

**LONDON: OuPeinPo AND THE ART OF CREATIVE
CONSTRAINT**

**AN AVANT-GARDE GROUP'S SELF-IMPOSED
RESTRICTONS SHAPE THEIR UNUSUAL PRODUCTIONS**

Homage to Thieri Foulc

bookartbookshop

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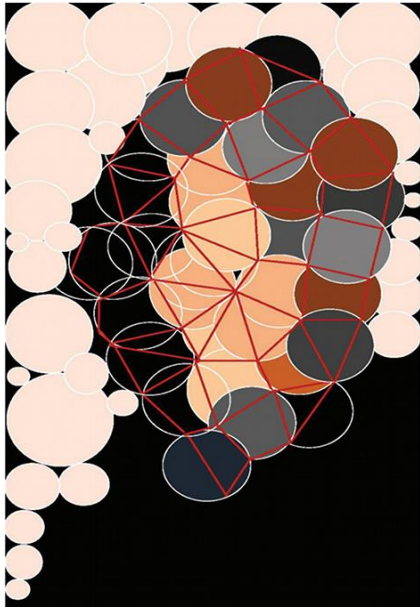
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by Nuala Ernest

LONDON — A fascinating exhibition, *Homage to Thieri Foulc*, is being presented this month at **bookartbookshop**, in London, on the occasion of the publication by Au Crayon Qui Tue, Éditeur (Paris), of the new book *Pour Thieri Foulc (For Thieri Foulc)*. Foulc (1943–2020) was known as a writer, painter, and publisher, but he did not regard himself as a writer. Instead, he once noted, “I paint with words as others do with pigments, and those who categorize me as a writer have not understood a thing.”

Born in Paris, Foulc was a senior member of College of 'Pataphysics, a conceptual institution conceived of by the French writer Alfred Jarry (1873–1907) that is rooted in the absurd and ironic realms of the imagination and the impossible. Foulc served as the general editor of its *Quarterly Notebooks* and of *The Correspondent of the College of 'Pataphysics*.



Achyap, “Isoradialité (Portrait de Thieri Foulc sur un graphe isoradial),” 2021, digital image. About the constraints placed on the making of this work, Achyap notes: “The lines of Thieri Foulc’s face are traced by the edges of the polygons. Each polygon also fits inside of a circle, each with the same radius, which gives rise to an isoradial graph. The irregularities of the face lead to an irregular polygonal graph. The complexity reflects the richness and sophistication of thought of Thieri.” Photo courtesy of Au Crayon Qui Tue, Éditeur, and bookartbookshop.

Foulc was also a co-founder of OuPeinPo, a group of avant-garde artists established in 1980. They proposed for themselves a framework from which one could derive a series of binary choices, or constraints, to use in creating works of art. Applied to an art-maker’s tools or materials, such self-imposed restrictions could dramatically affect and shape the outcome of an artist’s creative effort. For example, describing the process by which he produced his ink-on-paper work, “Enlargement by Theft” (2021), the OuPeinPo artist Brian Reffin Smith has noted, “A jigsaw puzzle is made, then the subject [is] expanded outwards — grown — using pieces taken from elsewhere in the image, in a fixed number of moves. Here the number is 42, traditionally the number of life, the universe, and everything.”

Pour Thieri Foulc features portraits of its subject by OuPeinPo members and by members of the College of ‘Pataphysics, including Achyap, Arrabal, Brian Reffin Smith, George Orrimbe, Eric Rutten, Helen Frank, Phillippe Mouchès, Guillaume Pô, and André Stas. The book also contains texts by Marcel Bènabou, Frédéric Forte, Paul Fournel, Jacques Jouet, Daniel Levin-Becker, Miller Lévy, and Olivier Salon, all of whom are participants in Oulipo, a group of French-speaking writers and mathematicians who, like the OuPeinPo artists, imposed certain constraints on their writing processes. In its

exhibition, **bookartbookshop**, London’s go-to destination for anyone interested in OuPeinPo, OuLiPo, or ‘Pataphysics, is presenting the original artworks that are reproduced in *Pour Thieri Foulc*.

OuPeinPo was inspired by OuLiPo, another avant-garde association, which emerged in France in 1960, and whose participants applied creative constraints to their production of literary works. These groups’ odd-looking names are abbreviations of the longer names “Ouvroir de peinture potentielle” (“workshop of potential painting”) and “Ouvroir de littérature potentielle” (“workshop of potential literature”).



Eric Rutten, “Gidouillisme (Portrait de Thieri Foulc gidouilliste n-angulaire), 2020, pen on paper. About the constraints placed on the making of this work, Rutten explains: “Gidouille (spiral) is a symbol of ‘Pataphysics, and has been utilized to form a portrait of Thieri Foulc. In particular, these spirals are drawn using n-angles, where each turn is $n1$. $n = 0$: eyes, ears. $n = 1$: hair, eyebrows, nose, face. $n = 2$: mouth. $n = 4$: glasses.” Photo courtesy of Au Crayon Qui Tue, Éditeur, and bookartbookshop.

OuLiPo was the brainchild of Raymond Queneau (1903–1976), a well-known writer, poet, critic, and editor who spent much of his career at Gallimard, one of France’s renowned literary publishing companies. Queneau’s OuLiPo co-founder was the chemical engineer and writer François Le Lionnais (1901–1984). Their discussions about the role of mathematics in literature led them to come up with a series of constraints and techniques that could be applied to writing and would, they believed, lead to new forms of written expression.

The constraints they came up with included, for example, the employing of lipograms (in which the use of certain letters is avoided in a particular piece of writing), or palindromes (words or phrases that can be read exactly the same

way both forward and backward), or mathematically based techniques, such as those associated with the movements of pieces on a chess board. Queneau once described Oulipians as resembling “rats who construct the labyrinth from which they plan to escape.”

As for the approach taken by participants in OuPeinPo, a group that is still active today, the framework from which they select the constraints they impose on the making of their works is a 10-by-1000-unit grid called the “Grand Oeuvre.” Part of OuPeinPo’s work is to populate the grid with constraints. (The Grand Oeuvre is still under construction). The rows of this grid propose a list of parameters, such as style, color, and subject. Its columns list such parameters as symmetry, measure, and intersection.

So, for example, a constraint that utilizes both “color” and “measure” is one constraint called “Measured Color Painting,” whereby a painting is made from colors measured into its composition in exactly equal parts. Each resulting artwork is regarded as an example of a constraint.



Brian Reffin Smith, “Enlargement by theft,” 2021, long-life inks on archival paper. About the constraints placed on the making of this work, Smith explains: “A jigsaw puzzle is made, then the subject [is] expanded outwards – grown – using pieces taken from elsewhere in the image, in a fixed number of moves. Here the number is 42, traditionally the number of life, the universe and everything.” Photo courtesy of Au Crayon Qui Tue, Éditeur, and bookartbookshop.

OuPeinPo was founded in 1964 and operated until 1966. Then, in 1980, the group was recreated by Foulc, Le Lionnais, and the painter-designer Jacques Carelman. Others later joined them, and the group set up an atelier. Foulc noted

that such artists of the past as Hieronymus Bosch, Leonardo da Vinci, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, and Pablo Picasso were sporadic — that was to say, conceptual or imaginary — participants. Today, the organization’s members still gather monthly to share new works, ideas, and news. They have their own rites and taboos. Among them: a strict rule demanding that “the name of the world’s most famous painting [presumably da Vinci’s ‘Mona Lisa’] must never be mentioned, on pain of a fine of 10 francs.”

The Oupeinpians began publicly showing their creations in France in 1985 and went on to present exhibitions in Belgium, Italy, and Canada. Foulc wrote that OuPeinPo was “not an artistic movement.” Instead, he explained, “[I]t is obliged to bring potentiality to bear equally on schools, movements, [...] manifestos, academies, avant-gardes, etc., and to propose techniques for proscribing the unregulated proliferation of new movements [...] so that every -ism, imaginable and unimaginable, can be created at will.” Participants from many different artistic or intellectual disciplines have taken part in OuPeinPo. Some of them have been active in OuLiPo, too.

In a recent interview, Helen Frank, who has participated in OuPeinPo since 2016, told me that each new work produced using its methods can prompt an artist to come up with new ways of creating. In devising the constraints she employs to make a particular piece, she said, she considers how those same restrictions might be used again later. She noted, “[It’s] not, ‘I want to do XYZ,’ but [rather] ‘How will it be applied by future Oupeinpians?’”

For artists like Frank, repetition (the routine use of the Grand Oeuvre, like an algorithm), the idea of free will (that they are free to make choices, within very strict limits), and the generating of creative systems within an overall, guiding creative system — all of these practices or notions affect their art-making approach. As Frank told me, OuPeinPo artists are “placed outside our art, contrary to the general idea of how an artist makes art, by the methodology, creating a paradox.” That is to say, an OuPeinPo artist may be regarded as being closely unified with his or her artwork while making it and, at the same time, as someone who observes that creative activity even as it is unfolding.



George Orrimbe, “*Vocalolorisme (Portrait vocalocolouriste de Thieri Foulc)*, 2020, colored-paper collage. About the constraints placed on the making of this work, Orrimbe notes, in part: “Following a method described by Arthur Rimbaud, the vowels in the word become a code to generate a colour and a shape. A = black, E = yellow, I = red, O = blue, U = green. 1 vowel in the word = circle, 2 vowels = rectangle, 3 = triangle, 4 = square, 5 = five pointed star or pentagon.” Photo courtesy of Au Crayon Qui Tue, Éditeur, and bookartbookshop.

George Orrimbe, another Oupeinpien whose work will appear in the **bookartbookshop** exhibition, uses a name adapted from that of the proto-modernist poet Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891) in combination with that of George Orwell (1903–1950). I wondered if “Foulc” might also be a pen name, perhaps related to that of the historian of ideas, literary critic, and philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984). However, it is not; Foulc was Thieri Foulc’s actual surname from birth, but Foucault and OuPeinPo still share a notable connection.

It has to do with Foucault’s theories about structures of power in society and various forms of communication, including literary and other art forms. With such ideas in mind, by applying constraints to their art-making, do Oupeinpiens demonstrate a kind of reclaiming of power in what may be seen as a reflection of structures of social power in the larger, broader world? Another connection: In an interesting historical footnote, the minutes of one OuPeinPo meeting that was held in 1963 show that the members who attended it agreed to invite Foucault to join them.

The British academic Dennis Duncan, who specializes in the history of avant-garde literary movements, notes in his 2019 book *The OuLiPo and Modern*

Thought (Oxford University Press) that “Foucault and the OuLiPo were part of the same milieu.”

In the **bookartbookshop** exhibition, the range of works on view, which were all made under different sets of creative constraints, together convey a sense of Foucault’s complexity as a person and as an artist. They evoke the affection and great admiration his Oulipian peers — and many other thinkers and artists who knew him — felt for Foucault and his achievements. They also suggest their makers’ collective sense of loss with regard to their friend and colleague.

The more that viewers examine these unusual works of art and the more they learn about how they were produced, the more they may appreciate Oulipo and Foucault’s motivating ideas, and the creative possibilities they opened up for the artists who embraced them. As Queneau once remarked, between any two works of art, or between any two sets of art-making constraints, “there exists an infinity of others.” Oulipo art makes this point vividly clear.

Resources

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<https://bookartbookshop.com/>