

Art and Artifice

Rowland Bagnall on two books that explore the processes and paradoxes of making art

Lavinia Singer

Artifice

Prototype £12

Charles Finn and Kim Stafford (editors)

The Art of Revising Poetry: 21 U.S. Poets on their Drafts, Craft, and Process

Bloomsbury £21.99

Lavinia Singer's *Artifice* begins with a transmission from the artist's studio. Drawing on the practice of painter Caroline Walker, 'Work Study' presents a scene of 'brush pots, clippings, tinted tea mugs' and 'routine', where 'cold light streaks each morning', revealing 'A recurrent cat'. With Frank O'Hara's 'Why I Am Not a Painter' nestled somewhere in the background, Singer's poem establishes a set of questions that preoccupy her first collection, concerning the creation of a work of art – both where it comes from and what happens to it – and how exactly it relates back to the world it first emerges from. 'So, how does it work', asks the opening poem, 'where daily work turns to more than just that?'; where 'out of, I'd almost call it junk [...] it is made – the Work.'

The image of an artwork rising from a heap of junk brings the 'rag-picker' to mind, 'one of Baudelaire's favourite figures for the modern poet', writes Susan Sontag in *On Photography* (1977). In the words of Baudelaire: 'Everything that the big city threw away, everything it lost, everything it despised, everything it crushed underfoot, he catalogues and collects', gathering 'the refuse which will [come to] assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects'. While Baudelaire's description finds its truest analogue, perhaps, in the work of American assemblage artist Joseph Cornell – particularly his famous boxes – Singer's writing reveals her own sustained engagements with the world's 'Reams / of material', from delicate books and manuscripts to artworks, buildings, maps, and flowers: 'petrified dry wood' and 'excavated skulls' to 'owl eyes' and the 'round buds' of a garden, 'loud with life'. At its best – which Singer's writing often is – these poems 'caress the universe as [they] examine it' (as Helen Vendler says of Jorie Graham), turning it delicately over, both cherishing and questioning 'a world I can barely believe' ('The Mapmaker's Daughter'), 'A world that was marvellous, that was good.'

Throughout this collection, Singer explores how the labour of the artist's work creates (and mimics) beauty, whether the 'crenellating stone & vaulting ribcage' of a Gothic cathedral or 'the strike & pick' of Barbara Hepworth's sculpting tools, her sleek 'vocabulary / of forms'. 'Spar Box' offers an excavation site of precious stones and gems – 'astonishingly ornate' – displaying natural beauty cut from the earth. Other poems are sparse: marble chips of language suspended in white space, as if testing exactly when their fragments might take flight, achieving meaning. 'Beauty is difficult, unlike the telling of beautiful untrue things', reads a line of 'True Artifice', echoing Oscar Wilde's 'The Decay of Lying' (1891) – further evidence of Singer's interest in 'the built, the not-built and [the] inbetween'.

In the words of art historian E H Gombrich, whose *Art and Illusion* (1960) makes an appearance in Singer's endnotes, 'Works of art are not mirrors, but they share with mirrors that elusive magic of transformation which is hard to put into words.' Singer charts the boundaries of this 'transformation' best in a variety of ekphrastic poems, channelling artists as diverse as

Peter Lanyon and Renaissance painter Federico Barocci. Singer appears drawn to the doubly ‘elusive magic’ of ekphrasis, which attempts to translate visual artworks into written language (among other things), creating a representation of a representation. In these poems, we watch the poet’s measured looking, her attention in action, inviting us to reflect upon not only what it means to translate one thing into another, but also on the strange activity of writing anything at all. ‘*Whence did the wondrous mystic art arise, / Of painting speech, and speaking to the eyes?*’ asks William Massey in *The Origin and Progress of Letters* (1763), the epigraph to Singer’s final run of poems: ‘*That we, by tracing magic lines, are taught / How to embody, and to colour thought?*’

If Singer is interested in the origins of poems and artworks, then she is equally concerned with themes of durability and afterlife. Several poems consider ideas of deterioration and decay. ‘The Painting of the Queen’ is prompted by the cracked surface of *Queen Elizabeth I* (c.1588), a painting in London’s National Portrait Gallery suffering ‘from abrasion and craquelure’. ‘anon.’, which draws on ‘various Old English manuscript marginalia, and other writings related to authorship and nobodies’, considers the life of language once its author disappears from view, suggesting that ‘the work speaks / for itself’ (quite literally). ‘The Bookworm’ repurposes a riddle from the medieval *Exeter Book* (c.960-990), imagining the gradual digestion of its words: ‘how wondrous / the reverse / of crafting verse’.

Artifice presents an exciting range of formal experiments, signalling the poet’s interest in both how words can be put together and how they come apart again. Many pieces deploy constraints and ‘visual disturbances’, including ‘From Devín Castle’ – named for a ruin in Slovakia – which seems to show signs of its own deterioration, hairline gaps appearing in its form, mimicking the slow erosion of the building it describes. ‘Waxworks’, set in Madame Tussauds, contains a distant echo – ‘look upon, ye! / brazen celebrity’ – of Percy Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’, whose ‘colossal Wreck’ calls out for passers-by to ‘Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!’ I’m reminded of Swiss-born artist Urs Fischer’s sculpture *Untitled* (2011), which re-cast Giambologna’s *Abduction of the Sabine Woman* (1579-83) in wax. Over twenty feet tall, the piece was lit and left to melt, creating an illusion of the statue’s marble dripping to the floor; a time-lapse of the process is available online.

More than her insights into art and artmaking, however, the true generosity of Singer’s writing is her confidence to let these poems find their meanings in the presence of the reader. Far from prescriptive or definitive, we discover the majority of Singer’s poems in a state of clay-like malleability, awaiting the connections and interpretations of each individual that comes to them. Many of the poems have a loose, associative, even notational quality, as if to prompt or generate their meanings in the process of their being read. In a 2010 article, Ben Lerner describes a ‘sense of displacement’ in the poetry of John Ashbery, ‘as if the poem we have [before us] describes a poem for which we’ve always arrived too late.’ In *Artifice*, something like the opposite is true, as though Singer’s poems were texts we have arrived at much too soon, before they’ve had a chance to fix in place, allowing us to grab a brush and paint parts of the scene ourselves, an invitation to collaborate.

‘The basic philosophical point’, writes the critic Arthur C Danto in *What Art Is* (2014), ‘is that art is always more than the few necessary conditions required for art.’ If this is borne out in Singer’s poems, then it also sets the stage for *The Art of Revising Poetry: 21 U.S. Poets on their Drafts, Craft, and Process*, a new anthology of poems (and their respective drafts). Edited by poets Charles Finn and Kim Stafford, *The Art of Revising Poetry* invites a roster of American poets – many of them teachers of Creative Writing – to reflect on the activity of bringing a single poem into the world, from first draft through to final version. Several references in Finn and Stafford’s introduction to the American writer George Saunders (who teaches Creative Writing at Syracuse University) reveals the influence, perhaps, of *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*

(2021), in which Saunders reflects on aspects of the craft of writing via several Russian authors of the nineteenth century. But *The Art of Revising Poetry* also joins the ranks of several other notable American writing manuals, not least Ted Kooser's *The Poetry Home Repair Manual* (2007), Mary Oliver's *A Poetry Handbook* (1994), and Robin Behn and Chase Twichell's anthology, *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises from Poets Who Teach* (1992), perhaps the closest relative to Finn and Stafford's project.

There is range in this anthology, emphasising (unsurprisingly) the very different lives and germination periods of poems, the vastly varied routes they take to get where they are trying to go. 'There has long been a gap in the writing trade', suggest the editors, of books that aim to show 'how a work evolves through revision, how it gets clearer, stronger, and deeper, start to finish.' *The Art of Revising Poetry* attempts to fill this gap, offering brief essays by '21 poets diverse in age, background, training, and style', revealing not only their 'considerable common ground' when it comes to the mechanics of revision (or '*reversion*', as the editors propose), but a 'wealth of idiosyncratic insights' from each poet in turn.

There is certainly insight here: the collection includes contributions from a number of long-standing practitioners, including Naomi Shihab Nye and Jane Hirshfield, whose wisdom and experience are hard to deny. 'Writing itself is revision', offers Hirshfield: 'each word, line, stanza revises what you know, who you are. Revision, in turn, isn't some arduous, afterward "fixing"; it's a way to step once more into making's original joy.' Moreover, there is a certain value (though perhaps only to other poets) in witnessing the drafts and final version of a poem side by side, inviting us to critically engage in – even challenge – the additions and subtractions that have taken place between them. Particularly striking are the reproductions of handwritten drafts, hastily scribbled, showing real-time editing and crossings out. After all, 'Revision [...] begins in asking a first draft, *What are you really about?*' writes Stafford, '*What's at stake here? Why does this matter?*'

At its most valuable, *The Art of Revising Poetry* offers the same guidance that Ted Hughes claims should be the true goal of all 'teachers of written English'. 'Their words should be not "How to write,"' he states in *Poetry in the Making* (1967), 'but "How to try to say what you really mean"'. At the same time, there is a sense that this anthology never quite manages to be more than a collection of distinct, 'idiosyncratic insights'; while this isn't necessarily a problem, it may be that there is less evidence for 'common ground' here than first hoped for by the editors. What this book does seem to reveal is that each poet's method for revision is entirely unique, instinctive, and slightly uncertain, changing from poem to poem. This is an essential ambiguity best put, perhaps, by Frank X Walker, discussing his brief poem 'InHerit'. 'I now understand the truth is that my poem might not ever really be finished', he writes: 'Can it be made better? Possibly. Will it save the world? Does it have to? Are these the best words in their best order? I certainly hope so. Am I ready to let it go? I am.'

Rowland Bagnall's second collection, *Near-Life Experience*, is due with Carcanet in 2024. www.rowlandbagnall.com