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It might credibly be said that, as an institutional formation, composition studies raises the question, “how shall we define writing so that we can teach it?” Such a formulation places emphasis both on theory (how shall we define writing?) and on practice (how shall we teach what we theorize?) in such a way as to acknowledge the service function that has historically defined and bedeviled us. Compositionists (many of them, anyway) theorize so they can teach better.

But as Susan Miller, among others, has memorably pointed out, the emphasis on teaching writing has historically involved a desire to change the subject. I use the word, “subject,” advisedly. Historically, in the United States, teachers of writing have been charged with changing the subjectivity of their students—the persons subject to their pedagogical ministrations. We have sought varying disciplinary and institutional ways to change the subject’s class status, to make her more alert to the ways in which language makes meaning, to make her more syntactically mature, or more institutionally docile. We have tried to make her capable of inventing the university; we have tried to turn her into a “man who can write a memo.”

But we have also tried to change the subject—our subject—the study of writing—as we have struggled with issues of disciplinarity and institutional prestige. In this process we have, through myriad metaphors, metonyms, disciplinary techniques and pieties, defined writing as a record of speech, for example, or as an expression of a self, or as a key to the gate that we are keeping, or communicative behavior, and so forth.

Geoffrey Sirc’s new book, English Composition as a Happening, registers his unhappiness with this state of affairs. Compositionists, in his view, should stop striving for disciplinarity and desist immediately from the implausible and unjust practice of trying to change our students. The book emerges, he writes, from a “disenchantment” that he “locate[s] both in theory and in pedagogy” (24). As he looked at “comp’s history, Sirc “began to realize that something questionable happened in our field in the late seventies and early eighties: our insecurity over our status as a valid academic field led us to entrench ourselves firmly in professionalism. To establish composition as a respectable discipline, we took on all the trappings of traditional academia—canonicity, scientism, empiricism, formalism, high theory, axioms, arrogance, and acceptance of the standard university department-divisions” (7). Refusing categorically to see writing and its teaching as a science or even a discipline, Sirc offers a blast from the past—the sixties’ happening, as his configuration for writing. His book calls on its audience to return to “spirit, love adventure, poetry, incense, kicky language, and rock and roll” (7).

English Composition As a Happening rests on a set of what I’ll call (following James J. Sosnoski in Modern Skeletons in Postmodern Closets) configurations—analyses that change into tropes, tropes based on analogies: writing is like painting; teaching writing in disciplinary ways is like establishing the criteria for a juried art exhibit; disciplinarity is like modernism; writers are like graphic artists; student writers are like the avant garde; happenings free us from constraints of space and convention; “the parallels between writing instruction and the visual arts, both seen as composition, are compelling” (19). As a rhetorical tactic, this one is superbly effective in places where analogies alone might not hold up and tropes alone might seem, well, trivial. In an early chapter, for example, Sirc describes himself as interested in Marcel Duchamp: “the way I’m interested in writing, writing done by anyone-whoever: useless, failed,
nothing writing by some nobody that turns out to be really something” (35). Several chapters later, he lingers over an email from a student named Greg:

dear mr.sirc

i’m in class today were talking about 2pac and not so much disappointed, however the people in class don’t understand 2pac the way i do . . . 2pac song “keep ya head up” is so true. how do i know? because everything he said i’ve been through remember when you said you can’t listen to this song without having a tear come to your eye. well it did because it hurt for 2pac to be so much on point. the things this man said was so true for instance he said he blame his mother for turning brother into a crack baby. my mother had a child who is my brother who has down syndrome from my mother drinking.

Sirc compares the academy’s rejection of (or need to change) “undisciplined” student writing such as Greg’s with the juries’ rejection of Duchamp and his fellows in the 1950’s. The similarities between (say) Duchamp’s urinal and Greg’s note fascinate and motivate Sirc more than any logical or sociological dissimilarities of class or “purpose” between the two texts. For Sirc, Greg doesn’t need to be “helped” or “disciplined” nearly so much as he deserves to be listened to—and not because he’s “underprepared,” but because he understands something important.

“Designing spaces . . . is what it’s all about” (1); we can learn about writing and how to teach it from people who have changed our modes of perception. The bland spaces of modernism are like the classrooms that contribute to the production of bland “modernist” disciplinary writing. The alternative is a happening, an event of sorts, variously motivated, variously carried out. But you can’t exactly teach a happening. The best you can do is foster it, create an environment in which it can occur. This was the project of the “compositionists’ writings that surrounded the sixties happenings.” Sirc recuperates the work of such thinkers as Ken Macrorie and William Lutz for those of us who are old enough to remember them, and he introduces those older voices to younger colleagues reared on the writings of the “comp establishment.”

Sirc makes his case in three lengthy introductory chapters that offer an historical account of visual arts. His fluent syntheses of visual and verbal and political/historical theory is one of the book’s greatest intellectual strengths—“looking at the spaces of writing construction through/as spaces of associated directly and tangentially with the Happenings movement . . . might best be thought of as a Materialist History of Composition studies as Gallery Tour” (19). In the process, Sirc “takes on” some of the most prominent names in the comp studies industry—the Bizzell/Herzberg/Bartholomae insistence on academic writing for example, as well as the romantic/personal/essentialist insistence on students’ own voice, as well as the political position of “bread-alone” cultural studies. That tactic will make this book controversial and important.

Its iconoclasm is likely to make the book a difficult sell. Almost everyone will be upset by this book. I feel that I’m a part of the audience he seeks—and I have been deeply disturbed—and prompted to careful thought—by his critique of the cultural studies tenets that I hold dear. The “comp community” has grown to expect quick and easy reads, with “empowerment rationales,” and a final chapter explaining what to do in the classroom. This book calls those expectations into question and that’s what makes it so exciting. I find Sirc’s tone tremendously appealing. The gentle, sardonic jokes packed beside elaborate quotations from Bataille and Baudrillard made it quite delightful. Such a style is certainly not the norm in “compbooks,” but that’s all the more reason for celebrating it. I found the book a “slow (if fascinating) read,” not only because parts are (necessarily) densely written, but also because it presupposes more knowledge of the work of Pollack et al., than many readers will have. Sirc offers, by way of recompense, a new notion of “students’ voice,” new ways to appreciate and talk to those voices, new ways of thinking about politicized writing, and wonderful pictures—both verbal and visual—to look at.

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