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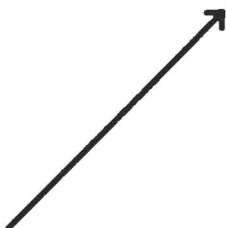
JOHANNA * DRUCKER

RUCKWORKS

1972-2012

**40 YEARS
OF BOOKS
AND PROJECTS**

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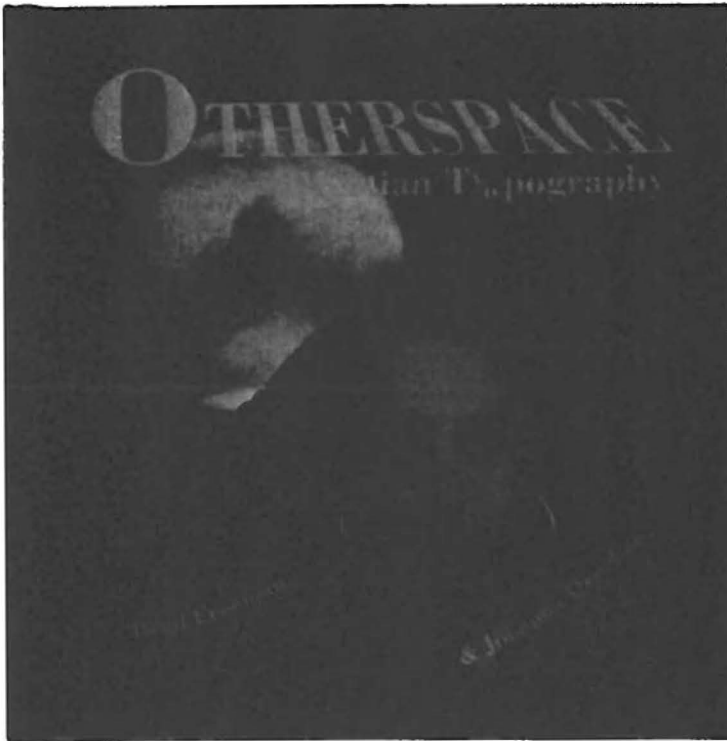
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MARTIAN TY/OPOGRAPHY

DARREN WERSHLER

... language is,
that we may mis-unda-stand each udda.
—Krazy Kat (1918)¹

Johanna Drucker and Brad Freeman's *Otherspace: Martian Ty/opography* is a remarkably dense little book. In science fiction, the correct term of art is that it's bigger on the inside.



Otherspace presents itself as a narrative of extra-terrestrial contact, but it embodies an entire theory of communication in its typography and design. On page after page, the reader encounters a series of intricate collages that always fall short of their ostensible goal: representing the alien intelligence at their heart. But these failed words and images don't simply vanish. They return in new configurations on subsequent pages, like space junk circling

around a singularity. And we fall into the gravity well right along with them, caught up in an orbit which eventually brings us back to the very real possibility that the alien intelligence whose attentions we are attempting to solicit is our own.

In *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*, John Durham Peters describes communication as a continuum that ranges between perfect telepathic understanding on one hand and utter dissemination and loss on the other. Even when we long for the former, we must expect the latter, because the problems of communication are "fundamentally intractable"; there are no noise-free channels, ever.² What this means is that dialogue is not a reciprocal exchange but an echo chamber:

Electronic media have taught us the chasms in all conversation. Conversations, after all, consist of single turns that may or may not link successfully with the following turns. To put it a bit archly, dialogue may simply be two people taking turns broadcasting at each other.³

At no time is there a guarantee that anything like comprehension (let alone an extraterrestrial "communion") will occur. This high degree of ongoing uncertainty about ever being understood means that every attempt at dialogue involves a certain amount of risk, with each partner "enacting the response of the other" in "desperate and daring acts of dignity."⁴

Communication is impossible... but we attempt it nonetheless. *Otherspace* manifests this struggle throughout. The book's colophon describes the production process as an epic 1200-hour "pixel by pixel" wrestling match with the motley assortment of hardware and software available to small-press printers and designers around 1990.⁵ As is the case with many of the more interesting experiments from artisanal presses like Nexus, Pyramid Atlantic and Coach House, we can locate traces of that struggle in the materiality of the final book, especially at the points where the final product differs from the designers' intent.

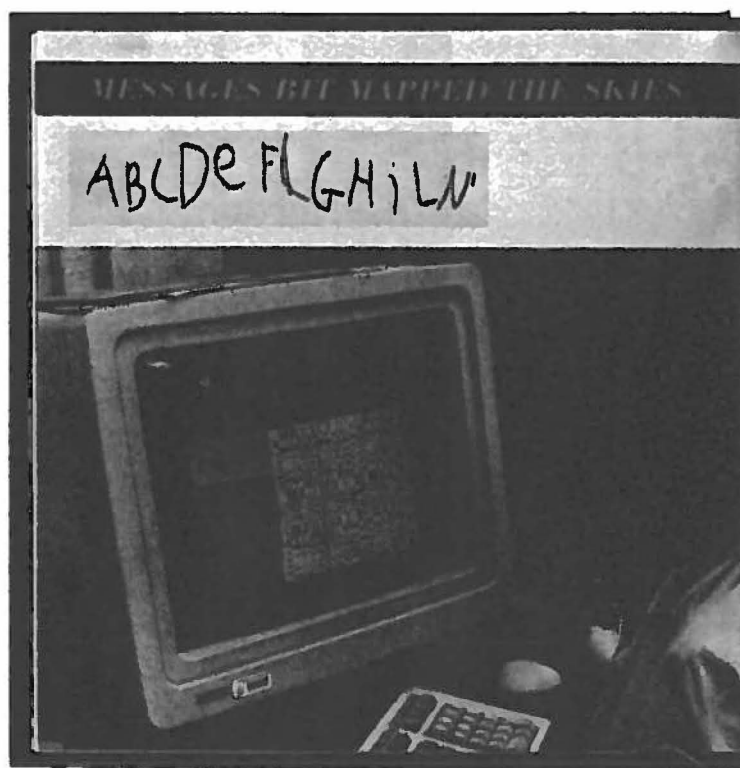
Consider the extra white sheet that precedes the endpapers (a 2-page photo-spread of the Martian surface) that should have been glued to the inside of the cover. Instead of being excised, these white pages have been rubberstamped with the image of an ambiguous communicative circuit much like the one that Peters describes. A hatched circle (the

planet Mars?) and an arrow pointing to space around the lower right corner appear on page 1. On page 2, an arrow points up from the lower left corner (emerging, more or less, from the space where the arrow on the previous page indicated?) to the word "RECEIVED." Near the end of the book, on page 93, is the word "MESSAGES," as though at the top of a list . . . but nothing appears beneath it. Rather than ignoring or attempting to hide this gap in material production, Drucker and Freeman have reimagined it as an opportunity to diagram the book itself as a series of simple glyphs that fall both outside and inside of its pages.

Over and over, *Otherspace* stages the confrontations of "two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible."⁶ These confrontations begin within the typography of the title itself, as Matthew Kirschenbaum notes: "Ty/opography suggests to me a stereoscopic oscillation between superimposed layers of material form."⁷ This could also serve as a description of the superimposition of red and silver inks in the book's duotone printing. It might also describe the oscillation between image and text that Susan Vanderborg outlines: "The page layouts themselves lead us to question any fixed interpretation of a particular image. Despite Jane's initial fondness for orderly data, this is a book of broken frames and cropped pictures, hinting at missing information."⁸ It could even allude to the collaborative process between Drucker, a writer and typesetter, and Freeman, a photographer and offset printer, both of whom intervene directly into the printing process during production. In "Collaborative Ty/opography," Drucker characterizes their collaborations in terms of a mutual concern with experimental narrative and intermedial production, and "striking differences" in their working methods.

Even at the level of plot, *Otherspace* doesn't so much tell a story as it simply shifts the perspective it provides on its protagonist, "Telepathic Jane." Though her daily actions don't change an iota, Jane passes, literally, from insignificance to significance. What's different is our point of view on the meaning of her life, as we come to the realization that even the blandest lives signify. Jane is startlingly similar to the student in Guy Debord's "Theory of the Dérive," whose regular comings and goings can be diagrammed as "a small triangle with no deviations"; "Such data," writes Debord, provides "examples of a modern poetry capable of provoking sharp emotional reactions."⁹ Jane becomes visible to Mars because "following her regular pattern"

renders her "identifiable at a great distance as a form."¹⁰ In other words, the topography of Jane's daily travels on the Earth's surface form a glyph that can be read even across interstellar distance. What Mars makes of that glyph, though—why it chooses Jane as an interlocutor—is anyone's guess.



If the message that the trajectories of Jane's life transmit is opaque, it is equally true that she expects nothing meaningful in return from her constant monitoring of interplanetary space: "All her instruments were tuned to find no answer from the waves and lengths of data she received on a regular basis."¹¹ "When messages do begin to arrive, the Mars that Jane sees is not the planet itself, but an endless series of human representations of it, shot through with the 'unreadable, untranslatable' Real, the ever-present 'gap between her capacity to believe and her dedication to blunt reason.'"¹² Even when these images are familiar to Jane, there are

Otherspace: Martian Ty/opography *** with Brad Freeman *** 1992 *** Nexus Press and Interplanetary Productions *** Offset printed *** Left, cover; right, interior page.

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Sunset tonight. I had work without
 clear form. Sometimes I am at a loss
 as to what to look for, gazing into
 the dark, form of the familiar day. My
 instruments provide directions, but
 do not construct the deep structure
 which comes back, constantly
 nagging, contradicting. Tonight the red
 planet appeared – and it was again
 as if for the first time. I have to fight
 this last rest of moments
 before the sun, surrounded by the
 beautiful disk. This is not science.

Mars made a bid for Jane's attention. Her soul
 had been wandering through all the coordinates of the
 chine. Her receptive instruments spoke through air and
 ether, the deep space of as yet unreciprocated
 communication. Taking the measure of a distant
 phenomenon, Jane's head felt light as her body heat filled the room. The
 receptive screen of the computer shifted toward red and the new technology
 went into overdrive. A slight buzz of dissonance caused her to pump in her
 morning routine.

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Otherspace: Martian Ty/opography *** with
 Brad Freeman *** 1992 *** Nexus Press and
 Interplanetary Productions *** Offset printed.
 *** Above left, interior page showing Martian
 script; right, interior spreads.

Notes

just too many of them: "she was finally resigned to
 mere recognition of many of the forms—unable to
 grasp the full extent of their original, irrecoverable,
 and impossible meaning."¹³ This "new alphabet of
 integrated circuitry and archaeological understand-
 ing" speaks to the same communicative problem
 that the contemporary Internet presents: a surfeit
 of information that reduces us all to browsers.

Otherspace doesn't conclude so much as it cycles
 back to its starting place, but with a difference,
 pushing past the fantasy of perfect communication
 and understanding to a different perspective on the
 everyday. The first image of Jane reappears as the last
 image of her as well, but it has been transformed.¹⁴
 The white paper of the original is overprinted with
 a red screen of the satellite map of the Martian
 surface: Mars and Jane are together yet separate.
 In the image, Jane retains her purposeful stride. In
 the text, "The other returned to its status as object
 and Jane went on, working to decipher its mute
 ty/opography."¹⁵

What the protagonist and *Otherspace* itself share
 is an aesthetics of drive, not desire. If the goal was
 supposed to be finding intelligent life on Mars, its
 true aim is the endless circular process of reading
 and writing.

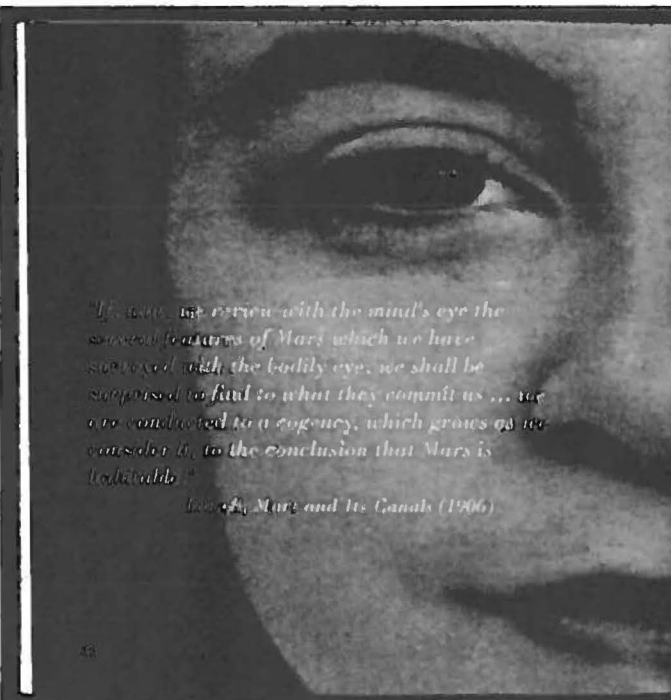
1. Patrick McDonnell, Karen O'Connell, and Georgia Riley de Havenon, *Krazy Kat: The Comic Art of George Herriman* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986), 61.
2. John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 29.
3. *Ibid.*, 64.
4. *Ibid.*, 152.
5. Johanna Drucker, *Otherspace: Martian Ty/opography* (Nexus Press and Interplanetary Publications, 1992), 88–89.
6. Slavoj Žižek, ed., *The Parallax View*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 4.
7. Matthew Kirschenbaum, "Lucid Mapping: Information Landscaping And Three-Dimensional Writing Spaces." *Leonardo* 32, no. 4 (1999): 261.
8. Susan Vanderborg, "Gendering 'Otherspace': The 'Martian Ty/opography' of Johanna Drucker and Brad Freeman." *Science Fiction Studies* 104, vol. 35.1, (February 2008): 104. <<http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/104/vanderborg104.htm>>
9. Guy Debord, "Theory of the Dérive." Knabb, Ken. *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 50–54.
10. Johanna Drucker, "Collaborative TY/Opography." *Afterimage* 27, no. 3 (1999): 11.
11. Drucker, "Collaborative TY/Opography," 10.
12. Drucker, "Collaborative TY/Opography," 8, 1.
13. Drucker, "Collaborative TY/Opography," 82.
14. The image of Jane appears on page 4; Drucker, "Collaborative TY/Opography," 85.
15. Drucker, "Collaborative TY/Opography," 84.



WITH A PERCEPTION OF AN ORDINARY LIFE



Telepathic Jane, a dedicated scientist, had devoted her life to the pursuit of esoteric knowledge of astrophysical phenomena. A peculiar, personal, compulsion drove her to study the face of the red planet. A private concern, not a professional one, tempted her to attend to the transits and conjunctions of her near neighbor: Mars.



"If, now, we review with the mind's eye the various features of Mars which we have surveyed with the bodily eye, we shall be surprised to find to what they commit us ... we are conducted to a eugenicy, which grows as we consider it, to the conclusion that Mars is habitable."

— Percival Lowell, *Mars and Its Canals* (1906)

Martian consciousness. The phase passed through her mind a thousand times before she let it pass her lips. And when she uttered that syllable sequence it froze in the air in front of her face for all the world to see. The missing metaphysical dimension was filled in afterwards. Jane watched her logical calculations get revised in the name of something less objective, more mutable. The information had been taken right off the machine; the messages were like skin, peeling off the surface of intuition in order to renew it. Stay away from cri-ti language, they would beg her, when communication was complete, having an abhorrence of the mistakes of humans in the shaping of the imaginary universe which they inhabit. Turning the interrogation on herself her dreams sank below the horizon and her thoughts rotated off the course of their habitual axis.

"I think all this evidence — and yet, I am in danger of understanding anything is a dream which is finished not as new from these facts? I am as a man for a considerable amount. I, some day, expect to look around — for one, uninvited, he said — as I being persuaded to come this way of here? The subject? Is justice? Is there something I feel, want, am knowing certain of — on something in these messages?"