own forms of focusing, the texture of analysis becomes an object, and you perform a close-up on the apparatus of close-ups. And you end up with what you call "noun-clump rather than clarity," and you end up with an abstract impressionism, where the "noun replaces thing." This very process is dramatized in a passage from *Camp Marmalade*: "too tired to give the context / that might make the <sup>step</sup> / detail matter, and now its / undescribed context falls / murdered and neglected / into the pit."**

That passage describes the process of language coming to me—first as a command or a call or an offer from another corner of the brain. Long ago I read Julian Jaynes's *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, which puts forth a theory that Moses and the other prophets heard voices because the two chambers of the human mind in that era were isolated from each other. I don't know if that's actually true, scientifically, but I have this sensation, while writing, that language is coming from a different part of my brain, and that the language is knocking on the door between the compartments. Most of the time I ignore the knock because I'm too lazy, or I don't have a writing implement at the ready. While writing my trance books, I was open to all offers. The language would come forward not as a story but a grouping of words with an implicit joke. And the joke part of the offer is important because the deeper matter would be hidden by the joke, which handily converts disparate stories into one noun clump. A joke is two things that don't belong together suddenly converging in a crux.

**You often pay careful attention to the timbre of what is "outside the room." Like in *Hotel Theory*, the murmuring, clanging that inspired James too—when he referred to himself and his siblings as "hotel children." Obscenity plays out for you in aural and visual ways, not simply sexual.**

I wore a pink jacket to my yeshiva job interview. I was barely even gay. I was only twenty-two. As a member of the yeshiva's secular faculty, I was certainly "obscene." My pinkness was obscene. I think that a part of oneself can gather gravity by being offstage. And that may be what Stein calls "bottom nature" and what others call "destiny" or "predestination."

**I like this notion of destiny as being in the wings of the stage or never quite recoverable. Is there an ontological aspect of the closet that can't be dispelled by coming out—that remains always in the dark, out of reach?**

In the more than twenty years since the *Epistemology of the Closet* was published and lodged "closet" for us in a comprehensible space, can there be a closet or an obscene

anymore? But there are new closets ... anything without a footnote becomes a new closet. You create new closets by saying something incomprehensible, unpopular, illegible even to oneself.... In *Camp Marmalade*, I'm tracking forms of sexual desire, and I can't quite figure out where they all are or which ones are genuine or which are mine or which ones are theatricalized or faked. But it seems the new closets become different sexual scenes that aren't quite realizable, just as most things in *120 Days of Sodom* can't happen. In my trance project, I'm testing out sexual scenarios, obscene scenarios, that I would call new closets. Like incest with oneself, which preoccupies me in *Camp Marmalade*.

**Is there a wish fulfillment to the serendipitous, uncanny meetings played out in the book? Or is it a nightmare?**

Definitely wish fulfillment. I want more congregation, more orgy. I am thrilled by casting ... like "Featuring Virginia Woolf as Daisy Miller!" As if the originally chosen star was canceled because she was uninsurable so they had to find someone else. Think about inter-textuality along the model of casting. Think about dating, matchmaking. Rock Hudson needs a wife. Casting is round robin, or a revolving doorway, providing contiguity between star bodies.

**A kind of randomized celebrity-cruising machine?**

Dating apps were originally based on geographical proximity, which was more important than desirability. Types and tribes would enter later—but the first thing was the *nearby*. That was the supremely desirable fact! That's how smart pre-Internet queer cruising already was: that *nearby* was always the most important thing. I'm finished with type. I think type is the tyranny of our times.

**The book plays out a lot of fantasies of these proximate, nearby junctures. You parody and indulge the clinical stereotype of homosexual adhesiveness and doubling—through images of oil paint on oil paint, brother-brother couplings, likeness, twinness, but the relations are always non-identical, never completely overlapping; resemblance without identity.**

Oil paint feels good on top of oil paint—they're both oil paints but they're different colors, and have different drying times. Oil paints are never really dry—they're always in a state of melding. Each movement of the top layer disturbs the bottom layer.

**Doubling can also lead to nightmare scenarios in the book—"he loved my / double but why didn't he realize / that I was the double, and give / me the voluptuous attentions / he gave my twin?" So what about the sibling rivalry of all these doubles?**

Can I just say those lines are the story of my life? I don't know if it's the story of your life and everybody's life, but feeling robbed of my claims on identity is a huge theme of my erotic imagination. I can easily see myself as a double and see myself being snubbed as a double. My envy is based on the delusion that the person I'm envying is my double. I don't attempt to have a clear self-image. So my conception of self in the world is vague—plastic and changeable, prone to vanishing or enlarging depending on the circumstance.

**The book deals with self-hatred, glimpses of the self in movies or mirrors, as well as quotidian homophobia, and unrequited masochistic love: "men who demote me / are the ones I desire." What is your relationship to the identity of the wimp, the schlemiel, the butt of the joke, that comes up frequently in the books?**

In my character and in my destiny I'm the schlemiel: genetic typecasting. I feel patriotic to wimp identity. I wish to defend wimps and eroticize them.

**In a recent set of live and recorded musical works, your piano/vocal “lounge act,” you tell sex stories while playing Scriabin. There’s a prodigious difficulty to the not-quite-tonal music, but also humorous relief in your monologues. I’m wondering about how trance writing, which is associated with interiority, relates to your public performances. When does the thought of audience enter into it for you?**

In my vaudevillian lounge-act performances, the nervousness, stress, and exhibitionism resembles the sensations I experience while privately writing. I noticed the other day when writing in my journal that my palms began to sweat when words started coming. The public performances enact a stage-fright structure that is built into writing. In the book, I use the phrase “why all musicians must be lonely,” which alludes to Schoenberg’s essay “How One Becomes Lonely.” His answer—you become lonely because you become atonal. You *must* grow atonal; that’s the direction history moves. Cabaret, whether tonal or not, isn’t just lonely self-immolation. Cabaret catharsis happens in Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire* or in Alban Berg’s *Lulu*: illegible but visceral. In Stein, too, the more anti-referential aspects of her work line up nicely with pornographic referents.

**There’s very minute neurotic fluctuations in the text about how long to hold a hug, when to put in or erase a word. The cut-up procedure is its own strife, so I wonder about the agony and pleasure of the assemblage as a task.**

Visual collage is not an art form that I’ve deeply explored, partly because of an anxiety about gluing—how long to hold the material down. I feel nervous and uncertain about the moment of adhesion. I recently asked a stranger who gives out free hugs, “How long are your hugs?” And he said “ten seconds.” And I was thinking, if you’re in that hug does it feel like a long hug? Ten seconds is kind of long. When I took a silk-screening course, the thing that made me most anxious was trying to figure out how long to hold the image down in the darkroom, when you burn a photo onto the screen. In any process of assemblage, however seemingly casual and slapdash, one must be sensitive to the materials and their compatibility.

**Even more than collage the notebooks seem pointillist. This is what Georges Seurat termed “chromoluminarism”—the maximization of light by combining colors through divided points rather than by mixing. And in the notebooks, the vivid adjacency of references boosts their pungency. As when you write, “translate light / blue chalk of red brick,” we get a synchronous field of multiple colors rather than diachronic narration of the world. Do you think of this as painterly writing?**

Well, orange pigment is the purple prose of painting. I think of my *Marmalade* mode as painterly because different objects with separate destinies, separate fields of reference, are seen simultaneously by the viewer, when each page is beheld as its own unit. Nothing in the book ever lasts long enough—or dominates sufficiently—to prevent one page from eavesdropping on the adjacent page’s conversation.

**What is this book’s relationship to process and chance; order and disorder? It feels neither like stream of consciousness nor a constraint procedure, but it clearly has a method.**

It’s a simple operation—chronology. *Camp Marmalade* is a distillation of my notebooks from 2013, preserved in order with all the line breaks. When I’m first writing, the breaks are simply there as geographical conveniences; I don’t think of them as line breaks. They came from the narrow size of the notebooks in which I wrote, longhand, the original draft. I was inspired by Thoreau, whose journals are online, in facsimile, and in a typescript that maintains his prose’s layout, with all the line breaks intact. My procedural constraint was largely to obey the order in which the thought-clusters appeared to me, without radical reorganizing. The ending, however, I wrote as a coda, and I paid a different, continuous

attention to its elaboration of a single conundrum: the halo and the sieve. Revising the notebooks, I treated the original draft as a fetishized dead-sea scroll. My project is documentary and autobiographical, but involving the dispassionateness of procedural writing. So the mood is Oulipian but the material is documentary—in the tradition of Bernadette Mayer’s *Midwinter Day* or David Antin’s talk-poems. Antin laid out his talks on the page with a prosodic decisiveness that pays fealty to the tempo of the original performances. Mayer and Antin put themselves forward as subjects for experimental procedures; this is what I want poetry to be—putting your unconscious and linguistic fluidities on the surface. I improvise the words in my “lounge act” performances, though the results would have been more comestible, or conventionally sensible, if I’d prepared the words in advance. My pedagogical aim, in my “lounge act” performances and in my two trance books, is to encourage others to improvise. I will put myself through the difficulties of onstage improvisation, not because I think it makes a better impression, but because I want to provide a model of how to practice: I want to prove that it is possible—and that it is desirable—to leap, to risk, to guess, to play, to hazard, to throw, to balance, to fall.

***Felix Bernstein is an artist and author of Burn Book (Nightboat Books, 2016).***



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