

Elisabeth Frost

"Body and Word: Handwriting in U.S. Feminist Poetry"

ABSTRACT

The linkages between poetry and visual art have historically reflected a narrative impulse. By contrast, in the serial poems of three avant-garde feminist poets -- Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Leslie Scalapino, and Kathleen Fraser -- we discover a conjunction of art and poetry, handwriting and image, that embraces language not only for its symbolic function but also *as material*. Each poet highlights the concrete aspects of words in order that they might function precisely as objects within the poem. These works resist narrative to demonstrate alternative conceptions of both consciousness and corporeal experience, challenging us to rethink the relations among the material and the symbolic, body and word.

BIO

Rachel Blau DuPlessis' serial poem "Writing," especially by way of its handwritten portions, partakes of bodily experiences, which the poet demonstrates are linked not only with the creation of both human life and all art, but also with language-making as such. In "Crowd and not evening or light," Leslie Scalapino uses the materiality of handwriting (as well as photos and typeset text) to represent a phenomenological approach to both corporeal and cognitive experiences. Finally, in Kathleen Fraser's serial poem "Etruscan Pages," the marks of a vanished writing become a sign of loss as well as of the difficulties of witness. Fraser confronts the inability to decipher (let alone understand) the material traces of a now-disappeared culture; thus the lack of symbolic function for language parallels a collapse or erasure of story and narrative.