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What Is?: Nine Epistemological Essays

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***What Is?: Nine Epistemological Essays,* by Johanna Drucker**

Victoria, TX: Cuneiform Press, 2014. 127 pp., references, index. HB. \$29.95.

Reviewed by Dennis Yi Tenen

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Johanna Drucker's work occupies a special place in the varied landscape of media studies, art criticism, and digital humanities. Drucker writes powerfully on visual culture, on digital aesthetics, on graphic design, and on print history. Her experience as an artist and a book-maker has always given her an original, grounded perspective on the occasionally all-too-ethereal vistas of theory.

What Is?, Drucker's latest book, is no exception. Within the space of nine succinct essays, Drucker unfolds a critical intervention, rectifying inflationary rhetoric on writing and technology. The essays proceed from micro- to macro-levels of analysis, striking at the core of our understanding of letters, words, documents, books, and textuality. Holding these nesting particulates together is an argument that, at times, reads like an inspired manifesto, proclaiming that words are embodied and material but also ephemeral and unresolved.

Drucker's often wry theoretical correctives are well supported by attentive examinations of related texts and artifacts. In this way, the reader will discover and rediscover the graphic novels of Art Spiegelman and Chris Ware, the unsolved mysteries of the Voynich manuscript, the canvasses of Ed Ruscha, the font algorithms of Donald Knuth, and the combinatorial poetics of Raymond Queneau.

When responding to an argument about the materiality of language, it is appropriate to mention the physical properties of the volume at hand. *What Is?* is a well-crafted thing, printed on thick stock, with the signatures neatly sewn through the fold. It was a pleasure to hold and to read. My copy of the volume is thoroughly marked with exclamation points both in affirmation and in constructive dissent. To my surprise, I found myself on the even more materialistic side of Drucker's already palpable materialism. "What is a letter?" she asks. What is a word, a text, a document, or a book? Her answers remind us that all these ideas are also things, that they are matter, but

also that they gain meaning in action, as practice and performance. I could not agree more.

Words, sentences, texts, documents, and books are not anything in themselves. They can only *be* in relation to specific communities of practice and performance, which have their own operational definitions, discoverable in observation. These beliefs are not always universal nor do they always constitute a coherent ontology. For example, it seems futile to rail against the “immateriality” of code, as is claimed by some in computer science. The very advancement of Alan Turing’s universal machine was to conjure up an abstract model capable of emulating all other possible machines. Such abstract and disembodied universalism stands in direct opposition to the material specificity of a painter or a printmaker, whose devices are recognizable by their idiosyncratic trace. But, there is no reason for us to insist on the identity of concepts between these worlds. A document will mean one thing to a poet, another thing to an attorney, and yet another thing to a software engineer, just as words and books mean different things to different communities of practitioners. Material properties of the book alone are necessary but insufficient grounds for our understanding of its meaning-making. We also need to know the rules of the game, so to speak: for whom these things are, when, why, how, and how much.

To be fair, the lithe edge of Drucker’s volume must have been made to provoke rather than to provide complete answers or thick descriptions. I think readers will also see their margins fill with notes, ideas, and exclamation points. Drucker’s work plays the role of a fellow traveler and a thoughtful interlocutor. It is likely to spark numerous generative conversations on the page and in the classroom, making *What Is?* a good fit for course use, probably in a graduate or upperclassman setting. Therein, you will find the beginnings of a ready-made reader for a course on book design, print history, or literary theory, a reader replete with threads to be unraveled during the semester. For now, the volume will find a cherished space on my bookshelf, right between Jacques Bertin’s *Semiology of Graphics* and Lisa Gitelman’s *Paper Knowledge*.