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*The Ideas, Identity and Art of Daniel Spoerri: Contingencies
and Encounters of an 'Artistic Animator' by Leda
Cempellin (review)*

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(Review)

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202 a broader debate about how we communicate (by words, texts, images, face-to-face encounters) and about literature's putative or possible instrumentality. Emre concludes with a provocative rejoinder and challenge to both "weak theory" and what Jeffrey Williams deemed "the new modesty in literary criticism." Along the way, *Paraliterary* attempts to strike a delicate balance between readings of traditional literary texts and historical accounts of sociologies of reading. It almost always succeeds on this count; its paratactic structures are welcome and illuminating, and Emre is conscious of the difficulty in positing "micro- and macrosociological" claims at once, as she does (179). At specific moments, her narrative thread gets buried under her own ample and rich evidence: one wishes for more narrative, less description at a few points, so that the scale of claims and evidence are better aligned. But a small price to pay for the admirably far-reaching work this book executes marvelously. Emre's prose is elegant and convincing, and this book will be required reading for scholars of the postwar world's overlapping, incomplete, and understudied interpretive communities.

Note

1. *The Simpsons*, "The Fat and the Furriest," episode 318 (episode 5, season 15), written by Joel H. Cohen, Fox network, November 30, 2003.

***The Ideas, Identity and Art of Daniel Spoerri: Contingencies and Encounters of an 'Artistic Animator'.* Leda Cempellin. Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2017. Pp. 256. \$58.00 (cloth).**

Reviewed by Roger Rothman, Bucknell University

I suspect that Daniel Spoerri is not a household name among readers of *Modernism/modernity*. This is a shame because he was an artist especially attuned to the sorts of interdisciplinarity this journal takes as its core concern. He began his career as a dancer, then turned to poetry, and then to object production. And in almost every instance, the work he produced was itself multidisciplinary: his poems are visual, his sculptures literary. But Spoerri is known almost exclusively within art-historical circles, and even there his reception has been limited to but a single body of work, his so-called "tableaux-pièges" (snare-pictures), in which the remains of a meal—dirtied dinner plates, emptied glasses, used stemware, napkins, and a tablecloth—are glued to the table's surface then hung horizontally on the wall. Indeed, for the bulk of his career, Spoerri has been known only as "that guy who hangs tables on the wall."

As the first English-language monograph on Spoerri's long and varied career, Leda Cempellin's new book should go a long way toward drawing Spoerri out of the margins of art history. Her book offers a richly detailed account of an artist who, on account of his multidisciplinary, has for decades eluded scholarly consideration. He was born Daniel Isaac Feinstein, in Romania, in 1930. His father, a Jew who had converted to Christianity, was arrested and murdered by the Nazis in 1941. His mother, Lydia Spoerri, a Christian, was a Swiss citizen and she was able to emigrate with her son a year later. Cempellin doesn't linger long on Spoerri's childhood, but she does propose that Spoerri's absent father, as well as the geographical disruption and trauma of his childhood years, played a role in the artist's lifelong engagement with memory, movement, and death.

Cempellin's book is cleverly structured. Rather than frame Spoerri's career within the confines of his renowned tableaux-pièges, the book focuses its attention on the artist's insistently

collaborative process. As the subtitle suggests, Spoerri emerges from these pages as an “artistic animator” rather than an “artist,” by which Cempellin means that Spoerri’s career was devoted to working with others and to helping others make and distribute their own work. As Cempellin asserts early on in the book: “There is not a single artistic venture in which Spoerri acted completely alone” (2). The challenge, then, is how to properly track the career of an artist for whom the work of others is inextricably woven into its fabric. Cempellin takes on the challenge by providing details not only of Spoerri’s work, but of the many artists and writers with whom he collaborated. The story of his collaborations begins with his editorial work on the short-lived but historically significant journal, *Material* (1958–60). *Material* was the first international collection of concrete poetry, and while it managed a limited distribution, it played a significant role in bringing about one of the most widely distributed and influential anthologies of concrete poetry, *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, edited by Spoerri’s good friend, Emmett Williams and published by Dick Higgins’s Something Else Press.

Higgins, a Fluxus artist, also published Spoerri’s justly revered text *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, perhaps the only other work by Spoerri to have achieved a level of widespread recognition matching that of his tableaux-pièges. The *Topo*, as it was known in Fluxus circles, is a model of the artist’s collaborative process. The book began modestly enough, as a textual supplement to a 1962 exhibition of Spoerri’s recent work. An inventory of all eighty items on his kitchen table on the afternoon of October 17, 1961, the catalog also included brief anecdotes, recollections triggered by the mundane objects on the table. Soon after its publication, Williams began to translate it from French into English, while their friend, Robert Filliou, began to supplement Spoerri’s anecdotes with anecdotes of his own. The resulting publication was more than twice the length of its original. Soon after, a German translation appeared, with still more anecdotes, these provided by the Swiss artist Dieter Roth (as well as new anecdotes by Spoerri himself). To this day, the book continues to be re-anecdoted and retranslated, a living testimony to Spoerri’s commitment to the work of art as collaborative object.

Spoerri’s tableaux-pièges were exhibited alongside other Nouveau Réaliste works and thus cemented the artist’s reputation as one of the movement’s central figures. But Cempellin’s account complicates this picture, and ultimately undoes it almost entirely. What emerges most forcefully from Cempellin’s account is the image of an artist far more in tune with the spirit of Fluxus—of collaboration, playfulness, chance, and the ephemeral—than with the movement with which he most immediately associated, Nouveau Réalisme. Founded in 1960 by the critic Pierre Restany, Nouveau Réalisme was the name for a loose assemblage of artist—including Yves Klein, Jean Tinguely, and Niki de Saint Phalle—for whom the Duchampian legacy of the readymade object as work of art was the source of new poetics of the everyday.

Cempellin has organized the book into six chapters, and consigned both the tableaux-pièges and the *Topo* to a single chapter. This effectively draws attention away from his most well-known works and towards his less well-studied projects. Particularly illuminating is the chapter on Spoerri’s myriad interactions with Fluxus artists—not only Higgins, Filliou, and Williams, but also Arthur (“Addi”) Køpcke, whose gallery in Copenhagen was among the first to exhibit Spoerri’s work, and Ray Johnson, whose mail art played a crucial role in redefining both material and distributional practices in the fifties and sixties. Similarly revelatory, and of particular significance to contemporary practices, is Cempellin’s discussion of Spoerri’s museum-based projects, all of which sought to transform the viewing experience in ways that prefigure the contemporary work of artists like Fred Wilson, Tino Sehgal, and Mark Dion.

Cempellin is insistent, however, that Spoerri’s work belongs to modernism, not postmodernism, and it will require the work of other scholars to more fully comprehend the relationship between Spoerri’s practices and those who are making use of them in the present. Nevertheless, Cempellin’s text shows us an artist very much at the threshold of the postmodern (Cempellin refers to Spoerri’s work as “late modern”), at the dawning of the network society (Manuel Castells

204 makes a brief appearance in the book, in fact). Network theorists would be inclined to refer to Spoerri as a “broker,” a figure who plays the crucial role of bridging otherwise disconnected networks. Indeed, this may well be the artist’s most lasting achievement: to have responded to the critique of modernist authorship by ramifying authorship such that the universe of artistic production is a potentially unending process of collaborative creation. This, it seems to me, is the promise inherent in Spoerri’s project, and one that is richly detailed in Cempellin’s text.

If I have one quibble with Cempellin’s book it is that, though meticulously researched and richly informed by interviews with the artist, it does not provide an introduction with which to situate the author’s unique perspective within the context of the established scholarship. References to other accounts of Spoerri’s work are woven throughout the book, but without an explicit statement up front it is difficult to distinguish Cempellin’s interpretive framework from those who precede her. Rather than have Spoerri’s longtime personal assistant, Barbara Räderscheidt, provide the book’s Introduction it would have been more productive to have had Cempellin frame the project herself. At the same time, however, there is something subversively Spoerri-esque about inserting the voice of someone else into what is conventionally a single-authored text. Though I find it less than fully satisfying in this particular instance, the incorporation of other voices into the book’s structure and argument works remarkably well in the case of Cempellin’s footnotes, which include a handful of reflections by a man named Nicholas Curry. Curry isn’t a friend of Spoerri’s. Rather, he is the copyeditor assigned to Cempellin by Vernon Press. That Cempellin would find it appropriate to include Curry’s comments on her text and to credit him by name, is a wonderful tribute to the collaborative generosity at the heart of Spoerri’s career.

***The Chatter of the Visible: Montage and Narrative in Weimar Germany.* Patrizia C. McBride. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017. Pp. 246. \$90.00 (cloth); \$39.95 (paper); \$39.95 (eBook).**

Reviewed by Thomas O. Haakenson, California College of the Arts

The Chatter of the Visible is a dense, sophisticated engagement that focuses on montage in relation to narrative in Weimar Germany. McBride’s foray into montage is far from the reductive analysis of this complex artistic form to which scholars in many fields have grown accustomed. Rather, the book represents a significant contribution to narrative theory in its own right. Through McBride’s deft, thoughtful encounters with early twentieth-century montage, she opens a chiasm of critical possibility in other arenas as well. Reserving the bulk of her sophisticated, potent prose for an unpacking of narrative, she has created what can best be described as a stand-alone assessment that also serves as an excellent companion to the study of montage in fields beyond German Studies.

The book approaches the relationship of montage and narrative by focusing on a discrete series of events and objects. *The Chatter of the Visible* begins with a lengthy discussion of the relationship between montage and narrative at historical points of transition as well as in relation to key examples of montage. Following a meaty, lengthy Introduction, which includes montage-like segments offset by bullet points and focused on particular manifestations, the text transitions to more sustained encounters.

In the chapters that form the body of the book, McBride focuses on deft re-readings of some of the most seminal ideas from Walter Benjamin’s essay “Die Erzähler: Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows” (*The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov*) as well as “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit” (*The Work of Art*