

Notes

1. Translated from Russian by Slobodanka Viadiv-Glover.
2. *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957): 298.
3. Ibid., 298.
4. For a more systematic exploration of this genre see Mikhail Epstein, "At the Crossroads of Image and Concept: Essayism in the Culture of the Modern Age," in his book *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 1993): 213–253, and "Essaistika kak nulevaia disiplina" (Essayistics as a Zero Discipline), in his book *Bog detalei. Essaistika 1977–1988* (Moscow, LIA Elining, 1998): 225–240.

Chapter 16

The Catalog of Catalogs

Mikhail Epstein

Preface

The genre of the catalog is pertinent to transcultural experimentation by virtue of its paradigmatic structure that juxtaposes various judgments on the same subject. Such discourse is released from the order of time or the relationship of cause and effect.¹ In contrast, the syntagmatic structure, in which one proposition is deduced from another, one event succeeds another, is subject to the restrictive and oppressive effects of logical or narrative sequence.² Transculture is a metaparadigm, a set of elements (cultures, canons, traditions, epistemes, worldviews) that coexist in a structured space rather than succeed and displace each other in time.

In Japan there existed a special literary genre, *swibitsu* (literally, "following the brush"), that enumerated various attributes of one object—or various objects that possess one attribute. Classical samples of this genre can be found in the *Pillow Book* by Sei Shonagon (966/7–1013). In some sections, she lists things that most attract or annoy her, or things that distract in moments of boredom. This genre, which can be called the "catalog," arises at the intersection of abstraction and factuality, of the generic and the unique. In its simplest form, the catalog presents the diversity of things that belong to one general category, or the diversity of categories within which a single thing may be located. The beauty of the moon, the beauty of snow, the beauty of pearls . . . The beauty of the moon, the coldness of the moon, the deceptiveness of the moon . . .

Similar compositions are used in structural studies in which a strictly

defined object is consecutively described in its various aspects. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is an example of such metaphysical investigation through enumeration of various propositions. A quite different example is provided by the contemporary Russian poet-conceptualist Lev Rubinshtein, whose catalogs, sometimes rhymed, include model rejoinders of colloquial speech with a swiftly changing focus of conversation.³

My catalogs follow the middle way between those of Wittgenstein and Rubinshtein: They are neither logico-philosophical nor literary-poetic but rather belong to the fuzzy intermediate zone between them. "The Catalog of Trifles," "The Catalog of Freckles and Birthmarks," "The Catalog of Smoke," and "The Catalog of Catalogs" are experiments in restoring the ancient genre as a model for contemporary culture's self-description. Differing opinions and views do not conflict in these catalogs but rather coexist independently, succeeding each other on the vertical axis (the Greek word "catalog" literally means "words going from top to bottom"). Of these catalogs, which were written in July 1982 in Moscow, only the last one is reproduced here: "The Catalog of Catalogs," which attempts to describe this genre by means of its own structure.⁴

The Catalog of Catalogs

- 0.0 Everything can be described in a catalog, even a catalog itself.
- 0.1 A catalog is written and read not from left to right and not from right to left but from top to bottom.
- 0.2 Such an order means that things do not follow each other but are given simultaneously.
- 0.3 A catalog simply enumerates everything that is present.
- 1.0 A catalog is good for the description of things but is still better for the description of thoughts.
- 1.1 Things emerge and disappear and therefore are narrated in the temporal order in which they succeed each other.
- 1.2 Ideas are always present as if they were kept in a storehouse where they cannot be lost and damaged.
- 2.0 The meaning of an object is the totality of all ideas related to it, or of all propositions that can be pronounced about it.
- 2.1 A catalog permits us to pronounce all propositions that can be pronounced about an object.
- 2.2 A catalog includes both true and false propositions.

- 2.3 A proposition becomes true or false through its relationship to an external reality while in itself it simply is, takes place.
- 2.4 A catalog includes both serious and ironic propositions.
- 2.5 A proposition becomes serious or ironic through its relationship to the person who pronounces it, but in itself it simply is, takes place.
- 2.6 A catalog includes the propositions of both the author himself and of other people.
- 2.7 A proposition becomes original or trivial in its relationship to the previous propositions but in itself it simply is, takes place.
- 2.8 A catalog is the common place for all possible propositions about a certain object.
- 2.9 True propositions in the catalog differ from false propositions no more than they differ from themselves, and this also concerns serious and ironic, original and trivial propositions.
- 2.10 A catalog is valuable not because it contains true, serious, and original propositions but because it is as full as possible.
- 3.0 The catalog is not a literary or philosophical genre. There is more similarity between a folk song and a scholarly dissertation than between the catalog and all other genres.
- 3.1 The catalog meets neither scientific criteria of truth nor aesthetic criteria of beauty but only formal criteria of order.
- 3.2 The catalog is a form that itself takes care to produce its contents.
- 3.3 The catalog narrates nothing, expresses nothing, and persuades us of nothing. It enumerates like a dictionary.
- 3.4 As distinct from a dictionary of words, the catalog is a dictionary of propositions.
- 3.5 Like the words in a dictionary, the propositions in a catalog are not pronounced by anybody. They cannot be personally attributed. They have no author. They do not express anybody's opinion.
- 3.6 A dictionary and a catalog contain everything that can be said and thought, but the speaker who is speaking in them is language itself, and the thinker who is thinking in them is mind itself.
- 4.0 A catalog forms an antipode of a text, for a text moves in time while a catalog exists in space. They relate as actuality and potentiality.

- 4.1 A text is always complete even if it consists of one word; a catalog is never complete even if it includes all existing propositions.
- 4.2 The critique of a text constitutes a text different than that which is criticized. The critique of a catalog constitutes a part of the catalog itself.
- 4.3 There is no catalog that could not be extended and that would not need extension.
- 4.4 A text has an author while a catalog has a compiler. The author is responsible for the truth of his own propositions, whereas the compiler is responsible for the diversity of all possible propositions.
- 4.5 A compiler is a person to whom thoughts occur when he is not thinking; that is why he does not consider them his own thoughts.
- 4.6 A thought always occurs in the form of two or three different thoughts. An author fixes only one of them. A compiler fixes simultaneously all thoughts that come together. Each of them is also born in the form of two or three thoughts. This is why a compiler can never complete his work.
- 4.7 For example, the thought that one has to love one's motherland is born in the form of the thoughts "I have no motherland," "I am not able to love," "My motherland does not love me."
- 4.8. The thought "My motherland does not love me" is born in the form of the thoughts "The more I love my motherland the less it loves me" and "How many motherlands do I have, if my motherland has so many sons?"
- 5.0 The catalog contains the folklore of the present epoch, that is, of the time after the time.
- 5.1 "The time after the time" is the space where all texts become lines in the growing catalog.
- 5.2 Folklore has performers, catalogs have compilers; both are distributors of the material, not its creators.
- 5.3 Prehistoric time generates folklore, posthistoric time generates the catalog.
- 5.4 Folklore accumulates similar, homogeneous ideas characteristic of primitive society, whereas the catalog combines different and heterogeneous ideas characteristic of contemporary society.
- 5.5 Folklore is produced in the form of a text that conveys one common proposition, whereas the catalog is produced in the form of a dictionary that juxtaposes diverse propositions.

- 5.6 The catalog revives folklore on the stage of cultural differentiation where the totality of all propositions is reinstated, not in the form of one impersonal proposition but in a collection of many personal propositions.
- 6.0 While reading a catalog one cannot understand what its compiler is actually thinking. But one can understand what is generally thought and what can be thought in principle.
- 6.1 A thought in the catalog is not attached to anything beyond itself. It is not issued on behalf of any subject; it does not describe any object; it is not addressed to any interlocutor. It exists only because it is possible for it to exist.
- 6.2 A thought in the catalog exists as evidence of its possibility. Its existence testifies to the fact that it can exist.
- 6.3 A thought in the catalog does not explain the world and does not change the world but testifies to the multiplicity of possible worlds.
- 6.4 A catalog sets up the boundaries of what is possible, of what can be thought.
- 6.5 The impossible and the unthinkable are conveyed in the continuation of the catalog.
- 7.0 Each catalog can be completed only relatively, and its end becomes the beginning of the next catalog. Thus, the catalog of trifles passes into the catalog of entertainments; the catalog of smoke passes into the catalog of sky; the catalog of the universe passes into the catalog of catalogs; and the catalog of catalogs passes into the catalog of silence.
- 7.1 Each of the existing catalogs is a fragment of a larger catalog, and the largest catalog is a fragment of the Catalog which has no title.
- 7.2 Since a catalog never ends it can be finished at any point.
- 7.3 Each sentence in a catalog can be the last; therefore, it must be conclusive.

Notes

1. A paradigm can be defined as "a class of elements that can occupy the same place in the syntagmatic string, or, in other words, a set of elements each of which is substitutable for the other in the same context." A. J. Greimas and J. Courtés, *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary*, trans. Larry Crist et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979): 224. The sequence "I love

- you" is syntagmatic. The sets "love, hate, adore, despise" or "I, we, he, they" are paradigmatic.
2. On the totalitarian effects of time's unidirectionality see the chapter "The Permanence of Newness and Spaces for Difference."
3. On conceptualism in general and on Lev Rubinshtein in particular, see in Mikhail Epstein's books: *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995): 29-37, 60-70; *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture* (with Alexander Genis and Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover) (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999): 105-118.
4. The first publication of all these catalogs was in Russian: Mikhail Epstein, "Katalogi," *Dar. Kul'tura Rossi* 1 (1992): 68-71.

Chapter 17

Improvisational Community

Mikhail Epstein

The goal of collective improvisation is to encourage interactions among different disciplinary perspectives, life experiences, and worldviews. It can also be identified with the task Richard Rorty has set for thinkers of the future: "They would be all-purpose intellectuals who were ready to offer a view on pretty much anything, in the hope of making it hang together with everything else."¹ Improvisations might be thought of as metaphorical "assaults" on ordinary things, experiments in creative communication, or exercises in the creation of Rorty's "all-purpose intellectuals."

1. *Creativity and Communication*

The word "improvisation" derives from the Latin "providere" and literally means "unforeseeable." Improvisation opens the unpredictability of creation for the creator himself. Any kind of creativity, however, shares this feature; otherwise, our mental activity would be better characterized as "knowledge," "scholarship," "erudition," "exercise," "training." What is it that makes improvisation different from creativity as such, which to a certain degree is also improvisational?

Typically in creativity the unforeseeable is contained in the mind of the creator himself. Isolation and self-concentration is a precondition for creative self-expression: A person meditates and converses with himself,

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