

“If I choose to stare the world happens to my eyes.” A Conversation With John Trefry

written by Joe Milazzo | October 21, 2014



I owe what I know—and that appeals to me as only a little, still—of John Trefry’s novel [Plats \(Inside the Castle, 2014\)](#) courtesy of Michel Butor. Not that either John or I have ever met or chatted with the man. And not that Butor, to the best of my knowledge, has read anything either John or I have written. But we know each other to the extent that we do because of a shared interest in Butor’s work, itself an investigation into notions of textuality and, more precisely, of language as filament, story as (to rely upon *Plats*’ own vocabulary) integument, and setting as mindfulness. Can friendship, being itself enveloping, also be textual? In origin as well as scope? I wondered as much as I read *Plats* and discovered the surprising ways in which my reading allowed itself to approach John’s troublingly beautiful and remarkably self-possessed writing.

Yes, but what is this writing about? A description of *Plats* risks much, and I wish to recommend the book without describing it. However, I appreciate the perversity at work in such a wish. Therefore, synopsis. The book’s publisher calls *Plats* “a masonry text built of modular narrative elements and settings, a textual city to be explored by the reader” whose plot revolves around “inhabitants struggl[ing] to observe the passage of their lives... [t]hey steal each other’s shoes, mail, apartments, and identities with the hope of getting one step closer to distinguishing themselves from the refuse of the unchanging city.” True, but *Plats* is also a visual object which reminds us in multiple ways that surfaces are interfaces and that syntax is phenomenology. Perhaps the best context for another reader I can provide is the review of *Plats* I wrote for [Goodreads](#), reproduced here in its full rawness: “Still processing the complexities of this text. Shades of Butor, Philippe Sollers and even Baudelaire in Trefry’s careful, even sometimes carefully grotesque, prosody—so, French—but this is a book that is deeply American in its concern with the self. *Plats* is also one of the most original meditations on sensory experience I can recall reading. And, yes, there is a narrative here, and it possesses dimensions (modern as well as ancient), but this is a book that requires you to perceive it first and only to read it ‘later,’ that is, through the medium of your own deliberation.”

In my experience, slow is better than fast when it comes to friendship. Ultimately, I think the answer is yes, friendship can be textually construed, and I trust the following exchange of Qs and As provides some support for this supposition.

– JM



1) As both a textual object and a narrative (or system of intersecting narratives), *Plats* seems to require a different kind of absorption from the reader. In fact, the book seems not only to permit but invite a certain drifting of readerly attention. Who is the reader of this book; that is, who is the reader while they occupy the spaces opened up within this novel?

I like that word, absorption. I look at it in relation to duration, as in how long the reader lingers on a particular territory, whether that is a word, or a paragraph, or a spread. I write to the type of durational reader that I am. I am more of a skatey reader, a looker more than a reader, maybe. Sometimes looking at a page in its entirety can give me what I want from a book. At the very least, I find it difficult not to be aware of a relatively broad surface around a word or line while I am reading. Reading line-by-line, and this probably is more common with readers of conventional prose, there is an oscillating immersion in the creation of meaning from the words in sequence, kind of like building a critical mass that gets processed as a chunk. I don't think readers of prose, except maybe an editor, or other people, I don't really know, but not me, reads every word in order and determines its meaning and function in a text one word at a time. It is really impossible not to see the words around the focal point, for them to not impact the connotation or coloring of that focal point. So, I guess this durational quality encompasses both the absorption and the attention. Absorption is the processing, or the depth of processing, how much the text gets your brain wet, and attention is the collecting... the sample size! Structurally, the book forces what I think of as a 'tidal' attentiveness. The rhythm the book sets up makes it difficult to read without allowing that drifting attention to take over. So, yes, fostering that broader type of attention was important.

Despite the more inviting pronoun choices, it is difficult to define exactly who the reader is. I would say simply, the reader is the reader. Like you said about [Butor's Mobile](#) when we first talked, it is a 'book.' But to me it is eminently immersive, almost inescapable. But there is no human foothold or vessel to enter, to occupy like a little submarine in the text, the reader enters the book as the reader. Similarly here, I don't think the reader is anyone but the reader, but perhaps because of the intimacy of the situations, they are the reader inside the book.

Plats is a rather short book, the right length, I think. I think *Plats* is a book first read as quickly as possible. The dot product of the book is only possible with the experiential facet of disorientation and cyclicity, and then the closer allusive reading. Maybe I should have printed it twice inside the same cover. I will never have the benefit of reading the book for the first time, so I am not able to say how many qualities of reading one person can synthesize in one occupation of the book. Because *Plats* is not episodic, there is no "Last week in *Plats*..." type of recentering; the reader can not expect that kind of registration. The increasing familiarity of the reader with their variety of contexts takes the place of those kinds of causal signposts, so does the constellation of objects. It is an iconography, almost

like landmarks that themselves have a transitional quality in relation to the narrative, the location of human figures, in relation to each other. These things primarily constitute the reader's progress. I think there is a time zone in *Plats*, but that time zone is far more meshed with the reader's than it is meant to be discretely representational. As with most experiences, we push away the just-passed moment. I equate reading a book such as this more to real experience than I do to the traditionally displaced temporality and causality of the novel.

I do think that a tidal attention allows the reader to define their role more. There are all sorts of other wrenches in the assignation of the reader's identity. But that shaky platform of drifting commitment to the self as a reader allows you to often take on a more integral role in the book than would typically be the case. I can see three potential relationships, reader-as-reader, in which you are aware that you are reading a book, and you are focused on translating or manifesting its representation in your mind, reader-as-person-in-the-world, that is, not really reading at all, but looking around, distracted, a distracted reader, which you might have with any text, but which some texts are damaged by, and reader-as-text, in which the reader's consciousness is displaced into the text, is more integral to it. Of course this last one requires a sort of distraction, an inattentiveness to the practice of reading, of actively translating, or the mechanics of reading. It is like involuntary reading. It is the drifting attention you described. To me, this is the optimum kind of reading, but can be sustained only for short periods of time, and would be useless without the other two.

2) As I read, I marked passages in *Plats* that I either wanted to refer to later, for the purposes of this questionnaire, or that I considered "favorites." But about midway through I experienced the peculiar despair of my highlighter not leaving the page for pages and pages of text. Every sentence throbbed with significance; every turn of phrase argued for its singling out. And yet the text is quite compressed, if only because the structural paradigm of the book requires a certain economization of language. How did you reconcile the flourishes of this subtly virtuosic polyvocal text with the rigorous uniformity of the book's surfaces? Were there any darlings in previous iterations of *Plats* which you had to strangle?

I am afraid I didn't do much reconciliation! In fact, the constraints, as is often the case, pushed the prose to the place we are discussing.

In terms of quantity, I wouldn't say I produced more than any other writer might for a 150-page book. And I wouldn't say that in editing and formatting I lost things I was overly-enamored with, although the structure of the book necessarily forced a pretty merciless cull, the things I lost were the duds. Often they were just clauses, or bridging devices in sentences. I just wanted to string together the jewels. It was more of a process of distillation. And that distillation was really only possible, or was guided by the compartmentalized structure of the book.

As I was saying about reading speed, or the level of focus, the opposite was true about the composition. It was tremendously slow. Perhaps that made it

more possible for it to be read in that involuntary way. You said that every phrase argues for its singling out, of course the opposite is also the case, depending on what kind of reader you are. If there are no valleys or passes, there are no peaks. With such an encrusted prose there is nowhere to go so you look for other rhythms and other hierarchical devices to guide your reading.

What really does sadden me, although it is crucial to the psychological foundation of overstimulation, is that the things I do care about, particular words or phrases, are subsumed in the wash of it. It is Rococo. But again, I am just projecting my reading practices. If you are only writing a sentence a day, you want that sentence to be as satisfying as possible; or I did; I find joy in the visual beauty of language. So there is more than enough embroidery and lividity in the particularity of the prose that a reader very different than myself, more meticulous, could profit.

3) To spend paragraphs in a novel describing phosphenes is to make an argument of sorts. Much in the same way that John Coltrane's famous "cellular solo" on "Impressions" (recorded live at the Village Vanguard in 1961) constructs a kind of argument. Viewed from informational perspective, what is the smallest or more irreducible bit of signification within *Plats*?

As far as it being an argument, yes, I guess when you consider it against the norm it must come across that way—I have had seemingly thoughtful people accuse the book of being a put-on or an elaborate joke—but for me it is a perfectly natural expression. I see something like a [2000-word sentence by Claude Simon](#) as being natural, or [Roland Kirk inhaling into the mic](#) as natural, if you want the jazz angle, because it is part of a functioning body, it is the labor of the thing, so I feel a little weird calling it an argument. I don't want it to sound like a 'put-on' or an exercise. But I do know what you mean.

In elementary school my teacher started a class by saying "Today we are going to get inside a 3x5 card." It thrilled me. I started thinking about this little terrain on the surface of the card, of being small enough to occupy it, to dig in it and carve out a space, to swim in its material. It turned out that we just cut it in a way that allowed it to expand large enough that we could stretch it around our waists. I think something like spending a few hundred words representing the visions we have when we press on our eyeballs is a way to reclaim that initial fascination with a level of inconspicuous detail that swells to take over the entirety of our reality.

As the person who wrote it, I would say the smallest bit is the book itself, especially in a book like this. It sounds cheap, but I have tried to excerpt it and it doesn't work. I think, like you pointed out, there are lines or chunks that are slightly more shimmery or shiny, but they just keep piling up, they don't do anything on their own but bewitch, and that is dangerous, or suspect to see in isolation. I think those bits say something, yes, but not what they say as a whole. I don't think a word itself, without the rest of the book, is able to present the proper connotative meaning or possess the quantity of information without the rest of the book, or a pretty significant

portion of it. But there are 'object' words in the book that do tend to stand on their own in the book.

If you are looking for a signal and noise distinction, I am not sure, I probably don't fully understand the concept, which is normal for me. I wrote the whole book, so I see it all as a production, as contributory. If you subscribe to Barthelme's position on noise and verisimilitude, which I do in a representational sense, in the sense that something might appear to be noise to the reader, but in the compositional sense, the writer is writing, it is words on paper, black on white usually, and that is all, and that allows an excessive amount of control, of fidelity, of willfulness.

I am an architect, and the idea of non-authorial, true noise, true compositional noise, is something you learn to work with, to embrace, because often, not always, the raw materials bring something of themselves to the picture. I wonder if an artist like Jeff Koons, who does none of his own work, is ever surprised by the outcome. The jazz analogy is interesting too. I love listening to different takes of the same piece by the same line-up, especially when I am very familiar with the most popular version. It is unnerving to see that we could have received any of these possibilities and integrated them into our lives, whichever one the people who get to make the decisions, for whatever reasons, chose to freeze the process on. That is what we know. It isn't errant. But even in this narrowing down, the raw materials of that kind of playing have so much chance, so much real chance, so much real noise to them. I feel like the ability to control in literature is more gripping and paralytic, or at least has more potential to be, and in my case, is, because the raw materials themselves contain no flaws, once they are assembled they are, or should be, exactly what the writer wanted.

I describe *Plats* as being a place, but I don't think this is truly possible, or at least not in the way I am thinking about it from the author's perspective. For the reader perhaps, who has not heard the 'other takes', and isn't privy to the mechanics of iterative creative pursuits, then I think *Plats* is quite effective, both in structure and in the argument of its prose, in being noisy enough to be real, to be a place.



4) There are figures who move through *Plats*, but I am only sort-of tempted to describe them as "characters." I attribute this ambivalence, in part, to a distinction that the narrative seems to draw between active memory and passive recollection. Are the human actors in *Plats* being recollected by their environment as much as they are remembering their own histories?

That is difficult to answer specifically. I don't believe there is a particular conceit about the characters in that way. Human experience, once it has transcended the immediate moment of our sensory processing, becomes a memory, is the same material as the chair we sat in, no different from qualities or forms we would associate with human beings. It is lovely to think that we can distinguish a human face from wood grain or asphalt or a tiger, but I don't, I think it is all a soup. The problem with books is that they are a displacement of the representations of our consciousness, they are

always in the past, but deceptively always in the present of the reader, they are outsiders and insiders, their humanity is always inseparable from their deadness, their uniform materiality. So in my mind the character in a book never had a chance to be more than the chair. Sadly, most people just don't write about the chair with the same level of empathy, so we tend to think humans are crucial to literature.

I would say the memory aspect is interesting, insofar as the book is a feature of your present and of the constellation of the things that make the present, each present, and that the words exist only as objects of meaning connected to your memory.

I don't want to say who is doing what or what is present or physically causal and what isn't, if that is a worthwhile distinction, I don't know, but the entirety of *Plats* is real in the context of itself. How could it not be? What I would say has more to do with the language, which is modeled on a characteristic of schizophrenic thought and language called concrete thinking, in which everything is real, everything is imminent, immediate. There is no analogy in the book for instance. This has a certain effect on the presence of things and people, their roundness, their edges in the book get defined in a way that is a bit disconcerting, by not coming through the typical filter of literary representation, it seems too real, it seems inappropriate. But as distinct as these things become it also makes them more inseparable, rendered in identical materials, because again it is words, it isn't real, it isn't a chair or a person. There is no recollection but yours, everything is in the moment the words are incanted.

5) Roughly speaking, there are three narrations running in parallel throughout *Plats*, one in the third-person, one in the second, and one in the first. How would that first-person narrator, that figure who is often seated at that metal desk housed somewhere (everywhere?) on Sepulveda Boulevard answer the following question: "When is a body a body, an anatomy, and when is a body an object, a thing solid in its thinginess?"

I think the question of 'when' rather than 'whether' is key. The body becomes a thing, a solid, in the material of the text, most clearly, when it is stripped of any capacity to be controlled by human consciousness, in the night Idaho plats (top verso) primarily. I want to stop and think about the conditions that make me visualize myself as meat. It is hard to do. I assume everyone does it at various points. It is a fleeting sensation I have frequently, but I can't really say when it takes over.

I like that the body, even when possessed of an implied consciousness, when fabricated in literature is almost indistinguishable from the material around it. I think of a painting by Seurat in which the representation is fabricated by identical marks of paint, of different colors, yes, but equivalent in value. We see the edges of things because their colors change, because we recognize the approximation of their forms, but the project of verisimilitude ends there. What the painting does, in fact, is bring a quality of buoyancy, of airiness to everything, to water, to human flesh, to the wind and the sunlight, even to the opaque and massive trunk of a tree. Its values are in its texture, its wrighting.

If we want to say this woman is a woman, then she would be aware of herself as an anatomy, because even when we think of ourselves as meat it is a reflection of mortality, on the kismet of our being, which a thing doesn't have, the potential of meat implies a phase change, or an energy transfer. But if she is aware that she is made of ink and the alphabet, she must be a thing, not a thing that lacks consciousness or will necessarily, but one that has no more or less than a shopping cart or a pillow.

6) How would you define nausea?

It's been a dozen or more years since I read the book. Is that what you are referring to?

6B) I was thinking about Sartre's *Nausea*, how the narrator of that book interacts with objects. *Nausea*, to me, well, the whole of Sartre's novelistic oeuvre showing the way, in some sense, for the authors associated with the nouveau roman.

Refreshing myself a little bit, I think my ability to situate the actual sensation of nausea in the same context as Sartre is minimal. My equitable, contemporary response is paralysis, or panic. What if I am distinct from these things around me? That is more terrifying than not being distinct. I get panicked in antique stores, especially cluttered ones. I think that the disappearance, likely the annihilation of the owner of the things around me, is proof that those things had no meaning, that those things didn't disappear with them, that they were in fact separate from them. I am not talking about possessions in particular, which I don't really care about. Just the things around us. Whatever they are. I don't think the preponderance of 'things' in *Plats* necessarily functions in the same way as it might in *Nausea* because I find them to be a relief, a savior, a surrogate, rather than a struggle. Perhaps this is a perception only possible eighty years down the road from Sartre. I think it could be seen as nihilistic, but I see it as optimistic, because I want to subsume what is around me, make it valuable to me.

Nausea as an actual state has a special place for me, in my physical world. I don't use drugs, so my consciousness altering is primarily limited to my experiences with nausea, which affects me pretty harshly when it comes around. It completely rewires my perceptions. Visiting a friend in San Francisco a few years ago I got really ill after a dinner consisting of multiple course of potatoes at a vegan diner in Berkeley. During the whole drive back across the bay I stayed in a pink and white tunnel of light and fog. I was there. I could hear his voice telling me not to get sick in his car, but I was also not there. I was inside myself. Many hours I have spent in a pool of sweat on a cold tile floor. Nausea has more of a displacing quality to it than a sense of immediacy, or reaction to stimuli. It isn't a lens or a barometer of judgment. It sounds silly, but it is more of a threshold into my body's pure physicality, the pure physicality of the perceptions without the stain of judgment or consciousness. It is quite wonderful... after the fact at least.

7) Place, as a concept, is overwhelmingly real in *Plats*. But time, as a concept, feels increasingly impossible as the novel works towards its

resolution and denouement. What makes time in *Plats* possible?

Time passes with the reader, regardless of the representations of appearance or temporal keys on the text. That is my reading practice at least. And that is more of the practice *Plats* encourages. However, the composition of the narrative is very time-dependent, not because of some kind of Rube Goldberg plot mechanism, but because of the effect of qualities of time, and when I say time I don't mean passing time, but time as a location.

The visual depiction of time does have a function, perhaps more of a function in relation to the characters than in relation to the narrative. Recently something stood out to me, in [The Fassbinder Diaries](#), which I read in one sitting on a city bench listening to a restaurant's Huey Lewis Pandora station, Pate's use of a time stamp, 3AM or thereabouts, seemed less to do with placing a moment ahead of or behind another moment so that it could cause or be caused by something else, but for the environmental and connotative qualities of that time. Its repeated appearance recentered, not the narrative content, but the radiating tone of dread captured by that time.

If you think about it more cinematically, which I like to do, rather than something being contingent on clock time or duration, the time of day presented visually can be used to situate events, not necessarily temporally, but in terms of their appropriateness. Something that has always stuck with me, and I rewatched it a few months ago, it still affects me, is Michael Keaton home during the day in [Mr. Mom](#). The quality of light in that closed-up house during the day, the ennui of afternoon, made the whole scenario seem inappropriate and difficult to watch.



8) Perhaps because *Plats* reinterprets the topography (not to mention topology) of Los Angeles so unusually, I found myself at times superimposing Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* over the novel, or at least projecting that film, split-screen style, alongside the imaginings prompted by the novel. If you could liken *Plats* to any cinematic expression (that would include films never actually filmed), to which would you liken it?

I hadn't seen that. I had to look it up and watched it on Vimeo at 6AM in the dark... in Kansas no less. I don't know whether it should be embarrassing or relieving to have just seen it for the first time, because there do seem to be a lot of familiarities. The multiples of the woman, the iconography of objects, there was even a very brief montage of a foot stepping in sand, grass, and concrete that could seem structurally and content-informative, but nope, hadn't seen it! Maybe that is a positive – in a bad way – thing about Los Angeles? That is has the ability to manufacture similar reactions, at a detailed level, over a sixty year gap?

As far as my own cinematic reference points, I would point out a couple, and they are not complete films, just fragments, for instance, all of the scenes that take place in Diane's apartment in *Mulholland Drive*, all during the day, all tremendously suffocating and dreadful. There is a scene in [The Beyond by Lucio Fulci](#) that I watched for the first time on VHS one afternoon when I

lived in LA, where a corpse rises out of a bathtub and attacks a woman. It takes place in the middle of the day, in a well-lit room, no shadow, just fully on display, very yellow, very grainy, or perhaps that is just my VHS resolution memory. One doesn't know if Fulci filmed it like that because he was just trying to stay on schedule, independent of any plot mechanics, of which there really aren't any anyway, but it struck me because of its inappropriateness.

I perk up at anything filmed day-for-night. Most cities have that night glow to them, but Los Angeles had it bad. I think most of [The Tombs of the Blind Dead movies](#) have pretty great day-for-night scenes. I tend toward the visual qualities of movies more than their storytelling, at least in the recollections I draw on for work.

I don't know that literature owes too tremendous a debt to film. It has affected us culturally, but the things that we like to think are cinematic, literature had already been doing, especially poetry, things like juxtaposition or parataxis, montage. So I guess my values are a little bit skewed. I have pictured how a film could be made from *Plats*. I always grimace when someone refers to a book as unfilmable. It just sounds so lazy. I picture a movie that looks nothing like the book. How could it? I don't think it should. Because of the values that *Plats* has in relation to the reader's experience it would need to find a cinematic way to accomplish that, not just taking the words and assigning images to them, or using the structure as a storyboard.

Also, a movie came out a few years ago called [Beyond the Black Rainbow](#) that was supposedly based on all of the science fiction and horror movie VHS box covers the director saw in the 80s and attempted to visually tell a story from those box covers, not their context, just their imagery. I think that is the type of relationship my writing practice has with movies.

9) When I first entered this text, I was a little puzzled by the title *Plats*, but the more I entertained the implications and dimensions of actual plats, the more I understand how that image served as a governing conceit. Plats are surveyors' tools; they are also both records and reifications of otherwise immaterial and invisible divisions (property boundaries). Plats are guarantors of access and right-of-way. Plats are also an invention without which urban development would more than likely not have redefined this continent, especially in the American West, as it has. Perhaps most importantly, I think about the size and heft of very old plat books, they way they themselves parcel out information via these beautifully standardized, boundlessly repeatable templates. That being said, if you were required to come up with an alternate title for your book, what title would you choose, and why?

I can't pinpoint the arrival of that particular title onto the scene. It was originally called *Lost Again*. The folder on my computer is still called that. *Plats* would have come after the structural decisions that characterize the final form of the book, which came maybe a third of the way through the work. [Genette's Paratexts](#), and his discussion of paper sizes and margins was formative in this shift, and probably in the title too. I was very interested

in these paratextual factors and giving them a more active role. I think the title is never not in that role for a writer, so I would like to think it is subservient to those other functionalities that it connects to. I am sure if I called the book something else you would have just as skillfully picked the lock and left the door wide open, but the things you point out are valid and were on my mind.

I think Baudrillard described Los Angeles from the air as a relentless gridded surface. When you fly over Harlem from La Guardia and you look downtown along all of the avenues, that to me is actually a reasonable facsimile of being on the street there, geometrically at least, but the flight over LA is not an acceptable presage to me at all. Its geometry is far more inscrutable, and on the street you never really have much of a clue what its extents are, what will be coming next in terms of physical contents. That is one reason why I like your plat book analogy. Each property has its own page, discrete, it cannot be looked at in relation to its neighbor. I like the implications of that on the city, and on the book.

As far as other titles, I don't think the original title worked, obviously. Maybe one of the dingbat apartment names in the book? *Vista Three Sisters*? That seems a little on-the-nose. It doesn't ask enough questions. Maybe just *Dingbat*? That would give you a pretty different book.



10) If *Plats* were a retelling of an ancient myth, of which myth would it be a retelling?

Honestly, I would have to look something up and lie to you to give you an answer. There wasn't anything structuring the story outside my own schema. I would rather hear what you think!

The action in *Plats*, the way in which the sunrise and sunset operate throughout the book, the sense of bodies atomized and reassembled in memory, over and over again, with ritual care... I couldn't help but locate an Osirian narrative at work here.

I see what you mean. That narrative and its imagery are definitely part of my cultural consciousness. I had not structured the work on it, or even semi-intentionally meditating on it. However, I know it is big for me. The book I am working on now, [Apparitions of the Living](#), contains a significant reconsideration of the Osiris, Set, Isis triangle. Sometimes we just don't know where these things come from. That is beautiful.

[John Trefry](#) is a writer and architect. He lives and works in Lawrence, Kansas. Between 1995-2008 Trefry published literary zines in Atlanta and Los Angeles under the name *From the Ground*. In 2001 Trefry co-founded [the work.group](#), a full service architecture, design, and planning workshop. Trefry's visual works have been exhibited at the Center for Architecture in New York, the Museum of Design Atlanta (an affiliate of the Smithsonian

Institution), Southern Polytechnic State University, Whitespace Gallery in Atlanta, GA, and Studio 34 in Philadelphia, PA.