

Strates by Christian Dotremont

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Brief presentation

Between October 1963 and October 1967, Christian Dotremont published seven issues of a French speaking journal called *Strates*. The journal marks the editorial activity that witnessed the birth of logograms and provides a theoretical framework for the poet to pursue his experimental research on writing and layout. The journal includes numerous collaborations with writers such as Frédéric Baal, Paul Bourgoignie, André du Bouchet, Pol Bury, Jacques Calonne, Camille Joffroy, Cornelis Kieft, Louis Scutenaire, Michel Butor and Max Loreau, and artists such as Pierre Alechinsky, Henri Silberschatz, James Thurber, Bent Irvé, Rune Jansson, Asger Jorn and Reinhold d'Haese. The nature of this journal is fundamentally experimental as it challenges the readability of the text through abrupt cuts, typographical shifts or the mixing and superimposition of languages (French, English, Dutch, Finnish).

Developments

In 1959, Christian Dotremont conceived of an Encyclopedia for an “Assemblée stratiste” that drafted out in no less than a hundred volumes and which included a number of points that would later be used for *Strates*. But while Dotremont was trying to clarify the concept of stratification in this editorial project, it is in his poetry that the idea of strata appears for the first time. In 1962, Dotremont wrote the poem “Abstrates”, which was published as a lithographed placard in collaboration with Pierre Alechinsky. The importance of this poem is confirmed when in early 1963, Dotremont prepared a selection of poems that he intended to propose to the N.R.F. under the title “Ancienne Éternité”, and in which “Abstrates” was included. This poem would become the title of a posthumous collection of texts published by Fata Morgana in 1989.

The 1963 poem “Abstrates” marked a culmination of Dotremont’s poetic approach. As the title suggests, he used a form of wordplay (“mot-valise” in French) that diverts abstraction towards the geological idea of strata. The notion of strata suggests that the different layers of a terrain can be investigated as the sedimentations of the subsoil of writing. The geological dimension of writing had already been approached in “Fagnes”, a poem from 1958 (Dotremont 1998: 328) which considers language and letters as layers of the landscape and its geological terrain. This poem led to the project “Boues” (Muds), a series of sculptures created with Serge Vandercam on which Dotremont engraved words directly into the clay; the writing of letters was inscribed in the layers of the materiality of the earth. Inspired by the poetics of Gaston Bachelard and an earthly imagination that seeks the buried by looking into the geological depths, the graphic imagination within these poems discovers a poetics of resistance and “living energies”, a “shock effect” that resides in the intimacy of the material. It is precisely this “poetry of chasms” (“poésie des

gouffres”, Bachelard 1948: 186) that Dotremont pursues through his poetry, digging into the landscape with poems such as “Brassée sismographique” of 1972 (Dotremont 1998: 472). The poem evokes the “stratigraphy of breaths” that is hidden in the rise and fall of the ink.

From “Abstrates” to “Brassée sismographique” the notion of stratum progressively imposed itself, until it ultimately became the title of a small review that he launches a few months after the invention of his first logogram. Conceived and created by Dotremont, *Strates* will largely benefit from the help of the ex-Cobra musician Jacques Calonne. While it was during his trip to Lapland in the spring of 1963 that the idea of this magazine was conceived, it was not until a trip to Ireland in the following September that his notebooks show a finalized composition of the model for the first issue of the magazine (CDPA 03003/1964/002). A first sketch tried to create a paper cutout whose assembly suggests the idea of layers in the folding of the pages. Very quickly, the notion of stratification is rethought and redesigned by questioning the readability of the magazine. The journal is no longer read from the first page to the last or even following the principle of left to right. Instead the review is read vertically by opening the first and fourth covers.

At the same time, Dotremont also created the “Strates” Editions which publish the first examples of logograms in two volumes: *Logogrammes I* appears in December 1964 and *Logogrammes II* the following year in December 1965. The booklet *Logogramme I* opens with a quotation of Marcel Havrenne, published in *The Happy Hand (La main heureuse)* of 1950 by the Cobra Editions: “In the stratified architectures of the frost on the windows”. This quotation crosses the “ice” writings of Dotremont, with his *logoneiges* and *logoglaces*, temporary logograms that the poet draws in the snow or on the ice in Lapland. One of the first logograms from the bundle *Logogrammes I* reads: “For a nothing / full the dance / of the tenuous” (“Pour un rien / plein la danse / du ténu”). This “full emptiness” is illustrated by a logoneige reproduced in the middle and at the end of the first issue of *Strates*, while the dance of the tenuous refers to one of the first linguistic essays of Dotremont’s youth *The Mathematics of the Tenuous (La mathématique du ténu)*. The tenuous, the little or the nothingness becomes the aesthetical element that resonates with the absence or the emptiness discovered in Lapland. By investigating the strata of writing, the poet discovered a form of plenitude or fullness under the emptiness of the landscape.

This aesthetics of the nothing-full (the French rime of “le rien plein” that is at the same time an oxymoron is difficult to translate into English) or the mathematics of the tenuous is stated in the first issue of the review: “If our time counts a positive event, it is the discovery of the nothing-full by an imposing meeting, although little visible, of the unhappy” (French Summary, *Strates* n°1, Oct. 1963). Dotremont enumerates the artists who contributed to this aesthetics, from Picasso to Cobra and the experimental word-paintings (the magazine shows a double montage of five word-paintings of Dotremont and Asger Jorn), the great discoveries “without completion” of Marcel Duchamp, the morphology of the creation with Bachelard, the geographical and topographical sensibility, “the passion of the textures” in Dubuffet’s works or the deepening of failure in the writings of Emmanuel Bove and Samuel Beckett, and finally the “insidious burlesque” of Tati. This exploration of such strata wants to be progressive, layer by layer, from the surface down into different levels of absences and silences to bring to light the nothing-full. This text that proposes the aesthetic manifesto of the review *Strates* is reproduced by Jean Paulhan in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (n°132) of December 1963.

The cover of the first issue of the journal is composed of the first part of the poem “Pour Sevettijäri” (Dotremont 1998: 405) while the reader will find the second part of the poem in the centerfold of the magazine. The poem accompanied by a photograph of the logoneige “For a nothing-full” (“Pour un rien plein”) is reproduced in the central sheet of the magazine and on the third cover. This repetition of the same photograph (slightly off-center) between the center and the outside of the magazine and the use of blank space inaugurates a game of strata and overlay within the lay-out, suggesting that writing is traced on a snowy ground and forms a stratum just like a page in the magazine. This idea is reinforced by the montage of two magazine clippings that repeat the idea of strata at the beginning of the magazine. The first clipping shows a plate extracted from the Finnish magazine *Kuvasin (Mirror)* which illustrates the geological

strata of the ground with dated layers, while the second shows an extract of *Mystère-magazine* which evokes a woman who “contemplates her husband with this stratified glance...”. By superimposing geological strata with the strata of writing, Dotremont illustrates a profound relationship that also applies to drawings. The journal includes two examples of word-drawings in ink by Jorn and Dotremont placed at the beginning and end of the journal, as well as a mirror play between Reinhoud’s “lost bread” sculptures (small figures molded from breadcrumbs at the end of the meal) and an ink-drawing by Alechinsky on antique paper dated 1960. If Alechinsky’s drawing is layered on ancient parchment, superimposing the painter’s calligraphic gesture on ancient writing, it responds to Reinhoud’s small bread sculptures, of which he reproduces numerous other copies in his book *Titres et pains perdus* (Alechinsky, 1965), where Reinhoud’s figurines are in contact with titles from his paintings.

Dotremont is traveling in Ireland when the first issue of *Strates* is published. While some of those copies are sent from Dublin, the second issue is dedicated to the country of Joyce and Beckett. Dotremont publishes an excerpt from the magazine *Petite Planète* which evokes a landing in the airport of the city of Shannon, “this green spot on the ocean and this archipelago of lakes embedded – witnesses of the oldest ice ages”. If this city gives its name to the river Sionna (which will be the name of another of Dotremont’s reviews between 1973 and 1978), it borders Limerick, which the poet transforms into Louverick by superimposing the plans of Leuven and Limerick according to a tradition of topographic maps that Dotremont traces back to Cobra.

The second issue of the journal features a poem by André du Bouchet, “Solidité”, and follows the same framework as the first issue, repeating certain formats. It gives an introduction in Dutch to the thesis of Cornelis Kieft, who carried out a geological study of the subsoil of Swedish Lapland from 1948 to 1951 (i.e., during the Cobra years). Dotremont proposes to take up the methods that the geologist used in the “desert expanses” in order to apply it to “the elaboration of a geological criticism of art”. This critique begins in this second issue of *Strates* when it reproduces a work by Runne Janssen, the Swedish painter whose paintings resemble geological sections of the ground.

In issue no. 4 from April 1965, there is a second reproduction of a painting from Janssen, and issue no. 5 publishes an excerpt in Swedish from Dotremont’s text “Strates of Runne Janssen”, which will be used as an afterword for the *Strater*, a portfolio of lithographs dated from 1979. That same year, Dotremont gave a preface for the catalog of an exhibition of Appel’s work at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, from June to August 1965. His text is entitled “Le stratificateur” which points to the layering of paint and the dynamics of exchange between them. “A painting by Appel is an exhibition of paintings by Appel, which he has piled up on the canvas field, in the wooden fence thus foiled” (“The Stratifier”). Dotremont pursues his aesthetic of the dialectical dynamics of the strata, resulting in the production of artifacts such as the topographic superposition of two cities. This approach is also applied to painting. In his 1974 text on the Dutch painter Corneille, entitled “The winged geologist”, he writes: “Paintings which are topographies, geographies, stratigraphies – and sometimes stratengraffitis – cuts of strokes of painting which make overflow the real”. Here the concepts of stratas and topography propose a word play around street graffiti, keeping a tension between writing and painting. The following year, goes on to state how the paintings of Bram Van Velde aim at capturing the transparency of “lively stratifications”. The notion of stratum thus forms the basis of this “geological criticism” of art and pursues the relationship between writing and painting as framed by the review *Strates*.

The notion of strata involves an aesthetics of rupture that encourages Dotremont to arbitrarily cut a text in the middle of a sentence and to publish the follow-on text in the next issue. Because of the geological nature of the strata, and the intimate relationship that the logogram maintains with the landscape of Lapland, the effect of textual discontinuity gives way to a privileged use of white and spacing in the magazine. The photographs of coal slag given by Jacques Calonne mark in contrast the black of the ink that also comes from the base layers of geology.

Strates pursues Dotremont's experiments on writing, proposing different writing samples. The third issue of the journal presents "spaced-writings" ("écritures espacées") of the same words written during different moments of his journey and travels through Lapland, using different locomotion like a bus, a plane or a sled. Here, the landscape and movement of the poet produce variation in the graphical gesture of the writing. Issues 5 and 6 of *Strates* give a list of elements with shorthands in Danish, signs of the skolts, i.e., the inhabitant of the town of Inari who developed this graphical signaling system. These elements will lead Dotremont to explore the physics of writing and what Michel Butor calls his "écritures" (Butor, 1978).

The last issue of the review includes a double contribution: "Poème optique" by Michel Butor and "Éclats" by Max Loreau. In his correspondence with Dotremont, Butor discusses the sending of a "text that is unpublishable elsewhere and that will appear in the journal like a reindeer in the snow" (Dotremont-Butor 1986: 17). Its publication was planned for the sixth issue of the review but will be postponed to the last issue. The text is dedicated to Dotremont and has a similar typographical composition to the text *6810000 Liters of Water per Second* published in 1965. While described as a "stereophonic study" of the Niagara Falls, his optical poem suggests a visual and auditory reflection that is pursued in "Voix de l'écrit – Cantate optique pour saluer les logogrammes de Christian Dotremont", written at the end of the summer of 1969 as a preface to Dotremont's first solo exhibition at the Maya gallery in Brussels. As an optical poem, "Voix de l'écrit" plays on a typographic montage that mixes and contrasts handwritten words with printed words, a combination that is already at the heart of previous issues of *Strates*.

The second text is a short piece of poetic prose which describes how a trace is shattered and dismantled. It is from a young Belgian philosopher who started working on the work of Jean Dubuffet. This work inaugurates a new phase in Loreau's poetry that he pursued with the poem "Cerceaux `sorcellent" published in 1967 with illustrations by Dubuffet. "Éclats" is a prefiguration of *Cri* published in 1973, a prose that traces the loss of speech in the rupture of the cry. "Éclats" marks a first movement of rupture of the "logos" that the philosopher will further investigate under the light of phenomenology. Close to Dubuffet and the Cobra artists, writing on painters such as Jorn, Corneille or Alechinsky, Loreau is also the author of the first monograph on the logograms of Dotremont (Loreau, 1975).

The seventh and final issue of *Strates* is dated October 1966. Dotremont's correspondence shows that this issue is antedated and was not in fact published until the fall of 1968. Similarly, Dotremont's papers indicate how by this point he has already gathered material for an eighth issue of *Strates* that is never produced. An offprint of "Poèmes Optique" is printed in December 1968 in Brussels at one hundred copies, supplemented with a lithograph by Butor and Alechinsky. This lithograph is intended to illustrate the last issue of the magazine. This antedating of the journal masks that the end of *Strates* is linked to Dotremont's illness. The last issue of the journal is in preparation when he enters the sanatorium in February 1968, and the journal stops shortly after the distribution of No. 7.

Avant-garde strategies

Strates is an experimental magazine that extends Dotremont's research on writing. It is contemporary to the invention of the logogram, and it attempts to operate disruptions of the legibility of the printed text. The reference to the graphical dimension of the logogram can be found in the printed title of the magazine which is the word "Strates" manually written as a logogram by Dotremont and superimposed in three layers – or strata – of impression, making the title difficult to read. This process of superimposition (or stratification of writing) is applied to other elements of the journal, such as press cuts from cinema programs or urban maps. From issue to issue, the layout of the title is progressively moved and off centered to the margins of the cover, before disappearing completely. Here, legibility is dissolved as the logogramme in the snow when it melts. The off centering of the title requires the printer to break and cut up the printing plate of the title.

The cover is not an external element to the magazine, but an integral part of it. Printed on similar paper to the interior, the cover provides part of a printed text that generally overlaps the back and the front cover, forcing the reader to unfold the outer cover to start reading. They then need to go to the centerfold to continue their reading. Thus, the cover is like an outer stratum that continues to the center of the journal as a geological terrain, with an outer terrain sliding into lower layers of the ground. In the same way, the journal is organized according to a principle of duplication and repetition through the different layers of writing.

Organized in small booklets of 16 sheets, the journal follows a single format throughout its seven issues. The break in legibility organizes sequences that repeat throughout the journal, proposing strata of meaning or geological sections through the body of the writing. The journal does not include an editorial, nor give details of an editorial board. It bears only the name of Dotremont as the responsible editor. Jacques Calonne assisted him in the production process of the journal while he was traveling to Lapland or in the sanatorium. Similarly, the magazine does not have a pagination, breaking the idea of an ordered or organized content. The texts are assembled and “stratified” throughout the magazine following a precise pattern. The magazine offers no subscription model. It is free of charge, like other avant-garde magazines such as the Flemish literary magazine *Taptoe* or Guy Debord’s *Potlatch*, and sent via mail to friends and acquaintances of Dotremont. It is printed in 300 copies.

Strates challenges the notion of readability by abruptly cutting the text in unexpected places (like a geological terrain) before the next issue picks up the text just as abruptly. This technique applied to the layout and arrangement of texts and images in the magazine recalls the poetics of Dotremont. He uses the technique in his tmesis poems, while the use of apheresis and apocope is applied to prose, and more particularly to the layout of this prose. Dotremont seeks out illegible or difficult to read texts in order to reinforce these effects of rupture and stratification.

Although the typography of *Strates* is quite sober, Dotremont will continue these experiments with *Typographismes I*, which proposes imitations of typography catalogs for printing. Here again, “typographisme” reinforces the break in legibility within the typographic element. Dotremont’s correspondences with Butor and Loreau underline the importance and the meticulousness of the typographic work of the review.

By applying the principle of the rupture or discontinuity of geological strata to writing and reading, Dotremont also seeks to break the linearity of the latter in order to highlight a dynamic of layers that returns to a more ancient form of writing. The logogram is a first attempt to reclaim a free form of non-standard, anti-calligraphic writing. While Dotremont’s reflection against the processes of mechanical reproduction of writing (the press, the typewriter) highlights the importance of the hand and the genesis of the graphic gesture, *Strates* completes a similar process based on a rhythmic layout of “stratigraphic” repetition that opens up the white space of the layout. Faced with this aesthetic of the minute and emptiness of white, *Strates* mixes media and genres, placing poems alongside popular novels, city maps or scientific photographs with press cuttings or shopping lists. The journal aims to combine these everyday elements with photographs, paintings or drawings, breaking down all forms of hierarchy between media, bringing art and everyday life together.

Avant-garde thought

The journal *Strates* marks the culmination of a sustained period of work on language and writing. It refers as much to geology and geography, to the poetic primacy of the landscape and an attraction to the North (Cobra being a federation of artists from the North against the surrealist latinity of Paris). North is a double reference in the review: it designates Lapland as the place of genesis for the logograms and Ireland where

Gaelic writing also offers a form of anti-calligraphy. Ireland is present from the first issue of the journal with the reference to Samuel Beckett and the collages of Louverick (Limerick and Leuven). References to the North and to the poet's travels in Lapland since 1957 are evident throughout the magazine. Printed by the "Straten" printing house for the first issue, the magazine later moved to the Nordia printing house and the Photogaveur du Nord, both located near the Gare du Nord in Brussels, where Dotremont left for Lapland.

This Nordic reference of *Strates* extends Dotremont's critique of Surrealism, while re-evaluating part of its heritage, notably in the person of Marcel Duchamp (after the pastiche catalogue "Le surréalisme en 1947", in which he openly attacks Duchamp). *Strates* thus becomes a revue-valise that repeats the word games found in Dotremont's poems and logograms. Articulating as much a visual montage and with its dismantling of text, this journal presents the theoretical background that underlies the practice of logograms. By giving concrete examples of this aesthetic of the "nothing-full" ("le rien plein"), with old photographs, slags, or the montage of a staircase followed by an elevator lift for the last issue, Dotremont shows throughout the journal's issues that the search for strata is not a search for beauty, in the same way that the logogram refuses to be a calligraphy and to seek beauty in writing.

With contributions like those of Butor or Loreau, who are interested in the relationship between language and painting, *Strates* confirms the importance of this relationship. Digging into the different layers of language allows Dotremont to return to the experimental source of writing and the plastic nature of the graphical gesture. He aims to capture this gesture at its source when it is being forged or when forms are being transformed. In this sense, the journal provides the printed counterpart to the poetics of the explosion and fragmentation of language that led to the 1970 poems "Llatation exa tumulte" (Dotremont 1998: 441). The work of dislocation of language is accomplished by the form of tmesis, separating and segmenting words, while writing is reinvented by the logogram (a poetry finally made visible but as difficult to read as the linguistic separation of tmesis). *Strates* works to question the legibility of print by resorting to the same forms of cuts and breaks in the legibility of text. The play of repetition through the effect of repetition and displacement seeks to highlight the effects of erosion and wear, the displacement of sedimentary layers within the writing.

Conclusion

Strates underpins the conversion of Dotremont's poetic activity to the painting of logograms, providing an experimental approach to layout, typography and textual discontinuity that are inherent to the discovery and evolution of the logogram. The review ties deep relations between readability and the unreadable, just like the logogram reinvents the graphical gesture of writing that is at first unreadable, as a readable transcription of the text of the logogram is added in small pencil writing. According to Pierre Caizergues, the logogram is one of the greatest poetic inventions since Apollinaire's calligrams.

The invention of logogram and its aesthetics as stated in *Strates* provides a critical answer to Breton's concept of automatic writing. While surrealism attempts to investigate the unconscious of associations through writing and image association (such as with the technique of the collage), the logogram blends the graphical and linguistics dimension into a single gesture where words are improvised and unique. Logograms pursue a new synthesis between painting and writing, completing Cobra's program with the invention of word-poems (Jorn, Alechinsky, Atlan) and perusing the relation between words and painting. The magazine confirms the Nordic geo-poetics (Lapland – Ireland), by opening up new avenues of research into the layout of an experimental magazine. By mixing different media (texts, photographs, drawings, paintings, newspaper collage, geographical maps or books) in a tight canvas to produce effects of recurrence and repetition, of blankness and repetition, of emptiness and fullness, of overlapping and stratifications between text and image, *Strates* pursues an experimental approach that leads the poet towards a new form of linguistics that suggest the study of "a language as it is practiced in the activity of

writing" (Dotremont 1977 : 5), a semiology that integrates the material and physical dimension of the graphical trace.

The aesthetics and nomadic poetics of *Strates* propose a climactic break with the aesthetics of Surrealism. While Cobra was an attempt to federate and collaborate among artists of the North as a refusal of the southern Parisian scene, pushing his trips further north to Lapland is a radicalization of this geo-poetic gesture, an exploration of the external or marginal boundaries of the art scene. Similarly, the experimental approach of Cobra was never theorized internally as with the French surrealist. Cobra was to be an experiment, an open and collaborative experience among artists. The same refusal is radicalized by *Strates*. Not only does the review refuse to define theoretically its aesthetics, but it challenges the very basis of this possibility by pushing the limits of readability.

Strates underlines the plastic creativity of writing, typography and the stakes of writing by following the areas of research of the Cobra movement. Articulating the theoretical stakes of writing and the experimental approach to poetry, the journal offered a platform for various poets and writers such as Michel Butor, Max Loreau or Frédéric Baal who examine the relationship between writing – painting and sign. It heralds an experimental journal like *TXT* and suggest a reflection on the graphic elements of writing pursued further by authors such as Roland Barthes, Pierre Guyotat, Sophie Podolski or Marc Dachy.

Further reading

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