

Introduction

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For thirty-odd years, novelist and critic Ronald Sukenick has actively participated in the reshaping of the American literary tradition. His has been for not one but two generations among the strongest, most creative, and most intelligent voices insisting that fiction can no longer perform its traditional functions in the contemporary age, that in an ever more dynamic world fiction can no longer rely on conventions. Of the many American writers to emerge in the late 1960s—what in his essay for this collection Charles Harris calls a “watershed [moment] in contemporary American fiction”—Ronald Sukenick is one of the very most important.

He has published six novels, three collections of short fiction, four books of nonfiction/theory (and played a pivotal role in the creation and growth of the publishing houses the Fiction Collective and FC2, as well as the journals the *American Book Review* and *Black Ice Magazine*). Distinguishing Sukenick’s texts: their constant struggle to open language, metaphors, and form—to take the seams out of writing before restitching it in ways that are truly novel. As a result, Sukenick’s revolutionary work “comes closer to the dissolving fragmentary nature of lived experience, [and] its lack of finality and closure” than perhaps anything written before it (Tatham 2).

Frequently *too much* for our usual categories, Sukenick’s books resist labels (constantly challenging Sukenick critics to come up with neologisms that *will* fit). They juggle storytelling at the same time as they consider artistic and aesthetic questions, which they do while raising and acting out theoretical speculations that emerge at the same time as political topics that impinge on personal concerns (and this in all his

books, fiction and non). Containing fragmented, nonlinear narratives, recurrent self-reflexivity, typographical play, fictions within fictions, experiments in mixed-media and graphic designs, and an insistent blurring of boundaries between fiction and “the real,” they are knotted and complicated books, and the best way to trace their threads is by seeing the big picture—integrating studies that grapple with all of Sukenick’s fiction and nonfiction, and maybe even some of his “real” life.

With the partial exception of Jerzy Kutnik’s 1986 study of Sukenick and Federman, nothing before *Musing the Mosaic* has taken such a comprehensive view.¹ This is in part because—although revered in certain circles—Sukenick has never drawn broad attention. And this is in part because, at times, he’s not only *too much* but *way too much*—too unusual, too challenging, and too contrary in his undermining of the idea of the book as traditionally conceived. His texts frequently subvert every expectation, narrative and otherwise, a reader might bring to them, as well as the very systems of rational thought, language, and categories supporting critical analysis and a wider discussion of his work. Like a joke one either “gets” or doesn’t, Sukenick’s texts speak to a certain mindset or mood, and a willingness to play along, and this they haven’t fully received.

Often, Sukenick’s books so deeply offend the average sensibility that they revolt and repel. Several years ago, in a senior seminar, one of my female students claimed that being assigned 98.6—and having to read its portrayal of a rape scene—left her feeling violated. Fortunately, she went on to discuss several reasons why Sukenick might want his texts to confront readers as they do. It seems, however, that too few readers—and even potential critics—take that extra step.

Although it’s unfortunate that certain factors have marginalized Sukenick, some advantages come from the deferral of a far-reaching, comprehensive study of his work. Coming out in 2003, this collection can effectively examine Sukenick’s importance to American letters while also stressing how the protean and interdisciplinary attitude developed in large part by Sukenick, and which we’ve come to know as postmodernism, is not only alive and kicking, but perhaps more expansive than anyone imagined it could be.

There’s been much talk of the death of postmodernism. Even Sukenick declared it a goner in recent years. Declaring postmodernism dead, however, is about as easy and effective as defining it, which few have had luck doing, and these few because they have perspectives open to indeterminacy. Among these, whatever his recent words, Sukenick must be counted, if not via more literal attempts to “define” postmodernism, then through his texts’ performances of a pomo atti-

tude. What is this pomo attitude? It's an attitude that embraces contradiction. It's an attitude, as Sukenick argues in his most recent book, *Narralogues*, that believes we must use fiction as a medium for telling the truth, which is by its very nature (truth, that is) a provisional beast. It's an attitude that wants to cross borders between genres and disciplines and traditions and texts and lives, and it's an attitude that is ever increasingly more necessary and inescapable.

Why necessary and inescapable? In a contemporary moment shaped by the shallow and inebriating cultural logic of spectacle and simulation (a postmodernism of sorts, to be sure, but not exactly the pomo one would associate with Sukenick), Sukenick's texts exemplify how writing can be "the blunt instrument of power" rather than hollow facsimile (*Narralogues* 5). Their form of imaginative writing provides, as Sukenick himself says, "a way of salvaging experience from overbearing and intrusive discourses whose aim [is] to manipulate one's sense of the world in somebody else's interest" (5). As the kind of reflective discourse that demands from the reader an interactive response not generated in narrative as entertainment, they, and fictions like them, can again take their place among what Sukenick calls "serious discourses of knowledge in our culture" (6).

These are goals toward which Sukenick has always worked. Several years ago, Paul Maltby labeled Sukenick's work dissident fiction, feeling that its primary function is to expose and struggle against the ideologies and conceptual limits of the restrictive postmodern language modes of late capitalism. Marcel Cornis-Pope has made similar arguments, claiming that Sukenick's texts operate as "revisionistic exercises of cultural imagination . . . questioning our perceptual and discursive systems, reinventing the rules by which reality is projected" (182). Both Maltby's and Cornis-Pope's discussions also agree with Charles Russell's claim that the implicit ideal of Sukenick's fictions:

Is a state of pure presentness. More directed against the constraints of the past than positing an ideal future of significant difference, the postmodern work is rarely concerned with an aesthetics of sustained development. In fact, it is unable to foster such an aesthetics, since any rigorously ordered work must be subject to the same process of demystification of established meaning that generated the original creative impulse. (257)

Sukenick's texts, in other words, don't do the work of *The Novel*. They do not aspire to represent a rational reality or a psychological

subject; they instead see the novel as a performance of ideas/ideals that can teach readers. As working models of the sort of perpetually present, generative writing (of the self, among other things) described by Maltby, Cornis-Pope, and Russell, Sukenick's work provides useful lessons to his readers, since this kind of "thought is . . . a powerful form of discourse if only because we all make use of it as we create our own life stories from our experience" (*Narralogues* 6).

Sukenick's books, therefore, valuably extend the ways that we can consider our world. They do contain narrative; in fact, Sukenick insists that even his most "argumentative" books cannot work without narrative, as narrative is to him the only "mode of understanding that uniquely is quick enough, mutable enough, and flexible enough to catch the stream of experience" (1). They do not, however, let themselves be taken as only their narratives, and certainly not as narratives that aspire to only mimetic, dramatic representation. According to Sukenick, "When you define fiction by representation you end up confining it to realism at some level and arguing that fiction, as a form of make-believe, is a way of lying to get at the truth, which if not palpably stupid is certainly roundabout and restrictive" (2).

As he goes on to say in *Narralogues*, if one wants to find "truth" in fiction, then there has to be a struggle against the the prevailing belief that while literature must be about "reflecting" reality, it must not in any consequential or thoughtful way practice another kind of "reflection," raising issues, examining situations, and meditating on solutions in ways that generates an "illuminating angle of vision of its own" (3). The novel must give accord to its rhetorical qualities, allowing itself to be an "ongoing persuasive discourse that [is] agonistic, sophistic, sophisticated, fluid, unpredictable, rhizomatic, affective, inconsistent and even contradictory, improvisational, and provisional in its argument toward contingent resolution that can only be temporary" (1). In this way, a fiction becomes like any other discourse. You would not say that an argument represents anything other than the argument, and so with fiction.

A more detailed explanation of Sukenick's theories of fiction begins this collection. Steve Tomasula's piece, "Taking the Line for a Walk," examines Sukenick's 1985 collection of critical essays, *In Form: Digressions on the Act of Fiction*, in order to understand Sukenick's early sense of the place of the novel—what it could mean—during "postModernism," which Tomasula places between 1972 and 1985. Sukenick's thoughts were, as Tomasula puts it, part of a "vital, if marginalized conversation for anyone interested in the viability of literature at the time Sukenick began writing it down," and not only

because they confronted the breakdown of modernist assumptions, and the void they left, but because they dealt practically with “the increasing influence of mass-marketing on literature.” Tomasula also turns to Sukenick’s most recent text, *Narralogues*, which he sees as offering a retrospective look at the period in question, as well as a discussion of how the novel can remain vital when the “nascent trends in literature identified in *In Form* have themselves grown to maturation: a publishing industry dominated by a handful of conglomerates; a time that has seen the resurgence of the realist novel and autobiography even as the Modernist ‘self’ has given way to the postmodernist ‘subject’; a time when the digitalization of culture and the rise of alternative media have forced conceptually driven authors to reevaluate the value and form of the written word.”

Charles Harris’s piece, “At Play in the Fields of Formal Thinking,” also takes an interest in Sukenick’s theories of writing, focusing on Sukenick’s book-length study of Wallace Stevens—*Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure*—and *In Form*. According to Harris, *Wallace Stevens* and *In Form* explain Sukenick’s sense of how reflexively writing (about) himself exemplifies a process of interpretation, a depiction of how the human mind works as it makes sense of the reality of self and culture, as well as how it reminds “the reader of how he himself thinks and what he is thinking, and thereby . . . activate[s] his imagination so that he himself can look at the world, not necessarily my [Sukenick’s] version of it—in his own versions of it” (*In Form* 146). These of Sukenick’s ideas can be connected, according to the piece, to the ways that all contemporary metafiction, which Harris sees as a literature in large part defined by the “deployment of reflexive techniques,” works in the interest of postmodernist concerns—in this case, the creation of an oppositional politics. Harris’s essay then analyzes how Sukenick’s first novel, *Up*, illustrates “as it extends Sukenick’s earliest formulation of an aesthetic theory and represents an excellent example of the novelist ‘at play in the fields of formal thinking’ ” (inner quote from *In Form* xvii).

In her study of Sukenick’s first collection of short stories, *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories*, Nancy Blake takes up Lacanian ideas to suggest that not only does Sukenick’s fiction pose “the question of the authority of the Other,” but that in his work “art sets as its goal the construction of its own Other.” If, that is, language is the “Other” into which we are born, and by which we are defined, then Sukenick takes onto himself the project of reconstructing that Other by pursuing a generative mode of thought—a sort of positive ignorance of what (language) has come before—that can result in an openness to experience, to the multiplicity of possibilities that exist if we can only tune in.

To back her argument, Blake focuses on the “collage-like pieces” in *The Death of the Novel*, stressing how their surrealistic interplay of writing and “found object” make Sukenick’s project possible, as well as how, as this project is developed, it disturbs “all standard notions surrounding ego identity.”

The concept of ego identity is also taken up by Ursula K. Heise, in “Sukenick’s Posthumans.” Concentrating on Sukenick’s second novel, *Out*, with some reference to Sukenick’s most recent novel, *Mosaic Man*, Heise discusses Sukenick’s style of character construction, how he persistently refuses “to grant his fictional characters any plausible psychology, or, indeed, any coherent identity that would remain recognizable over the duration of the text.” Noting, however, that this method of character construction is not unique to Sukenick, but shared by a number of postmodernist writers, Heise’s piece claims that what is distinctive to Sukenick’s postmodern characters, and what in part makes his work relevant to the contemporary moment, is the way that his “questioning of human identity . . . is associated with a suprisingly realistic conception of place and geography on the one hand, and with the exploration of how new technologies of information and communication alter the experience of space and the configuration of human identity, on the other.” The broader question approached by Sukenick, according to Heise, is “how the human subject should be reconceptualized in its systemic relations to planet-wide non-human spaces, whether these be the webs of global ecology or the networks of international information technology.”

In “Interruption Discontinuity Imperfection It Can’t be Helped,” Cam Tatham examines episodes of shocking sex and violence in Sukenick’s third novel, 98.6, wondering how these moments represent an attempt to reach the “extraordinary,” a place or experience beyond custom, beyond language and literature, a place of pre- or post- or nonlinguistic feelings. Tatham further wonders in what ways these attempts can be considered successful. Is part of their success that they affect the reader in some ways that are close to extraordinary? To the last question Tatham argues yes; that like Carlos Castenada’s don Juan, Sukenick teaches by tricking—in 98.6 manipulating the reader into a startled “disruption of ordinary, routine perception” that leads to the “deliberate cultivation of a willingness to see—and experience—the world anew.” Case in point, “Interruption Discontinuity Imperfection It Can’t be Helped” recognizes in a critifictional way how Tatham himself, as the critic and professor, can not remain and has not remained aloof from what he studies. Weaving his own story through the discussion of Sukenick, Tatham shows, “more or less, how deeply he is implicated in

what he is saying,” and how 98.6 has been for him “one of those life-changing experiences, becoming over all the years virtually a sacred text.”

Situating 98.6 and *Long Talking Bad Conditions Blues*, as well as Sukenick’s third collection of stories, *Doggy Bag*, within a broader scheme of postmodern arts, Charles Russell’s “Explorations of Postmodern Time, Space, and Image” compares Sukenick’s works to those of painter David Salle, a young neo-expressionist visual artist of the 1980s, in order to “illuminate many of the core aesthetic issues of this period known as the postmodern.” Never ignoring the challenges involved in comparisons between literary and visual arts, or the particular differences in tone and attitude between Sukenick and Salle, Russell focuses on “the affinities that justify” this specific comparison: Sukenick’s and Salle’s shared interest in making “the act of creation a central subject” in their works, and the ways they develop “highly self-conscious formal and thematic strategies that explore the processes and challenges of meaning-making.” Russell studies how Sukenick and Salle “validate the organization of narrative time in the novel and compositional space in self-revealing terms” in order to operate in “the absence of wholes,” or “the apparent lack of coherence to both external reality and personal experience upon which the aesthetic artifice can be based.” Also of interest to Russell is how both artists are entangled in what they understand to be a highly-mediated popular culture, which they approach comically, ironically, and critically as they mine it “for their iconography.” Where the individual is concerned, says Salle, both “indicate the ceaseless creation and loss of personal identity within [the] competing codes of meaning” under examination in their works.

Brian McHale’s essay, “Sukenick in Space, or, The Other Truth of the Page,” also examines how Sukenick makes the act of creation a central interest of his poetics. Contextualizing this interest within a culture of spontaneity “that arose in the United States immediately after the Second World War” and embraced a “range of cultural practices, from abstract-expressionism, collage, and assemblage in the visual arts, through Beat and Black Mountain writing, to bebop and free jazz,” McHale looks at *The Endless Short Story*, *Long Talking Bad Conditions Blues*, *Doggy Bag*, *Blown Away*, and *Mosaic Man* to explain an improvisational Sukenickian “writing that preserves the trace of the writer’s actual activity in real time and real space, writing that registers the process by which the page itself was inscribed.” This “truth of the page,” according to McHale, corresponds to the “underlying orality of spontaneous prose.” There is, however, he goes on to say, a second “truth of the page” that Sukenick recognizes, one that recognizes the reality of the written word,

its “*materiality*, its existence as a structure of real objects: the white space of the page, the shapes that typography makes, the concrete ‘technological reality’ of the book.” In a way linking literary and visual arts, McHale says this materiality emerges in formal and typographical experiments that result in Sukenick’s “palimtexts,” whose “spaced out prose” create postmodern, archeological ruins of print.

Sukenick’s sense of the technological reality of fiction is further explored in Lance Olsen’s “Graphiction.” Looking to three works—98.6, *Doggy Bag*, and *Mosaic Man*—from two different decades of Sukenick’s career, Olsen explores how Sukenick uses graphics to destabilize, complicate, and make self-conscious traditional reading assumptions and processes. “What is the advantage of such a graphictional strategy,” he asks. “What does one gain—and what does one lose—by employing it? By learning to think about the novel as a concrete structure rather than an allegory, do we thus banish the notion of allegory altogether, or simply displace it and reintroduce it at another level of meaning-making? Is it ever really possible to demystify a text without engendering another kind of mystification—here, perhaps, of the technological reality of the text itself?” How are these questions further complicated, and illuminated, the piece wonders, by its own self-reflexive, formally inventive graphictional nature? To what extent does it matter if Sukenick’s (and Olsen’s and others’) graphictions are all in some ways proto-hypermedia texts, anticipatory of electronic environments?

Mark Amerika’s piece, “The Artist Is The Medium Is The Message: A Ron Sukenick Re-Mix,” follows. Like Olsen, Amerika puts together a collage that illustrates its ideas in visually striking ways as he connects “Sukenick’s fiction and theory-digressions” with “emailings and personal conversation” (between the two writers) with Amerika’s own digressions on how Sukenick’s work “anticipate[d] the arrival of more multi-disciplinary, networked-narrative environments being created on the World Wide Web.” Amerika illustrates while discussing, in other words, the kind of “rhetorical remixing” he sees in Sukenick’s creation of a “not-fiction,” a type of writing whose “purpose is to gather data in pleasurable complexes, yield information, and argue truths,” as well as to manipulate the “the narrative interface” between the page and the self, the page and the world of experience. As this “interventionist not-fiction” writing practice leaves behind “both the [traditional] book and literary sense and sensibility,” Amerika argues, it suggests the contemporary need of writing to upgrade “to the latest version. In this case, the latest version would be one you could apply to your web browser, personal digital assistant, mp3 player, or email program, because in this ever-morphing new media environment that writers finds themselves in, what was once a narrative

practice in search of an audience of sophisticated readers, has transformed into a networking practice that uses the intuitive (Sukenick might even say “prophetic”) role of the writer as a medium, or shamanic filterer. A kind of DJ Deconstructionist or Network Conductor whose disintermediating practice as Cultural Producer leads to a Reconfiguring of the Author into a Virtual Artist.”

Examining the cultural context that in part bred Sukenick, JR Foley’s essay is on *Down and In: Life in the Underground*, Sukenick’s nonfiction remembrance of life in the American avant-garde “underground” of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Foley examines how this text, ostensibly an autobiography, is actually a collective memoir, or “collective autobiographical experience . . . an experiential history out of which an art-literary movement came,” that “succeeds in placing *l’hypocrite lecteur* vicariously at a crowded table in every dark, teeming bar in ’40s–’60s Greenwich Village, eavesdropping on everyone, famous, brilliant, and otherwise.” The more recognizable in Sukenick’s cast of characters: Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Judith Malina, Robert Creeley, Ted Joans, Ed Sanders, Diane Wakoski, Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Willem DeKooning, and Andy Warhol. At stake in this world: how to remain “free,” intellectually, artistically, personally, in the face of an ever-increasingly pervasive American status quo that reveres “The Golden Calf,” and functions according to “caution, conformity, and mercenary values.” “Defining what the underground was” (and is), Foley writes, and “how ‘adversary artists’ must redefine or re-realize it in changing circumstances is what Sukenick [orchestrates] his subterranean voices to address.”

In “Unwriting/Rewriting the Master Narratives of ‘Bankrupt’ Modernity,” Marcel Cornis-Pope outlines what he calls Sukenick’s revisionistic poetics, which works to unwrite “what has been formulated as an experience,” before continuing on “with an imaginative rewriting that allows “a new sense of experience” to evolve.² Cornis-Pope looks briefly at the whole of Sukenick’s oeuvre in order to explain how Sukenick has “arrived at this concept of ‘interventive’ fiction gradually, in an unremitting struggle with narrative conventions and epistemologies” associated, in particular, with “the seductive economy of narration that for Sukenick functions as the chief illusion-building mechanism of modernity.” Cornis-Pope’s primary interest, however, is *Mosaic Man*, which, according to him, is Sukenick’s “most important work to date,” reconfiguring “not only Sukenick’s previous work . . . but also the poetics of post-Holocaust/post-Cold War fiction,” and the “dominant narratives that have shaped his destiny as a writer: the existential picaresque, the western quest, the gauche-pornographic novel, the family chronicle, the political thriller, and even the grand narratives

of the Hebrew Bible.” In its reconfigurations, it further develops Sukenick’s “collective” memoirs, submitting “the author’s cultural heritage . . . to a thorough reexamination, discarding one-sided definitions in favor of new cross-cultural interactions.”

In a new interview, Larry McCaffery covers a great deal of territory as he wonders with Sukenick about the novel today. Tracing changes in the world that have affected Sukenick’s current “task as a fiction writer,” they discuss their common feeling that what in the 1950s was a favorable democratization of art led to a loss of integrity in creative works, where “art got completely confused with the entertainment industry, which meant it totally lost its adversarial position.”³ One result of this loss of integrity is contemporary postmodernism, which Sukenick feels has no “coherency, no morality, no real aesthetic purpose beyond that of grabbing people’s attention,” and is part of a system of commodification that has moved away from the kind of work done by literary artists of the 70s, which, whatever its deconstructive impulses, also had a reconstructive “impulse that was just as crucial, some recognition that new values, new sets of aesthetic assumptions would have to be erected.” Turning to *Narralogues*, they weigh possible “solutions” to this situation, in particular Sukenick’s feeling that if fiction is to tell the “truth” nowadays, if it is to have any constructive power, it has to return to rhetoric, because only when writers are able to “accept that the novel is rhetorically-based” can they reestablish fiction as an intellectual activity that moves beyond a mind-numbing representational realism dominating American literature and culture. The novel, Sukenick says, can also take advantage of the electronic communication technologies that make “writing a very kind of plastic activity” that allows one to “literally see how writing emerges from drawing as a graphic art . . . and work with a new conception of the space [and sound] of the page.” Fittingly, the conversation also takes up the shared work they have done toward restoring an integrity to the American novel, focusing on the Black Ice Books series they started to publish writers with positions opposed to the middle-class and popular cultures of America, writers who like Sukenick are deeply political in that they find genuinely inventive ways to “open up new experiences for [their] audience[s].”

What does Sukenick finally add up to? Nothing simple or straightforward, writes Jerome Klinkowitz in “8½ Ronnies,” since at the start of Sukenick’s career there were already five Ronnies: “critic, novelist, fictively-inclined scholar, scholastically inclined fictionist, and the publicized image of a fifth figure who does all these things and more”—and Sukenick didn’t stop expanding. Despite emerging in the tough literary and academic times of the late 1960s and 1970s, says Klinkowitz, “like

a Fellini self-portrait Sukenick survived, projecting at least three and a half more identities until by century's end his magic number was attained." Analyzing in turn each Ronnie emerging over the past thirty years, Klinkowitz pays attention to the various texts that have defined each character, moving from *Wallace Stevens* and *Up* to *Mosaic Man* and *Narralogues*, situating them in the American cultural conditions that helped make them. The sixth Ronnie? "The combative (if not embattled) figure of the 1970s, writing three novels which are defiantly countercultural," as well a collection of critical and theoretical essays on the state of art at the time. Number seven? A "figure concerned with cultural power—concerned to the extent of being willing to broker it" via his championing of personal power over mass market. And eight? A "transitional figure who writes just one book, *Doggy Bag*, which examines all he has made of himself before moving on to more work by a Ronnie still in progress, the eighth and one half," who assembles all the parts that have come before into new "wholes" that are the beginnings of something else.

Although, as is already clear, I took one obvious route in organizing these essays, putting them (roughly) in order according to a chronology of Sukenick's works, I hope it's also clear that other logics of organization connect the pieces, and that juxtaposed works are bound by shared topics and styles. Similarly, although this collection is about providing a comprehensive study of Sukenick, it is much more than dutifully so; instead, it offers coverage of Sukenick's life and work via sharp new perspectives, ones that work over perennial aesthetic and cultural debates, and ones that move beyond literary criticism and theory, tying Sukenick to other contemporary fields: art history, ecocriticism and autobiographics, psychoanalytic theory, and technology and hypertext studies.

Notes

1. Kutnik's book is titled *The Novel as Performance*.
2. I also discuss this narrative/political method in my dissertation, "Moinous Li(v)es," using Deleuze and Guattari's ideas in *A Thousand Plateaus* to frame my discussion.
3. As an example of this democratization, McCaffery and Sukenick turn to Andy Warhol, who, according to Sukenick, "destroyed a lot of crap that was coming out of the painting style and gallery scene, especially the mystique of the artist and the addict and all that shit." They also mention, it must be noted, that Warhol was among the first to turn his situation into pure commercialism.

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