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READING GUIDE: Eric Schmaltz's *Surfaces*

Dear Reader,

Thank you, truly, for taking some time to read, skim, and gaze upon the pages of *Surfaces*. Though it is a book interested in the surface of things, *Surfaces* is also about what lies below those things. So, what lies below *Surfaces*? A lot, surely, for there are many ways to move along these pages and to move deeper into them. This brief guide is designed to offer points of contact that will further open the book for you and that will, hopefully, provide you with more ways to enjoy it.

The pieces in *Surfaces* are more commonly known as visual poems or concrete poems. This simply means that the visual elements of language and bookmaking are foregrounded more than you might find in other books of poetry. In his book *Designed Words for a Designed World*, Jamie Hilder describes concrete poetry as a creative way for poets to understand “how computers have affected our relationship to information.” He makes this argument when examining twentieth century poets—such as Eugen Gomringer, Décio Pignatari, Mary Ellen Solt, and others—who developed their own poetic practice that we recognize as visual poetry today. *Surfaces* builds on the work and ideas of these poets. It updates some of their concerns and applies them to our context where the computer is now nearly ubiquitous. *Surfaces* asks: Where does the body go when we write to one another thru digital channels? How and what do we feel when information is realized through taps, clicks, and pressures? What happens to meaning within a digital economy when information is considered to be bodiless?

While examining the poems' relationship to information technologies might lead to some intellectual heavy lifting, *Surfaces* invites readers to enjoy the poems in any way they see fit. Readers who are new to visual poetry tend to read these poems as though they are Rorschach blots. What do you see when you look at a poem in *Surfaces*? Do you see a gravesite or do you see a floorplan? Is the language mired within thick black tar or is it lodged within a starry sky? How are the images of *Surfaces* different from images we see every day in advertising, on television, or on social media? Like any book, coming to *Surfaces* with your own point of view and your own set of experiences is important. The poems in *Surfaces* are intended to open conversations around what the poem is and how it communicates meaning. As Canadian poet bpNichol once said: “language means communication and that communication does not just mean language.” What do the visual poems in *Surfaces* communicate to you?

These are just some of the ideas and questions you can interrogate as you find your way into and out of *Surfaces*. *Surfaces* may be a fast “read” but I hope it is a book that you can find time to come back to and that is meaningful to you each time. You can spend time gazing at each page or you can flip through the pages however you please, letting the ambience of each section wash over your eyes. Enjoy!

Yours,
Eric Schmaltz

SURFACES

ERIC SCHMALTZ