

EDITED BY ANDREA ANDERSSON

**POSTSCRIPT:
WRITING AFTER
CONCEPTUAL
ART**

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS

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Acknowledgments

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As a collection of essays, this book attests to a long-running and spirited conversation between friends and colleagues, deeply invested in cross-disciplinary scholarship and practice. I extend my thanks to all the contributors for their intellectual generosity.

As an exhibition publication, this book is realized by a much wider network of individuals. First and foremost, I express my respect for and appreciation to the artists and writers who participated in the exhibition *Postscript: Writing after Conceptual Art* and to all those who built walls, shipped crates, and, broadly speaking, made place for the conversations that unfold here. In this sense, this book began as a proposal to Adam Lerner, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver for an exhibition on the subject of Conceptual writing, and I am grateful for his enduring support, without which this project would not have been possible. I also extend my thanks to all of those who worked to realize it as a travelling exhibition at the Power Plant Gallery in Toronto and at the Eli and Edythe Broad Museum at Michigan State University. But most of all, I give thanks to Nora Burnett Abrams, my co-curator and my friend – long before we imagined this exhibition and long after its close.

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Always, I give thanks to my family, who live passionately and show their love by supporting the passions of others. Above all, I dedicate this book to John and Emmanuelle, who believe in the work I do. In addition to all of its other functions and modes of operation, this book will always serve in our family as a *pense-bête* of the first two years of Emmanuelle's life.

Preface

Postscript: Writing after Conceptual Art originated as an exhibition that opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver on 12 October 2012. This publication advances many ideas raised by the installation and introduces several new questions about the rich terrain occupied by the writers and artists discussed. The exhibition aimed at eroding the entrenched disciplinary boundaries that for years have kept the two fields of art and literature separate – and the ambition of this publication is to ensure that such an argument is strengthened and endures well past the physical presentation.

The exhibition emerged from a close study of contemporary art and poetry that evinced a shared preoccupation with found language. Identifying these works from competing disciplines collectively as Conceptual writing disabled the binary system that for too long has governed the presentation of these works.

That *Postscript* stands as the first such exhibition in North America to acknowledge both literature and visual art as mutually informing creative engines of Conceptual writing – privileging neither discipline's history – reveals how urgently this collective endeavour needed formulation and advocacy within the contemporary art world.¹ Though keenly articulated and defended within the literary field,² Conceptual writing had yet to receive a full, comprehensive, and critical treatment from the visual arts. While some exhibitions³ had ably demonstrated how artists utilized found language as source material or as the subject of their inquiries, none had put forward the argument that both writers and artists deployed similar strategies, that they shared the same historical precedents, and that their works looked remarkably similar, despite wildly different intentions and significations.

I am indebted to Andrea Andersson for introducing me to this immensely creative and intellectually rigorous body of work and for posing serious questions about Conceptual writing as treated by today's practitioners. She and

I conceived *Postscript* out of two strangely related goals: both to identify the primary strategies and approaches with which Conceptual writing emerges, and also to confuse or undermine any type of categorization that might limit how these works are understood. Ultimately, the ambition of the exhibition was to identify both the shared formal vocabulary of these artists and writers and to enable museum-goers to grasp not only *how* text can function materially, but also *why* the use of found language is such a meaningful, relevant, and contemporary approach to art making. That is, the exhibition sought to make clear just how much there was to say with what has already been said.

My great thanks goes to Adam Lerner, director and chief animator at MCA Denver, for his unending support for this exhibition and publication. He has championed this project from its infancy and we could not have arrived at the final realization without his staunch belief in its merit and relevance. Lastly, I am immensely grateful to the artists and writers featured in the exhibition for sharing their work with our audience. They are Mark Amerika and Chad Mossholder, Carl Andre, Fiona Banner, Erica Baum, Derek Beaulieu, Caroline Bergvall, Jen Bervin, Christian Bök, Marcel Broodthaers, Pavel Büchler, Luis Camnitzer, Ricardo Cuevas, Monica de la Torre, Dexter Sinister, Craig Dworkin, Tim Etchells, Robert Fitterman and Tim Davis, Ryan Gander, Michelle Gay, Kenneth Goldsmith, Dan Graham, Alexandra Grant, James Hoff, Seth Kim-Cohen, Sol LeWitt, Glenn Ligon, Tan Lin, Gareth Long and Derek Sullivan, Michael Maranda, Helen Mirra, Jonathan Monk, Simon Morris, João Onofre, Michalis Pichler, Paolo Piscitelli, Vanessa Place, Kristina Lee Podesva, Seth Price, Kay Rosen, Joe Scanlan, Lytle Shaw and Jimbo Blachly, Frances Stark, Joel Swanson, Nick Thurston, Andy Warhol, Darren Wershler, and Eric Zboya.

Notes

- 1 Two important precedents in the UK include the exhibitions "The Perverse Library" organized by Simon Morris at Shandy Hall (2010) and "Sentences" organized by Tony Trehy at Bury Art Museum and Sculpture Centre (2011).
- 2 See, for example, Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith, eds., *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010).
- 3 See, for example, *Ecstatic Alphabets/Heaps of Language* at The Museum of Modern Art (6 May – 27 August 2012), which focused exclusively on the roots of Conceptual Writing in the field of the visual arts, notably with the Futurists, the Dadaists, and the subsequent generation of neo-Dada artists, and how this legacy comes to bear on contemporary visual artists. Though it alluded to a formal vocabulary shared with the literary avant-garde, the exhibition did not present any examples from the field of literature.

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“I, too, wondered ...”:¹ An Introduction to Conceptual Writing after Conceptual Art

To write is to organize a relationship.

Marcel Broodthaers²

In 1969 when asked by Belgian publisher and art dealer Richard Lucas, “why he had just written a book?” the artist Marcel Broodthaers began, “To write dedications ...”³ Having abandoned his professional life as a poet in 1964 to become an artist, Broodthaers was particularly sensitive to the categorical conventions that code a piece of writing. His sculptural work *Pense-Bête*, shown in his first exhibition at the Galerie Saint-Laurent in Brussels, consisted of fifty remaindered copies of his book of poetry by the same name, still dressed in original wrapping paper, but assembled together in a base of plaster and wood. Impossible to read without being destroyed, *Pense-Bête* no longer functioned as literature. As Broodthaers reported, “No one had any curiosity about the text; nobody had any idea whether this was the final burial of prose or poetry, of sadness or pleasure.”⁴

Sceptical of Conceptual art’s prevailing notion of language as transparent, accessible, and dematerialized, Broodthaers, instead, presented works that while looking much like the text-based art he subtly critiqued, foregrounded the complexity of language operating in different fields of register. Describing his early sculptures with shells, mussels, and eggs, he explained: “The subject is ... that of the relationship established between the shells and the object that supports them: table, chair, or cooking pot.”⁵ Applied to his text-based work, the subject of Broodthaers’s art becomes the relationship between language and the frames and structures that support it.

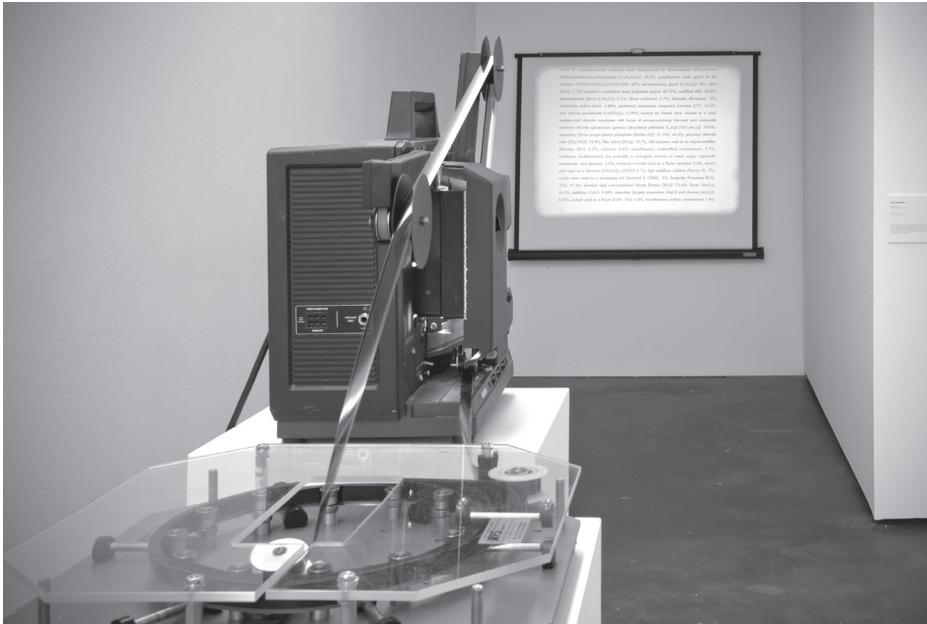
Broodthaers’s work holds particular significance for this volume of essays on the subject of contemporary writing, which operates in the fields of both art and literature. “To write dedications,” as Broodthaers sought to do, is to do

more than simply make books as art objects. A dedication, like a postscript, is a paratext, as defined by Gérard Genette in his seminal study, *Seuil*. It is an “‘undefined zone’ between the inside and outside”⁶ of the book that locates a work within a particular tradition and signals its intended audience. “To write dedications” is to use the material forms of print culture to test the ties and distinctions between writing drawn from different disciplines and different historical periods. In dedicating much of this introduction to the work of Broodthaers, I suggest that his practice provides a demonstration of a kind of writing that is defined by the company it keeps. *Postscript* assembles essays by writers in the fields of art and literature who reflect on the material qualities, technologies, and affiliations of writing identified variously as literature and as art. *Postscript* explores the expanded field of contemporary Conceptual writing by serving as both the title of this volume of essays and as the title of an exhibition on the same subject that opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver in the fall of 2012.⁷ There, Broodthaers’s work joined other books and magazines by Conceptual artists of the sixties to present a body of work comprised of language, generated through practices of appropriation, transcription, translation, redaction, and repetition. In addition to the historical works on view, the exhibition presented contemporary Conceptual writing that employed generative strategies, used by artists of the preceding generation, for works that took the form of paintings, drawings, prints, 16-mm films, digital video, photographs, mixed-media sculpture, sound installations, and iPad applications. The exhibition pivoted around a central claim: that the historical relationship between art and poetry had been redefined by writing, like Broodthaers’s, imagined as an art of selection and arrangement rather than as a vehicle for self-expression.

Like the book with its paratextual apparatus, the *Postscript* exhibition was preceded by a host of textual documents – proposals, press releases, wall texts, invitations, a gallery guide – that signalled this particular body of language *as* art. These documents, produced by contemporary cut-and-paste technologies, did more than repurpose information for distinct and often competing audiences; these texts, like the pedestal that supported Broodthaers’s books of poetry, established a frame for looking at these works. It was, in fact, through his own press release that Broodthaers first redefined his poetry as visual art and blurred the line between publicity and art object. For the invitation to his first show at the Galerie Saint-Laurent, Broodthaers printed his own text across and on top of the folio spread of a women’s fashion magazine. Declaring his old poetry as new art, he established the semantic shift as a value proposition, writing, “I asked myself if I could not sell something.”⁸ His “invitations” simultaneously denied and extended his vocation as writer, while also acknowledging his participation in the new arena of the art market.⁹ In the Broodthaers tradition,



Installation view of *Postscript: Writing after Conceptual Art*, The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery.



Installation view, Craig Dworkin, *FACT*, 16 mm film, 2010 (MCA-Denver).
16 mm film projection.

David Reinfurt and Stuart Bailey, together as Dexter Sinister, participated in the 2008 Whitney Biennial with a project entitled “True Mirror” that involved commissioning, designing, editing, and releasing texts for public and press consumption, parallel to the biennial’s official public relations. Collected in this volume, a proposal in verse, a faxed elaboration on the project, and an open letter to co-conspirators, Dexter Sinister’s variously distributed, appropriated texts acknowledge the prefatory reading and writing that mediate contemporary experiences with art. For the *Postscript* exhibition, despite the curatorial imperative to include writing that emerged from both visual art and literary contexts, the textual and literal frames of the art institution prefigured the writing as plastic art. One such writing was Dan Graham’s “Poem Schema,” a variable piece published in magazines between 1966 and 1972, which foregrounds its own contextual specificity. The typed, self-referential index, beginning “(number of) adjectives” and building to “(number of) words not italicized,” was “to be published in various places. In each published instance, it [wa]s set in its final form by the editor of the particular publication where it [was] to appear, the exact data used to correspond in each specific instance to the specific fact(s) of the published final appearance.”¹⁰ At the Denver MCA exhibition, a version of *Poem Schema*, from the first edition of *Extensions* magazine (1968), appeared under the glass of a vitrine. Nearby, contemporary poet Mónica de la Torre’s *Unreliable Translations*, a series of self-translations of her poem “Equivalences” (2011), hung on the wall – also framed behind glass. For one version, de la Torre divested herself of authorial responsibility, using instead the voice recognition component of her Google Translate application; for another, de la Torre texted the poem in Spanish into MSN, activating the auto-correct function and “naturalizing” the text message by turning it into English, a process de la Torre outlines in her essay contribution to this volume.¹¹ Like Graham’s, de la Torre’s poems testify, not to the author’s subjective experience, but rather to the formal conventions of their original means of production and distribution. They also demonstrate poet Craig Dworkin’s claim that “when put next to texts from a soi-disant poetic tradition, a work of conceptual art might look indistinguishable from a poem.”¹² In the exhibition and under glass, both works looked like art, recalling the double life of Broodthaers’s *Pense-Bete*, a physical memorial to poetry and print culture, refashioned as sculpture.

One might easily argue that the categorical limits of Conceptual writing have been intentionally obscured since the term’s debut on the *UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing*¹³ in 2003. Here, beside his compilation of orphaned texts from different periods and fields of practice, Dworkin coined the term Conceptual writing “to signal literary writing that could function comfortably as conceptual art and to indicate the use of text in conceptual art practices.”¹⁴ De la Torre’s work “comfortably” fits Dworkin’s definition of conceptual writing, as does

recent writing by Caroline Bergvall, Christian Bök, Robert Fitterman, Kenneth Goldsmith, Vanessa Place, and Dworkin himself.¹⁵ Their poetry of found language filled the pages of a special issue of *Poetry* magazine in 2009,¹⁶ and it is text by this group and associated writers that has come to be known as Conceptual writing.¹⁷ *Postscript* interposes itself in this history to examine not only foregrounded examples of this work, but also abounding writing, realized through similar processes of appropriation and redistribution, emanating from competing fields and conceptual frames. In so doing, this publication establishes a broader field for Conceptual writing and calls attention to the interpretive complexity of both historical and contemporary examples. Historical precedents include Lawrence Weiner's wall "Statements" or Mel Bochner's language portraits that occupied gallery walls, as well as published writing like Sol LeWitt's and Joseph Kosuth's manifesta, Dan Graham's and Carl Andre's poetry, and Robert Smithson's ficto-critical prose.¹⁸ In the *Postscript* exhibition, works by many of these artists, plucked from competing and sometimes irreconcilable strains of 1960s conceptualism, were situated alongside contemporary writing and, together, served to demonstrate that works that look alike may still signify differently.¹⁹ The inherent tension between morphology and signification can be traced back to conceptual art's rigorous formalism and to the fluidity with which these artists experimented with different genres – from portraits to poetry – and sites for exhibition and dissemination – from the gallery to books and magazines.²⁰ It is this legacy of experimentation – in appropriation and distribution – that remains defining for contemporary writers across disciplines whose work is under examination in this volume.

And though first-generation Conceptual art deftly defies categorical conventions and provides a primary model for contemporary writing that crosses the borderlands between fields, "Writing after Conceptual Art," the subtitle of this volume, does not chart a clear lineage. Like the term "Conceptual writing," it belies sources and influences ranging from the historical avant-garde, the French Oulipean tradition, Brazilian Concretism and pop art, to inventions in the fields of computer science and informatics. Neither is it a mere designation of chronology. This volume's subtitle is a registration of reduplication, an acknowledgment of this contemporary writing's debt to the first wave of textual compositions beholden to inexpensive and accessible reproductive technologies. And for many Conceptual writers, this debt has been validated by further appropriation.²¹ The iterative relationship, however, between the generations has not always been founded on fidelity; rather, *revision* (historical and material) is primary to this practice. One might consider artist Seth Price's digitally altered scans of a page from Stéphane Mallarmé's 1897 poem *Un coup de dés n'abolira le hasard*, as well as the remaindered image of the poem, rendered by Marcel Broodthaers's 1969 redaction of the work. Price's careful reconfigurations



Installation view of Carl Andre, *American Drill: Red Cut – White Cut – Blue Cut* (The Power Plant). 1963/2003. Courtesy of The Sackner Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry.

of both Mallarmé's and Broodthaers's pages were featured twice in Dexter Sinister's print journal *Dot Dot Dot*, first alongside the text "About Nothing" by Peter Bilak (2004) and again to illustrate his own essay "Décor Holes" (2009), which is reprinted in this volume.²² The result of Price's cut-and-paste exercise is a work that is hardly distinguishable from its source. To the casual viewer, only its attribution, "Courtesy of Seth Price," suggests Price's hand in the work at all.²³ Magnifying the iterative gesture, framed, blown-up facsimiles, and capital-A art lithographs of the magazine pages were included in a travelling installation (first exhibited in 2004) of artefacts assembled by Dexter Sinister. The collection, comprised of images disassociated from the texts they had formerly served to illustrate in the pages of the magazine, inverts the hierarchical relationship between text and image. Together with the other artefacts from the journal, Price's reproductions test the historical burdens and signifying capacity of paratexts. But Price's barely legible doubling, also foregrounds the central question for Conceptual writing – why again? why now?

Price begins his essay on the history of sampling, "Décor Holes," with a description of a work, comprised of found language, by the musician Steve Reich. This sampling, Price argues, is an "act of writing" in which "each reproduction is an original and a new beginning." Price's essay, itself reproduced over ten

times in print, and variously titled “Décor Holes,” “Unique Source / All Natural Suicide Gang,” “Akademische Graffiti,” “Depletion,” and “Was Ist Lost” (as it appears in this volume), stages the complex relationship between textual site, function, and interpretation, which Broodthaers explored half a century ago, and which Price suggests revivifies a work in a new context.²⁴ Of course, Broodthaers’s work also impressed the fact that context is both material and categorical. Price examines the work of art in the age of digital reproduction through the history of music, which, he reminds us, treated “intellectual property” very differently than visual and literary arts. And through this history, he also reminds us that the rules do not always hold across competing disciplines, that the differences between traditions shape the way we read, look at, listen to, and interpret writing. It is for this reason that this volume expands the discussion on Conceptual writing to account for work not only by those who identify themselves as poets, but also by those who locate their work within the visual, sound, and new media arts. The aim here is not to examine text-art broadly, a foolhardy undertaking in our information-rich moment, in which more and more artists employ language as a visual and documentary medium. Nor is the intent to compile an anthology of essays that exhausts the subject of Conceptual writing. Rather the task of this volume is to map a field of strategies, concerns, and historical models shared by a growing number of writers across disciplines and to propose that the juxtaposition of different histories and interpretations is what is finally at stake in contemporary Conceptual writing. As artist Stuart Bailey writes of Price’s reproductions of works from the history of modern literature and art: “To clarify, these are blown-up facsimiles of two pages from the magazine rather than the original books, and any blanks, gaps, fields and gray areas between these various generations of images, formats, mediums and media are imprecisely where any new work lies.”²⁵

Anticipating Bailey’s interest in the imperfect and informing correspondences between works from different generations and in different media, *Aspen: The Magazine in a Box* stands out as a publication from the height of Conceptual art that explored emerging distribution platforms even as it invoked historical forms. “Harking back to the original meaning of the word [magazine] as a ‘storehouse, a cache, a ship laden with stores,’”²⁶ the three-dimensional magazine contained music records, super-8 films, poetry, critical essays, art posters and other objects, signalling a shift not only in the arts but also in popular media and available systems of production and distribution. In her essay for this volume, Gwen Allen discusses *Aspen* and other artists’ magazines of the 1960s and 1970s as forerunners to recent on-line projects – including *UbuWeb*, *Continuous Project*’s on-line distribution arm *Distributed History*, the digital arts magazine *Triple Canopy*, and Dexter Sinister’s *The Serving Library*, acknowledging the institutional, economic, and social structures that circumscribe the

formal rendering of every piece of writing.²⁷ In an email correspondence with Stuart Bailey and Alice Fisher, reproduced in this collection but originally sited in the pages of *Dot Dot Dot*, artist Ryan Gander discusses the complexity of originality in the age of Microsoft Word. As Samuel Johnson's dictionary once defined the parameters and systems of print logic, Microsoft's spell check presents a new set of constraints and conventions. Gander's exchange traces the transformation of a single word under the contemporary pressures of today's distribution mechanisms, but in coining a word without "a true etymology," he also confronts the full weight of print history. It is important to recall that *Aspen*, forward-looking in its embrace of new technology and forms during the 1960s, fittingly dedicated its fourth issue to media theorist Marshall McLuhan, but the double issue *Aspen 5+6*, popularly remembered as the Conceptual issue, was dedicated to the nineteenth-century French poet Stéphane Mallarmé. Framing works by contemporary Conceptual artists, including Dan Graham, Sol LeWitt, Mel Bochner, and Tony Smith, guest editor and contributor Brian O'Doherty's dedication underscores the centrality of writing for the issue, and he surely had *Le Livre*, the poet's conceptual three-dimensional book in mind. "Conceptual" in the sense of left unrealized, Mallarmé's absent book exists only through epitexts that circulated and anticipated the work. Mallarmé envisioned a book without binding, not unlike *Aspen*, inviting multiple vectors between its pages. With his dedication, O'Doherty, pointed from 1960s conceptualism to historical precedent. Works by artists Marcel Duchamp, Naum Gabo, Richard Huelsenbeck, László Moholy-Nagy, and Hans Richter from the historical avant-garde mingled with literature by Samuel Beckett, William Burroughs, and Alain Robbe-Grillet and critical essays by Susan Sontag, George Kubler, and Roland Barthes. Corraling writing from different fields and periods, *Aspen 5+6* is an important precursor to Dworkin's on-line collection of Conceptual writing, and housed in its white cardboard box, "evok[ing] the proverbial white cube of the gallery space,"²⁸ the magazine O'Doherty described as a "miniature museum" also paved the way for the *Postscript* exhibition in Denver. In its collection of writing as theory and as praxis, *Aspen's* conceptual issue serves as a model for this anthology of texts, which confuse and capitalize on the established distinctions between scholarly and artists' writings.

"The sign of disorder would also open up a new system." – M.B.²⁹

In her essay in this volume, writer, artist, and performer Caroline Bergvall attempts to classify her field of performance writing, only to conclude that "what is at stake might be less a question of classification than one of applied definition." Treading in territory familiar to Broodthaers, who dedicated his practice

to upending historical classifications,³⁰ Bergvall anticipates the complexity of categorization for this volume. Thus, despite the lists, diagrams, and grids that course through the history of Conceptual art and writing, fields that have long cultivated an aesthetics of taxonomy, this volume resists the editorial convention to group or corral essays according to theme or provenance. To echo contributor Tan Lin's call in his essay "Plagiarism: A Response to Thomas Fink" for an embrace of broader reading practices that acknowledge and absorb contemporary modes of textual production and distribution, "I wanted reading to be less not more narrow as a practice," and to bring attention to the "fluid boundaries" between contemporary disciplines. Thus, *Postscript* is designed to invite cross-readings of essays on topics under scrutiny by competing fields, articulated in different formats and genres. Take, for example, the relationship of conceptual writing to developments in computer science and information management. In his contribution, Nick Montfort examines computational Conceptual writing – its history, predating Conceptual art of the 1960s – and the innovative works composed by the computer-based mathematical modelling of language. Tracing computer text generation from its earliest and simplest systems to more recent projects, with computers networked to social media and other sources of data, Montfort explores the complex relationship between input and output. He demonstrates how the simplest codes today can manage massive amounts of information in the generation of new conceptual works. Montfort's discussion of the relationship between code, or the set of constraints that defines an operation, and the textual matter it wields and yields, reminds us of Conceptual writing's double inheritance from both art historical and literary traditions. The tension between the concept and its textual materialization can be traced, on the one hand, to first-generation conceptual artists like Sol LeWitt and Lawrence Weiner, who privileged the "concept" over the materialized object, and, on the other hand, to French Oulipean constraint-based literature. This history, which posits Conceptual writing as by-product of the textual elegance and creativity of its code, literalized in the case of computational Conceptual writing, provides some context for Kenneth Goldsmith's designation of his writing as "boring" or "uncreative."³¹ "The idea becomes the machine that makes the art," wrote Sol LeWitt, in his 1967 "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art."³² In his essay, originally distributed as blogs on the Poetry Foundation website and reprinted in this volume, Goldsmith reinserts the authorial subject, writing, "I am a word processor." If Montfort describes the scientific feat of computers composing in the place of authors, Goldsmith describes the phenomenon of living writers generating text like machines. And he crafts his essay in the form of a blog, a kind of journal entry for the digital age. It is also exactly the kind of "nonpoetic language" that poet Darren Wershler, in his writing, identifies as the Conceptual vernacular: the "memos, business letters, status updates, forms, executive summaries,

lists, web pages, reports, RSS feeds, classified ads, indices, catalogues, how-to-manuals, and countless other hybrid 'information genres' that we habitually ignore." Wershler explains "uncreative writing" like Goldsmith's, like his own, as the result of poets increasingly employing the language and forms used to convey information. He dedicates his essay to the subject of the "findable," writing that exists in the culture at large that bears formal similarity to Conceptual writing, so as to question the very future of this field through its relationship to "its own uncanny double on the outside of the poetic economy." Montfort, Goldsmith, and Wershler chart a conceptualism buoyed by the digital revolution, in which the divide between information and aesthetics, or, for that matter, code and a work of art, can be as illegible as that between art and poetry. They describe a field, transforming alongside new technology, one which can no longer be contained by established categories, and yet one in which the very forms of arrangement carry a heavy burden of signification.

"I am a word processor. I sympathize with the protagonist of a cartoon claiming to have transferred x amount of megabytes, physically exhausted after a day of downloading," writes Goldsmith. Despite conceptualism's professed rejection of the expressive lyric subject, Goldsmith re-establishes the embodied author in his essay and in his work. He writes of his own "brute physicality" in the process of "textual transference" and the "sensuality of copying gigabytes."³³ This embodied conceptualism, indissociable, it would seem, from the information culture the subject inhabits, serves as the topic of Paul Stephens's essay about recent writing that feature textual representations of DNA coding. Stephens examines works that reflect the contemporary field of bioinformatics, the science concerned with the information flow in biological systems. Linking literary forms to DNA, Stephens's essay is nothing if not a study on the serious implications of arrangement itself. In his examination of recombinatory forms, both biological and literary, Stephens suggests the gravity involved in the organization of knowledge, the consequences, in biological, social, and political terms. Here, Sarah Cook's essay on found text in new media art proves particularly instructive. Cook returns us to the field of computational conceptualism, providing the art historical balance to Montfort's literary history. In her essay, which identifies new forms of art that share properties with software and computer programming, Cook acknowledges new media's facility for "moving information from one container to another" and mindfully suggests that "what you do with it, or where you put it, might be the important thing."

Conceptual artists, including Carl Andre, were making similar arguments with their constructions in the 1960s: "Each word is placed so that the letters are evenly spaced horizontally and vertically. On a type writer the horizontal spacing of the letters is a lot closer than the vertical spaces between the lines.



Installation view of Kenny Goldsmith, *Soliloquy*, 1996 (The Power Plant).
Laser print on paper.

This has been compensated by making two spaces between the letters vertically and three spaces between the letters horizontally ... The letters are distributed very much like grid paper.”³⁴ Carl Andre’s oral description of the arrangement of his words on the page begins Liz Kotz’s essay, which she devotes to the organizing structure and process of the grid in the artist’s typewritten poetry of found language. Kotz describes matrices of text that operate both linguistically and visually and recovers the grid from its modernist interpretation as a uniform structure that refuses language.³⁵ Resituating the grid in a longer history, shaped by the “weaving [of] thatched roof[s]” and the mechanizations of the typewriter, Kotz uses her discussion of the arrangement of words on the page to address a categorical failure. She describes the “repetition, gridding, stacking” of graphic figures to argue for the limitations of reading Andre’s poetry within the narrow frame of modernist art. And yet, there is generative potential in mislabelling and dislocating. Like Kotz, literary historian Michael Golston is concerned with patterns of repetition, and particularly the kind that afford visual and verbal reciprocity, indeed, the very kind that have been theorized under the aegis of allegory. Golston charts the history of allegorical attribution “from the disarticulations of Postmodernism to the melancholia of the Baroque,” including recent claims for Conceptual writing. In his essay, Golston debunks many grand claims for allegory over the past half-century, but delights in the critical fictions that have afforded poetic invention, the very kind that fuelled poets Rob Fitterman’s and Vanessa Place’s allegorical theorization of Conceptual writing for their 2009 *Notes on Conceptualisms*, excerpted in this volume.³⁶ Quoting poet Clark Coolidge’s designation of the “whole history of art” as “the great misunderstandings,” Golston reminds us that categorical error is just another form of constraint to be used to govern new forms of production.

Golston’s irreverent essay, departing from scholarly models, reads more like what we might expect from an “artist’s writing” than many of this volume’s rigorously theoretical texts by practising artists and poets. It is also a deliberate attempt, in the tradition of Broodthaers, to bring attention to categorical conventions and the ways they obscure information and forms of art. Many of the essays in this volume, like Kotz’s and Golston’s, similarly endeavour to unsettle seemingly resolved categories, first among them, the category of Conceptual writing itself. Brian Reed, for example, identifies a division within the conceptual lineage that yields a complex, contemporary field of Conceptual writing, indebted to competing legacies traced back to the dispassionate, intellectual conceptualism of artists like Kosuth, LeWitt, or Morris, on the one hand, and the populist spectacles of Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons, on the other. Other essays by Jacob Edmond, Antonio Sergio Bessa, and Mónica de la Torre importantly undermine this volume’s Anglocentric treatment of Conceptual writing.³⁷ Bessa establishes

Brazilian concretism as a formidable precedent for twenty-first-century conceptualism. Reading Haroldo de Campos's late masterwork *Galáxias*, Bessa charts a disruptive, polyphonic, and decentred writing that defies the reductive, popular portraits of concretism and conceptualism alike, and, instead, presents a lineage for writing as a form of thinking. In contrast to this modernist metalinguistic portrait of writing that traverses borders, both geographical and disciplinary, Jacob Edmond foregrounds the specific social, political, and historical framing of Russian conceptualism from the 1970s onwards and its relationship to Western models of the 1960s and today. And, operating somewhere between concretism's embrace of internationalism and Russian conceptualism's site-specific model, Mónica de la Torre explores the lost and found at linguistic and institutional borders, recalling the process of translating her work *Equivalence* from the original Spanish. If Edmond presents the self-conscious reconstruction of official, "master" discourse in the poetry of Dmitri Prigov, then de la Torre examines the no less powerful or defamiliarizing systems that govern the borderlands between languages, and, like Golston, reaps the harvest of misreading. Finally, Nick Thurston provides us with the tool that allows us to chart relationships across all of these writings with recourse to paratextual technology.³⁸ Thurston's artful index of this volume of essays reveals, for example, the relationship between Edmond's essay, in which he discusses Dmitri Prigov's engagement with "children's didactic literature" and Cathleen Chaffee's on the didacticism of Conceptual art of the 1960s and the pedagogical impulse in contemporary Conceptual writing, which she traces back to Marcel Broodthaers's paternal experience with childhood literacy training. Indeed, Thurston's index makes plain the many points of shared interest and recycled sources across this volume, and the long shadow of historical Conceptual writers, like Broodthaers, on these collected writings.

"One day, you'll see, people will re-read my poems." – M.B.³⁹

"As for the notion of establishing some direct relationship between literature and the visual arts, I'm afraid I've begun by choosing Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés* as a subject!!!" explained Broodthaers in a letter from 1973. With his *Exposition Littéraire autour de Mallarmé*, Broodthaers joined the company of *Aspen* editor Brian O'Doherty and a chorus of theorists from the period, who contextualized their work in relationship to writings by the French poet.⁴⁰ Opening the exhibition were a pair of counterfeit editions of Mallarmé's book *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, near-reproductions of the poet's 1914 Gallimard publication. The covers, though nearly identical to the originals, reveal Broodthaers's sly

operation in the replacement of the subtitle “Poème” with the word “Image.” This subtle shift on the covers imprints the books as a works of art rather than literature before the first pages are turned.⁴¹ Broodthaers’s copies, rendered before the “trickster” spirit of Broodthaers, who confronts the reification of language who takes responsibility for that text?” Thurston finds in contemporary Conceptual with his own consumption of literature as a form of art. Thurston writes of the hyper-production of Conceptual writing – the cloaking of “data shifting” and “data harvesting” as acts of today’s literary cut-and-paste technologies, anticipate the reproductive logic of Conceptual writing, in which the question “Who wrote that text?” is refashioned, as Nick Thurston argues in his essay contribution, as “works writing. In contrast to the bounty Thurston describes, however, Broodthaers offers textual paucity.

In the pages of his reproduced editions, Broodthaers replaced Mallarmé’s famously typographic setting of language with black bars corresponding exactly to the placement of Mallarmé’s words on the page. Translating poetry into pure image, Broodthaers foregrounds the spatialization of Mallarmé’s text, which invites the competing practices of reading and looking at language. Simon Morris’s contribution to this publication, an image-essay with text by Thomas Campbell, revisits the typographic field revolutionized by *Un coup de dés* with images interspersed with text, offering a view of reading, itself, as a form of art. In the photographs of the author silently reading, Morris assumes a familiar position, seated with book in hand and head in book. And in those photos, just as in Broodthaers’s copies, the text is withheld. We cannot see the words on Morris’s pages any more than we can see Mallarmé’s poetry in Broodthaers’s constructions. Textual absence shifts the gaze to textual supports. In addition to the two counterfeit paper editions of *Un coup de dés* in the *Exposition Littéraire*, Broodthaers included a sculptural rendering – anodized aluminum sheets of the poet’s double-page folios with the typographic layout and voided language marked by grooves in the industrial matter. The works remind the viewer of the mass production of so many minimalist works of the period, but also that the book, itself, is no less a product of the same system of mass production and distribution. For all of Mallarmé’s reveries about *Le Livre* existing in multiple media, *Un coup de dés* is resolutely a product of print technology, of the potential and limits of ink on a folio spread supported by the structure of the book’s spine. Broodthaers’s paper reproductions, with their old-fashioned typeface and the traditional cover layout from the French publishing house, signal writing from another time and place, as much as the aluminum sheets read as contemporary sculpture in the American vein. Broodthaers’s self-conscious historicism anticipates contemporary Conceptual writings that painstakingly employ outmoded, but no less sophisticated, textual forms and technologies in the face

REDACTION,

n. [a. F. *redaction*]

The action or process of revisiting or editing text, especially in preparation for publication. The censoring or obscuring of part of a text for legal or security purposes.



Installation view of Marcel Broodthaers, *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard*, 1969 (MCA-Denver). Collection of Michalis Pichler.

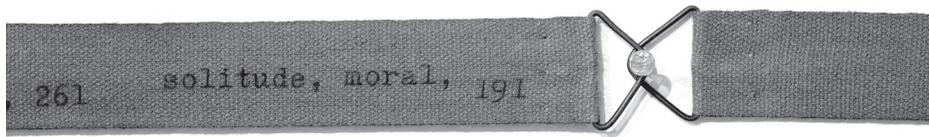


Detail of installation (MCA-Denver). Fiona Banner's *1066* (2010/2012). Indian ink on wall.

of the digital revolution – like Jen Bervin's hand-sewn reproductions of Emily Dickinson's fascicles and Helen Mirra's indexes of books or Fiona Banner's wall drawing, narrating the Norman conquest of England in 1066 and recalling the formal terms of the work's source text, the Bayeux tapestry.

In his essay for this volume, in which he describes his own practice with artist Jimbo Blachly, poet Lytle Shaw explains that their constructions of models, dioramas, and faux historical ephemera from the golden age of Dutch paintings yields a conceptualism meant "to anatomize writing's occasion and context." Delighting in the background noise of textual spectacle, Shaw hails contemporary Conceptual writing that takes institutional critique and site specificity as the primary legacies of Conceptual art. Broodthaers's oeuvre of counterfeits and fakes, as well as Shaw's and Blachly's constructed environments, expose the temporal and situational constraints that elicit specific kinds of writing. And however rooted in the textual event, theirs is an art dependent upon the displacement of language. But displaced to where and when?

On the opening night of the *Exposition Littéraire*, a recording of Broodthaers reading *Un coup de dés* again and again, played from a tape recorder in the middle of the room, but like Mallarmé's poem in Broodthaers's counterfeits, the recitation soon went missing, purged from the exhibition after the first night's



Detail of installation (The Power Plant). Helen Mirra's *Sparrow's Death*, 218. 2005.
Milk paint and ink on cotton.

playing. Contributor Paul Elliman's typographic reconstruction of another missing voice, that of Howard Hughes from a 1972 interview, uses print technology to present a textual portrait of a reconstituted identity. In so doing, Elliman foregrounds a tension between oral and textual events and their claims on veracity and authenticity. Unlike Elliman's writing, Broodthaers's disembodied spoken work, heard rather than seen, offered no visual attribution, intentionally obscuring the relationship between authorship and subjectivity. Art and literary historians Rachel Haidu and Patrick Greaney address the complex field of oral citational performances for this volume with essays on the artist Sharon Hayes. Discussing Hayes's work in relationship to that of artist Yvonne Rainer, Haidu hears in the orphaned language to which Hayes lays claim the potential for a layered subjectivity, the formation of identity at once singular and communal. Greaney, through the lens of philosophical history, examines the broader field of re-enactments, in which he identifies "moments of non-coincidence," the tensions between time and utterance, between language and subjectivity. And in these non-coalescing performances, Greaney sees the opportunity for change, not only for the artist to become someone else, but for history to unfold otherwise. Differentiation, Greaney and philosophy tells us, is a part of repetition. Poet and artist Vanessa Place celebrates this notion, writing about "the difference that lies in repetition, the difference that makes all the difference." Her meditation on her own art and writing practice and on Ovid's tale of Echo and Narcissus locates the value of recitation and reiteration in the challenge it poses to originary intent. The same words, spoken again, upend the balance of power, tell a different history, afford alternative identities.

A few months after the opening of the *Exposition Littéraire* in Antwerp, Broodthaers was invited to exhibit at the MTL Gallery in Brussels. For the new context (a change of time, place, and language), Broodthaers offered no original works. Instead, he mined his personal files, offering selections drawn largely from his practice as a poet.⁴² A handful of writings, however, dealt with the



Installation view of Jen Bervin, *The Composite Marks of Fascicle 28* (from *The Dickinson Fascicle series*), 2006 (MCA-Denver). Silk thread on cotton.

plans for his version of *Un coup de dés* (exhibited a few months prior) and, more specifically, with the treatment of the work's preface. For while Mallarmé's poetry was excised from the edition's textual body, Broodthaers preserved the text in the front matter, replacing Mallarmé's original preface. The shift of poetry to the position of paratext challenges the supplementary status of the textual framing device; it establishes the preface as the primary site of writing. For his essay contribution to this collection, Seth Kim-Cohen, too, privileges paratexts, delivering a work consisting entirely of foot- and end-notes (which, in turn, point to another set of endnotes) culled from texts bearing some relationship to Conceptual writing and its forebears (OuLiPo, nouveau roman, poststructuralism, etc.). Kim-Cohen's piece, laid out in a system of grids, visually and citationally interconnected, provides a constellation of texts, many of which are cited (and sited) elsewhere in this volume.

Postscript, as a paratext, foregrounds intertextuality and illuminates (like the celestial constellation Ursa Minor, which figures on the final folio spread of Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*), the differences that emerge through every cycle of repetition. In her essay on the Wittgensteinian impulse behind contemporary Conceptual writing, which opens the essays in this collection, Marjorie Perloff quotes the preface to both Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and his *Kringel Buch*, noting an echo that courses through the philosopher's oeuvre. Wittgenstein's explanatory writing on the logic behind his books serves for this introduction as well as for his preface: "The same or almost the same points were always being touched upon from different angles"; and again, "The one movement links one thought to the next: the other always comes back to the same place."⁴³

Notes

- 1 Marcel Broodthaers began his announcement for his first gallery show, "I, too, wondered if I couldn't sell something," acknowledging that the reception of his work as art rather than poetry would be conditioned less by the work's formal terms than by the systems of production, distribution, and economics, which govern its circulation and signification. Marcel Broodthaers, "I, Too, Wondered Whether I Couldn't Sell Something . . .," reprinted in *Marcel Broodthaers Collected Writing*, ed. Gloria Moure (Bologna: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2012), 138. First published in the invitation to the exhibition *Moi aussi, je me suis demandé si je ne pouvais pas vendre quelque chose...*, Galerie Saint-Laurent, Brussels, 10–25 April 1964.
- 2 Marcel Broodthaers, quoted in Gloria Moure, "L'espace de l'écriture," in *Marcel Broodthaers Collected Writing*, 20.
- 3 Marcel Broodthaers, *Vingt ans après* (Brussels: R. Lucas, 1969), quoted in Birgit Pelzer, "Recourse to the Letter," in *Broodthaers: Writings, Interviews, Photographs*, ed. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 168.

- 4 Marcel Broodthaers, "Ten Thousand Francs Reward," repr. in *Broodthaers: Writings, Interviews, Photographs*, 44.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 40.
- 6 Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.
- 7 The exhibition, which I co-curated with Nora Burnett Abrams, associate curator at the MCA Denver, travelled to Toronto's Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery (summer 2013) and to the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University (March 2014).
- 8 Neither wall texts nor labels distinguished between works of literature and works of art in the *Postscript* exhibition. But the valuations of works, required for the museum's insurance, provide arguably the clearest determination of disciplinary division. Works in *Postscript* ranged in value from \$80,000 to a mere \$100. Though some participants actively figure in both literary and visual art contexts, works distributed as visual art accounted for over 85% of the total valuation of the exhibition.
- 9 For a thoughtful, extended reading of the invitation, see Rachel Haidu, *The Absence of Work* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 3.
- 10 Dan Graham, *Art-Language* 1, no. 1 (May 1969).
- 11 For the exhibition prints, de la Torre's translations in black type hovered above the substrate of the original poem, which was printed in an ink nearly identical in colour to the paper's. The resulting palimpsest sustains the ghost of the original translation, calling to mind Broodthaers's *Pense-Bete*, itself haunted by its original life as poetry.
- 12 Craig Dworkin, "The Fate of Echo," in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, ed. Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), xxiii. Though Dworkin's essay is reproduced in this volume, this quotation, as well as another cited in this introduction, does not appear in the version collected here. Cut and tailored for the demands of this publication, Dworkin's essay reflects a shift in function from paratext, as preface to an anthology, to collected essay.
- 13 Founded by Kenneth Goldsmith in 1996 as a web-based collection of concrete poetry, UbuWeb has become the largest on-line archive for the historical and contemporary avant-garde. As an alternative archival and distribution platform, UbuWeb has grown, as Damon Krukowski described in *Artforum* in 2008, "to incorporate the functions of a virtual publishing house (via PDF), record company (via MP3), and, most recently, film distributor (via Flash). In its archival breadth, UbuWeb is now something like a library or museum." See Damon Krukowski, "Free Verses: Kenneth Goldsmith and UbuWeb," *Artforum*, March 2008.
- 14 Dworkin, "The Fate of Echo," in *Against Expression*, xxiii.
- 15 Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith provide a more comprehensive list of Conceptual writers in the table of contents for their recently edited 656-page anthology, *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*. However, departing from the logic that governed selection for the on-line anthology, Dworkin and Goldsmith self-consciously limited their paperback anthology to "works published or received in a literary context" (see *Against Expression*, xxiv). While foregrounding disciplinary distinctions, *Postscript* aims to address not only works from the field of literature but also those emerging from other disciplines.

- 16 *Poetry's* embrace of Conceptual writing introduced a broader community to this body of work, but it also delimited the field as a category of poetry, bound to a specific coterie of writers. See *Poetry*, July / August 2009. A version of the issue is available on-line at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/toc/2303>.
- 17 In addition to *Against Expression*, some other books and journals (on-line and print) that have notably historicized and provided critical reception of Conceptual writing to date include the special issue of *Open Letter*, "Kenneth Goldsmith and Conceptual Poetics" (2005), the on-line journal *Jacket 2*, the Swedish journal *OEI's* special issue on Conceptual writing, "After Language Poetry" (2001), and *I'll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing by Women*, ed. Caroline Bergvall, Laynie Browne, Teresa Carmody, and Vanessa Place (2012).
- 18 For excerpts and descriptions of many textworks by Conceptual artists, see Lucy Lippard, ed., *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973). Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson include many of the more polemical essays and manifestos in their anthology of writings on Conceptual art; see Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999). Contributor Liz Kotz's book on the proliferation of text-based works in Conceptual art – and their relationship to experimental music of the same period – provides the most comprehensive study to date of writing by Conceptual artists of the 1960s; see Liz Kotz, *Language to Be Looked At*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).
- 19 In his introduction to the critical anthology he edited with Blake Stimson, Alexander Alberro explains: "Given the complexity of genealogical strands and avant-garde strategies that combined to comprise what came to be referred to as conceptual art, it is not surprising that conceptualism during the mid to late 1960s was a contested field of multiple and opposing practices, rather than a single, unified artistic discourse and theory" (*Conceptual Art*, xvii). In his introduction, Alberro teases out competing "aesthetic theories or models of conceptual art," positing the "linguistic conceptualism" of Joseph Kosuth, Christine Kozlov, and the Art & Language group, for example, in opposition to the process-oriented conceptualism that "dismant[ed] myths of integrated subjectivity," exemplified by the works of Mel Bochner, Hanne Darboven, Sol LeWitt, Lee Lozano, and Brian O'Doherty. Alberro carefully maps the different philosophical arguments that undergird conceptual art practices throughout the 1960s and 1970s. See "Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966–1977," in *Conceptual Art*.
- 20 It is important to note that while many conceptual artists explored book and magazine publication during the 1960s and 1970s, few located their writing within a literary context. With the notable exceptions of Carl Andre, who saw his poetry operating within a distinctly American poetic tradition, and Vito Acconci, whose poetry later evolved into his performance and visual art practices, conceptual artists, by and large, explored the codex as an alternative exhibition site for their art. And while early supporters and distributors of artists' books, like The Printed Matter, Inc., which opened in 1976 in New York, chart a tradition for artists' books distinct from literary publications, many of the poets and artists most active at the height of Conceptual writing could trace their practices back through shared histories that include the interdisciplinary experiments at Black Mountain College in North Carolina (1933–57) or beyond, to the historical avant-garde.

- 21 While contemporary Conceptual writing is rife with appropriations of conceptual art from the 1960s, the convergence of contemporary poetry and art might have as much to do with contemporary art's notable turn to poetic discourse. Mónica de la Torre explores the other side of art and poetry's reciprocal borrowing act in her blog entry "Art & Poetry Now," for the Poetry Foundation website. See <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2014/07/art-poetry-now/>.
- 22 *Dot Dot Dot* is the print publication, edited by Dexter Sinister (the compound name of artists and designers David Reinfurt and Stuart Bailey) and published between 2000 and 2010. Since 2010, Dexter Sinister has distributed freely downloadable essays and articles through The Serving Library as well as their bi-annual printed journal, *Bulletins of the Serving Library*.
- 23 Price's predilection for the copy extends to his work with *Continuous Project*, a collective he began with Wade Guyton, Bettina Funcke, and Joseph Logan in 2003. Dedicated to the reproduction and dissemination of seminal art texts and magazines, the collective reproduced the entire first issue of Willoughby Sharp and Liza Bear's *Avalanche* magazine (Fall 1970) for their first distributed work. In 2010, *Primary Information*, the press founded and directed by artist James Hoff and Miriam Katzeff, released a limited edition of 1000 facsimile reproductions of the complete thirteen issues of *Avalanche*. This distributive echo illustrates the reproductive imperative that has fuelled publication practices by many contemporary artists. *Continuous Project* explores distribution mechanisms widely, figuring their reproductions on gallery walls and in public readings, videos, and published magazines. Hoff's and Katzeff's *Primary Information* is dedicated to the publication of artists' books and writings, and is responsible for the republication and recirculation of many works from 1960s and 1970s conceptualism, including the full on-line Seth Siegelaub archive and the *Great Bear* pamphlet series. Their reprintings of artist Carl Andre's *Quincy* (2014) and poet Aram Saroyan's *Coffee Coffee* (2010), however, attest to the important cross-overs between visual art and poetry during the 1960s and their relevance for Conceptual writers from both fields today. Saroyan's book of one-word poetry was originally published by Vito Acconci and Bernadette Mayer, whose influential *0 to 9* (published between 1967 and 1969) brought together works by many experimental poets and artists of the 1960s and was, itself, reprinted by Ugly Duckling Press (through the Lost Literature Series, directed by James Hoff and Ryan Haley) in 2006.
- 24 In an email correspondence with the author, dated 13 August 2013, Price explained, "I don't even know how to go about looking into how many times it's been reproduced; I have been very loose with allowing that ...When you include web publishing and bootleg Xerox positings in exhibitions, things like that (*Title Variable* has been exhibited without my knowledge, even!) then it's hard to track."
- 25 Stuart Bailey, "Transcript of a Voiceover by Giles Bailey for *Applied Art*," (Kunstverein, Amsterdam, May 2010), <http://www.dextersinister.org/MEDIA/PDF/AppliedArt.pdf>.
- 26 Phyllis Johnson, "Letter from the Editor," *Aspen*, no. 1 (1965): n.p., quoted in Gwen Allen, *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 43.
- 27 Seth Price (of Distributed History), Stuart Bailey and David Reinfurt (both of Dexter Sinister) have both contributed to this volume. Additionally, works by Price, Dexter

- Sinister, and *Triple Canopy* magazine figured in the *Postscript* exhibition. *Triple Canopy's* contribution, a QR code displayed on the gallery wall, directed viewers to a special edition of the on-line journal on the subject of Conceptual writing, presenting original works by *Postscript* artists Erica Baum, Gareth Long, and Caroline Bergvall that foreground the digital medium and explore the magazine's on-line platform. In conjunction with the MCA Denver, *Triple Canopy* held two days of events, a symposium and roundtable discussion, in New York City in the Fall of 2012. These events provided the source material for the print publication *Corrected Slogans: Reading and Writing Conceptualism*. Following the symposium, discussion, and special issue, the print publication serves as the final instalment in *Triple Canopy's* collaboration with the MCA and their *Publication in Four Acts*.
- 28 Allen, *Artists' Magazines*, 52.
 - 29 Marcel Broodthaers, "There Are Two Systems at Issue ...," in *Marcel Broodthaers: Cinéma* (Barcelona: Fundacio Antoni Tapies, 1997), 159.
 - 30 In her opening notes to the artist's collected writings, Broodthaers's widow Maria Gilissen Broodthaers reminds the reader that "MB once said: 'What is painting? Well, it is literature. What is literature then? Well, it is painting.'" *Marcel Broodthaers Collected Writing*, 9.
 - 31 Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreativity as a Creative Practice*, 2000, Electronic Poetry Center (SUNY Buffalo), available at <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/uncreativity.html>.
 - 32 Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," repr. in *Conceptual Art*, 12.
 - 33 Here Goldsmith articulates language's demand on the body. But for his work *Fidget* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 2000), for which he recorded every move his body made on 16 June 1997 (Bloomsday), Goldsmith subjects language to the burden of every bodily gesture, voluntary or involuntary. *Fidget* was originally commissioned by the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris as a collaboration with the vocalist Theo Bleckmann. The work was later exhibited at Printed Matter in New York City from 11 June to 4 September 1998. Goldsmith also collaborated with programmer Clem Paulsen for an on-line edition including audio files from the Whitney performance, available at http://archives.chbooks.com/online_books/fidget/.
 - 34 "Transcription of the tape made by Carl Andre for the exhibition of his poem at the Lisson Gallery, London, and the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, July 1975," transcribed and edited by Lynda Morris, 1.
 - 35 In particular, Kotz complicates Rosalind Krauss's argument in her seminal 1978 essay "Grids," in which she argues that "the grid announces, among other things, modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse." See Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 9.
 - 36 The formal organization of *Notes on Conceptualisms*, a collection of notes, quotations, queries, and asides on the subject of Conceptual writing, signals the project's intentionally provisional nature. And yet, as one of the earliest attempts to explore this field of writing, it has been quickly canonized through reprintings in multiple languages. *Notes on Conceptualisms*, with Robert M. Fitterman and Vanessa Place (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 3rd printing 2013), translated into Norwegian (Oslo: Audiatur, 2009), Swedish (Stockholm: OEI, 2010), Danish (Copenhagen:

- After Hand Editions, 2012), German (Berlin: Merve Verlag, 2013), Mexican Spanish (Mexico City: Conaculta, 2013), and Russian (Moscow: New Literary Observer Publishing House, 2014). The publication history of *Notes* provides a useful illustration of the global interest in Conceptual writing.
- 37 Vanessa Place's important series in *Jacket 2*, "Global Conceptualisms" (<http://jacket2.org/commentary/vanessa-place>) provides an expanding picture of international conceptualism with its competing histories, precedents, and social functions. The on-going series is an outgrowth of the panel, organized by Place for the June 2012 *&Now* conference held in Paris, including speakers Paal Bjelke Andersen (Norway), Christian Bök (Canada), Marco Antonio Huerta (Mexico), Franck Leibovici (France), Swantje Lichtenstein (Germany), Carlos Soto-Román (Chile), Nick Thurston (UK), and Vanessa Place (US). In October 2014, Mexico City's Museo Universitario del Chopo hosted another conference on Conceptual writing, with a focus on Mexican and Latin American writers as a parallel event to their exhibition *Art and Language. Visual/Concrete Poetry in Mexico*. For profiles on Conceptual writing in South America, the UK, Scandinavia, and Canada, see "Conceptual Writing: A Worldview," edited by Kenneth Goldsmith for the Poetry Foundation, at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2012/04/conceptual-writing-a-worldview/>.
- 38 Nick Thurston has long been charting and facilitating relationships across the field of conceptual writing. Together with founding partner Simon Morris, Thurston founded the independent imprint information as material (iam) in 2002 as a publisher of "work by artists who use extant material." iam's range of activities extend to publishing, exhibiting, curating, and developing web-based projects. Their exhibition *The Perverse Library* was a landmark presentation of Conceptual writing in 2010. More recently, they organized *DO or DIY* at London's Whitechapel Gallery, to mark the end of their tenure as the gallery's writers in residence as well as iam's tenth anniversary. For more details on their publications and projects, see <http://www.informationasmaterial.org>.
- 39 Marcel Broodthaers, qtd in Gloria Moure, "L'espace de l'écriture," in *Marcel Broodthaers Collected Writing*, 34.
- 40 For a discussion of Mallarmé as the "icon of the new generation of philosophers and theorists rapidly gaining political and cultural authority in Europe" in the 1960s, see Haidu, *The Absence of Work*, 66.
- 41 Other editorial adjustments to the front cover include Broodthaers' substitution of Mallarmé's name with his own, a move that reinterprets the role of author, and the replacement of the logo of Mallarmé's publisher, NFR, with the names of Broodthaers's galleries, Wide White Space and Galerie Michael Werner.
- 42 See Anne Rorimer, "The Exhibition at the MTL Gallery in Brussels, March 13–April 10, 1970," in *Broodthaers: Writings, Interviews, Photographs*.
- 43 I quote directly from Marjorie Perloff's essay for these translations. Please see her endnotes to her essay on her adaptation of translations by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte.

The Conceptualist Turn: Wittgenstein and the New Writing

How hard it is to see what is *right in front of my eyes!*

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Everything was becoming conceptual, that is, it depended on things other than the retina.

Marcel Duchamp¹

One of the most enigmatic and complex of Wittgenstein's Cambridge notebook entries is the following, dating from 9 February 1930:

Engelmann told me that when he rummages around in his drawers at home, full of his own manuscripts, they strike him as so wonderful that he thinks they would be worth showing to other people. (This is also the case when he looks through the letters of his deceased relatives). But when he imagines a selection of these manuscripts being published, the whole business loses its charm & value and becomes impossible. I replied that his case was like the following; Nothing could be more remarkable than seeing someone engaged in some simple everyday activity, when he thinks he is not being watched. Let's imagine a theatre, the curtain goes up & we see someone alone in his room walking up and down, lighting a cigarette, sitting down, etc. so that we are suddenly seeing someone from the outside in a way we can never see ourselves; as if we, so to speak, witnessed a chapter of our biography with our own eyes, – that would be disturbing and wonderful at the same time. More wonderful than anything that a dramatist could produce to be performed or spoken onstage. We would be seeing life itself. – But then we do see this every day & it doesn't make the slightest impression on us. Yes, but we don't see it in perspective. – Just so, when E. looks at his writings and finds them marvelous (those that he didn't

want to publish individually), he is seeing his life as God's work of art, & as such it is certainly worth contemplating, each and every life. But only the artist can represent the individual thing so that it appears to us as a work of art; those manuscripts rightly lose their value when we look at them individually & especially when we look at them without bias, that is to say, without having previously been fascinated by them. The work of art forces us – so to speak – to see it in the right perspective, but without art the object is only a part of nature like any other & the fact that we can exalt it without enthusiasm gives no one the right to thrust it upon us. (It always reminds me of one of those insipid snapshots that the person who took it finds interesting because he was there himself, because he experienced it, but which a third party experiences with justifiable coldness; insofar as it is ever justifiable to look at something coldly.

But now it seems to me that beside the artist's creation there is another way to capture the world *sub specie aeternitatis*. It is – I think – the way of *thought* which, as it were, flies above the world & leaves it as it is – contemplating it from its flight above.²

If the last paragraph here sounds familiar to readers, it is because, as Joseph Rothhaupt has pointed out,³ it echoes an observation made during the First World War and recorded in *Notebooks 1914–1916*:

The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is the connexion between art and ethics.

The usual way of looking at things sees objects as it were from the midst of them, the view *sub specie aeternitatis* from outside.⁴

But in the later note, the connection made is not between art and ethics, but between art and *thought*, that is to say, in the light of the famous aphorism "Philosophy should really be written only in the form of poetry" ("Die Philosophie dürfte man eigentlich nur *dichten*," CV 28), between poetry and philosophy. And the emphasis on aesthetic distance (the view from *sub specie aeternitatis*) is brought up again in an aphorism from the *Cambridge Notebooks 1930–32*, where we read "Style is the universal necessity, seen *sub specie aeternitatis*."⁵ Style, which remains to be defined, is somehow seen by Wittgenstein as *absolute*, immune from change.

Such seemingly Romantic reverence for the autonomy of the artwork is puzzling, given the well-known Wittgensteinian insistence on the impossibility of defining the aesthetic. We all remember the familiar adage in *Lectures on Aesthetics*, "You might think Aesthetics is a science telling us what's beautiful – almost too ridiculous for words. I suppose it ought to include also what sort of coffee tastes good."⁶ Or again, in Wittgenstein's Cambridge Lectures for 1932,

"The words 'beautiful' and 'ugly' are bound up with the words they modify, and when applied to a face are not the same as when applied to flowers and trees." Indeed, for Wittgenstein, "Aesthetics is [always and only] descriptive. What it does is to *draw one's attention* to certain features, to place things side by side so as to exhibit those features."⁷

Note that Wittgenstein is *not* saying that one can't talk about art or differentiate between art and its raw materials; rather, he insists, as he does in the case of meaning, on the *context* of any artistic procedure or "poetic" use of language. Let's begin with Wittgenstein's reference to the "insipid snapshot" ("die fade Naturaufnahme"), which may well mean something to the person who took it, reminding him or her of a particular place or event or moment in time, but which leaves the rest of us simply "cold." What, we might ask, constitutes the exception? Why have certain photographs – say, Alfred Stieglitz's *Two Towers, New York* – a snow scene of 1911 with the towers of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Building and Madison Square Garden in the background (see page 30) – become iconic, while others of the same subject (see page 31) seem easily expendable?

The difference, Wittgenstein would have it, is a matter of perspective, of framing. Whereas the 1909 photograph has no particular shape, merely reproducing what is seen from above, Stieglitz frames the building by encircling it with the snowy branch in the foreground, above the snow-covered banister leading up the stairs to an old brownstone, with the silhouette of a small black figure in the centre front contrasted to the mysterious cloud-covered skyscrapers.

Such artful transformation of an actual scene reflects, of course, a perfectly traditional – even Aristotelian – view of the relation of "art" to "life," of *form* to *informe*. But whereas classical theory conceives of *form* as a set of structural or narrative or rhetorical devices – in Aristotle's *Poetics*, for example, tragedy (the highest form of poetry) is defined as mimesis, *not* of "what happened" but by *ton pragmaton systasis*, the arrangement of the incidents – Wittgenstein's conception of aesthetic form has a curiously ethical edge: the "insipid snapshot," let's recall, is experienced by "a third party," not only with indifference but "with justifiable coldness." "No one," Wittgenstein declares, has the "right to thrust it upon us." Indeed, the artwork "forces us – so to speak – to see it in the right perspective."

Force, the *right* perspective, *justifiable* coldness: such strong value terms always governed Wittgenstein's response to particular artworks. The words "großartig" and "herrlich" appear again and again in his journals and letters, with reference to a specific symphony or poem or novel. Schubert's Quintet in C Sharp, op. 163, for example, is "von phantastischer Großartigkeit" ("exhibits fantastic brilliance"), and the second movement of Beethoven's *Eroica* is "unglaublich" (unbelievable, fabulous).⁸ Negative judgments are just as emphatic.



Stieglitz, *Two Towers, New York* (1911).



Metropolitan Life Insurance Building, Madison Square (c. 1909).

Alfred Ehrenstein's poetry is "*ein Hundedreck*" (dog shit); Mahler's music is "nichts wert" (worth nothing), the characters in Goethe's *Faust II* "eregen unsere Teilnahme nicht" (do not arouse our empathy).⁹ In keeping with his early formulation in 1916 – and there is no reason to believe Wittgenstein ever changed his mind on this issue – "Ethics and aesthetics are one."¹⁰

Again, this is by no means a new principle: Plato, after all, dismissed from the Republic poets whose seductive fictions would lead the future Guardians astray. But the conundrum of *Kringel-Buch* #52 is that Wittgenstein's understanding of *grammar*, first formulated in the notebooks and lectures of the early 1930s, seems to be at odds with his concept of literary value. Thus, in the very same year that note #52 was composed, Wittgenstein was insisting, in his Cambridge Lectures, that "there are no gaps in grammar; grammar is always complete"; or again, "You cannot justify grammar": "Grammatical rules are arbitrary, but their application is *not*. There cannot therefore be discussion about whether this set of rules or another are the correct rules for the word 'not'; for unless the grammatical rules are given, 'not' has no meaning at all. When you change the grammatical rules you change the meaning of the word."¹¹ There is no prescriptive grammar, no "right" or "wrong" way of saying something; grammar simply *is*. "Language is not *contiguous* to anything else. We cannot speak of the use of language as opposed to anything else. So in philosophy all that is not gas is grammar" (*Lectures 1930–32*, 112).

Is poetry, then, "gas"? An additive of some sort, a kind of language-plus in the form of tropes and figures of speech? Consider now the case of Engelmann's attachment to his own manuscripts, as recounted in #52. To look through one's own writings – letters, diaries, papers, sketches for stories – is to recapture one's former self – what one once was – and the selves of one's deceased relatives and former selves. Rereading such manuscripts provides the author with what may be precious information. For the outsider, however, unless he or she happens to be the author's biographer or is looking for evidence in a court case or some scholarly venture, the manuscript in question holds little interest. Engelmann himself was clearly aware of this situation: he understood that, among the welter of old manuscripts, there was not a single one that had synecdochic value, that was able to represent the larger sequence to an uninvolved reader.

The distinction is between information and art. In the words of an important aphorism in *Zettel*, "Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information."¹² And Wittgenstein gives this aphorism the header "Das Sprechen der Musik" ("The way music speaks"). Poetry is a question of form, not external reference. But the tricky part – and this is where Wittgenstein parts company with theories of poetic autonomy – is that "form" is not a matter of a special language

or some form of linguistic deformation as, say, the Russian Formalists argued; on the contrary, the literary work is itself, according to Wittgenstein, “composed in the language of information.” And there is the further complication that, for Wittgenstein, the truly artful work – in this case, a stage play – deals, not with heroic events or “great” characters, but, on the contrary, with ordinary life. “Nothing,” we read, “could be more remarkable than seeing someone engaged in some simple everyday activity, when he thinks he is not being watched.”

What, then, is artistic form in Wittgenstein’s lexicon? The adage in *Zettel* implies that the distinction is one of authorial intention – of choosing a language-game whose purpose is to create something artistic (and hence also ethical) rather than to dispense information. But we also know that, from Wittgenstein’s perspective, intention is not the decisive factor: many of the composers and poets he scorns certainly *intended* to be the best artists they could be. Moreover, the situation described in *Kringel-Buch* #52 skirts issues of intention as well as of rhetorical figuration. Wittgenstein imagines the curtain going up on an unobserved man performing the most ordinary of activities, a man unaware of being observed, “in a way we can never see ourselves” – a process that is pronounced “at once disturbing and wonderful” (“*unheimlich & wunderbar zugleich*”). Indeed, “More wonderful than anything that a dramatist could produce to be performed or spoken onstage.”

Accordingly, the highest art, in Wittgenstein’s lexicon, is that which somehow presents us with *life itself*, as it is actually lived, conveyed in the “language of information” but framed so as to render it *other*, unfamiliar, strange. Curiously enough, this view of art allies Wittgenstein, not with the great classical composers (Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms) who were his pantheon, or even with his fellow modernists – for example, the poet Georg Trakl, whose work he had supported financially on the eve of the First World War – but with an exact contemporary he would no doubt have scorned, had he so much as known of his existence. I am thinking of Marcel Duchamp, whose famous *Readymades* – for example, the upside urinal called *Fountain by R. Mutt*, the snow shovel inscribed *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, the *Bicycle Wheel*, or *Bottle Dryer* – illustrate perfectly the distinction made in *Zettel* 160, composed as they are in “the language of information,” but not used in the “language-game of giving information.”

The snow shovel, for example, was purchased at a hardware store on Columbus Avenue in Manhattan in 1915. Duchamp’s biographer Calvin Tomkins tells us:

There were thousands like it in hardware stores all over America, stacked up in advance of the winter storms, or, as Duchamp would say in the title that he inscribed on the metal reinforcing plate across the business end, *In Advance of*

the Broken Arm. Why did he choose this particular item? He ... had never seen a snow shovel before, he explained some years later – *they did not make such things in France* ... Duchamp, after taking it home and signing it “[from] Marcel Duchamp 1915” (to show that it was not “by” but simply “from” the artist), tied a wire to the handle and hung it from the ceiling.¹³

Describing his newest readymade in a letter to his sister Suzanne, Duchamp remarks, “Don’t try too hard to understand it in the Romantic or Impressionistic or Cubist sense – that has nothing to do with it.”¹⁴

But, as I have argued elsewhere,¹⁵ it does of course have a great deal to do with it, Duchamp’s shovel parodying any number of realist paintings of the period, in which the image of a shovel connotes manual labour and working-class ideals. In framing the object itself by hanging it from the ceiling or putting it in a glass case, Duchamp forces us to look at it in an entirely new light.

In a note placed in the so-called *White Box* (*À l’Infinifif*, 1913) – a note reminiscent of Wittgenstein’s *Zettel* – Duchamp posed the pressing question “Can one make works that are not works of ‘art’?”¹⁶ Countering the axiomatic belief of his time that the sine qua non of an artwork (e.g., painting and sculpture) was that it was made by the artist’s own *hand*, Duchamp introduced the idea of *art* as idea or concept, in which case craft is replaced by choice. Of *Fountain*, he wrote in a playful unsigned editorial of 1917, “Whether Mr. Mutt [the comic name inscribed on the urinal, with its play on Mutt and Jeff, or on a mongrel dog or mutt] with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. HE CHOSE IT. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object.”¹⁷

Decades, later (1959), looking back at his early work in an interview with George Hamilton Heard, Duchamp explained the artistic process this way:

You don’t define electricity; you see electricity as a result, but you can’t define it ... You can’t say what it is but you know what it does. You see, that is the same thing with art: you know what art does but you don’t know what it is. It is a sort of inner current in man, or something which you don’t have to define ...

But with the readymades, it seems to me that they carry out of the world of everyday life – out of the hardware shop, as in the case of the snow shovel – something of your own sense of irony and wit, and therefore can we believe that they have some sort of message? Not message but value, which is artistic even though you haven’t made them. The actual intention in choosing and selecting, in setting them aside from everything else in the world, does that not give them some kind of possibly intellectual value?

It has a conceptual value if you want but it takes away all technical jargon.¹⁸

Not message but conceptual value or concept. Wittgenstein would have understood this notion, and the idea of setting the object “aside from everything else in the world” accords nicely with the view of art proposed in *Kringel-Buch* #52. If the curtain of a theatre went up, showing a man, not knowing he was being observed, performing the most ordinary of acts, that would be “disturbing and wonderful at the same time”: “We would see life itself.” However, as Wittgenstein goes on to say, “But then we do see this every day.” Just as we see snow shovels in hardware stores and barely notice them.

Choice, framing, perspective, repetition: these are what transform the “ordinary” into something else. “Art,” as Hugh Kenner put it with reference to William Carlos Williams, “lifts the saying out of the zone of the things said.”¹⁹ Or, as Wittgenstein puts it in *Kringel-Buch*, “The work of art forces us – so to speak – to see it in the right perspective, but without art the object is only a part of nature like any other.” And just as Duchamp talks about “setting [the object] aside from everything else in the world,” so Wittgenstein speaks of the artist’s creation as capturing the world from outside it, “*sub specie aeternitatis*.”²⁰ In this regard the counterpart of the artist is the philosopher: “It is – I think – the way of thought which, as it were, flies above the world & leaves it as it is – contemplating it from its flight above.”

The Conceptualist movement in art (and more recently in poetry) might well have chosen *Kringel-Buch* #52 as its epigraph. Here, for example, is Sol LeWitt in his famous 1967 manifesto for *Artforum*:

In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work ... If the artist carries through his idea and makes it into visible form, then all the steps in the process are of importance. The idea itself, even if not made visual, is as much a work of art as any finished product. All intervening steps – scribbles, sketches, drawings, failed works, models, studies, thoughts, conversations – are of interest. Those that show the thought process of the artist are sometimes more interesting than the final product.²¹

LeWitt’s comment applies not only to the Engelmann passage but to the *Kringel-Buch* itself – indeed to the entire *Nachlass*. Wittgenstein was constantly revising his propositions, and the process of revision and repetition is central to his own conception of the book, as explained most clearly in the preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*:

After several unsuccessful attempts to weave together my conclusions into such a whole, I realized I should never succeed. That the best I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks; that, when I tried to force my thoughts, into one direction against their natural inclination, they soon became

paralyzed. – And this was surely connected to the very nature of the investigation, which forces us to move criss-cross in all directions over a large arena of thought. – The philosophical remarks in this book thus resemble a group of landscape sketches, which came into being in the course of these long and complicated excursions.

The same or almost the same points were always being touched upon from different angles, and new sketches were constantly emerging. A huge number of these were incorrectly drawn or not characteristic, marked by all the limitations of a poor draughtsman ... So this book is really only an album.²²

Here is the paradox that haunts Wittgenstein's aesthetic. In his commentary on the artworks he loved – Beethoven's symphonies, Mozart's sonatas, classical Greek sculpture, Goethe's lyric, Wittgenstein adhered to the traditional line, as it was given to him in childhood, about the nature and value of art. The canon was so circumscribed that even Shakespeare was held slightly suspect: "Was he perhaps a *creator of language* rather than a poet?" we read in an entry of 1950 in *Culture and Value* (CV 95). Or again, coming across a reference to Beethoven's "great heart," Wittgenstein says scathingly, "No one could say 'Shakespeare's great heart'" (CV 96).

But, as Wittgenstein never tired of saying, taste is one thing, the nature of art another; thus, Wittgenstein, whose taste would not allow even for the great modernist compositions of Gustav Mahler, was himself nothing if not an avant-gardist. In principle, he admired formal control – the Stieglitz photograph rather than the casual snapshot – but in fact he looked to art to capture the very process of life as it is actually lived – the man moving from chair to window and lighting a cigarette. His predilection, in LeWitt's words, was for the sketches "that show the thought process of the artist [which] are sometimes more interesting than the final product." Of course, because these show us how such central concepts as the language-game or the "form of life" are actually arrived at. Indeed, Wittgenstein repeatedly insisted that the language-game could not be defined; it could only be shown. And he gave one specific example after another.²³

Accordingly, when Engelmann declared that he found his own manuscripts wonderful but couldn't find one synecdochic exemplar to show to others, he was not as wrong as we might suppose; on the contrary, he was thinking like a conceptual poet. As Craig Dworkin puts it about the new conceptual writing being produced:

Eschewing the visual emphasis of illusionistic or referential imagery – with its call for aesthetic appreciation, narrative engagement, or psychological response – conceptual art equally abandoned the compositional bids for phenomenological

experience or emotional intensities that abstract art elicited. Instead, conceptual art offered information ... [It] substituted factual documentary – information about information – in place of the optical apprehension of composition, gesture, and the material facture of traditional media.²⁴

Context, restaging under new circumstances, creates a work that cannot be duplicated. The artist's vision – *sub specie aeternitatis* – is of necessity unique.

Since the late 1960s, when artists like Joseph Kosuth first declared that theirs was a conceptual art and invoked the example of Wittgenstein,²⁵ the role of context and framing have become increasingly important. Take Christian Marclay's recent installation piece *The Clock*, first shown in 2010 at the Hayward Gallery in London and then February 2011 at the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York. *The Clock* is a twenty-four-hour montage made of thousands of film and television clips, each of them capturing a specific minute of the day by glimpsing a clock, wrist-watch, church tower, sun-dial – indeed, any kind of timepiece – or by hearing people onscreen saying what time it is. "This incredible installation," writes Peter Bradshaw on his *Guardian* blog, "is set up so that whatever time is shown is, in fact, the correct time as of that instant. So as well as providing food for thought about the nature of time in the cinema, and indeed in life itself, the whole thing functions as a gigantic and gloriously impractical clock."²⁶ If, for example, you enter the gallery at 11:23 AM, you will witness a scene taking place at 11:23 AM, so that "real" time and film time intersect. Sometimes time is central to the action, as when someone is rushing for a train; at other times, a clock may flash on for just an instant in the background of a shot, an irrelevancy of sorts that only later strikes us as significant. Throughout, music provides the continuity. As Zadie Smith puts it:

Because you have decided that the sharp "cut is the ruling principle of the piece, you're at first unsure about music bleeding from one scene into another. But stay a few hours and these supposed deviations become the main event. You start to find that two separated clips from the same scene behave like semi-colons, bracketing the visual sentence in between, bringing shape and style to what we imagined would have to be ... necessarily random.²⁷

The coordination of audience time and film time shows up the extreme coding of commercial film. In the latter, Smith notes, "'Making lunch' is a shot of an open fridge, then a chopping board, then food cooked on the stove." Time, this sequence tells you, is passing! Or, again, years can pass in a moment as in the shift from the Paris flashback to the present of Rick's bar in *Casablanca*. But in *The Clock*, time *really* passes: we only see the moment itself before something

entirely different happens, even though the music often remains continuous and, as in a Merce Cunningham dance piece, may not support the image in question. “Each passing moment,” as the program note tells us, “is a repository of alternatively suspenseful, tragic or romantic narrative possibilities.”

The idea, of course, is to witness the actual, and inexorable, passage of time – a process the Wittgenstein of *Kringel-Buch* would have loved. “It is like witnessing a chapter of our biography with our own eyes. No simulation of storyline can be as real as this minute by minute transformation of what we have always already seen.” And Wittgenstein’s preface to the *Kringel-Buch* bears this out. From ##65–78, Wittgenstein tries to define the purpose of his book, circling again and again round the same set of phrases, dissatisfied with their locution. He begins:

The one movement links one thought to the next; the other always comes back to the same place.

The one movement builds, putting stone upon stone in one’s hand; the other always reaches for the same stone. (K-B 65, 66)

Like the artwork which frames and contemplates “life,” seen *sub specie aeternitatis*, the “work of thought” or philosophical meditation emerges from the cycle of repetitions and variations, gradually allowing us to take in the parameters of the language-game being played. “The question,” as Craig Dworkin puts it in his discussion of conceptual writing – for example, Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Day* – “remains not whether one of these works could have been done better, but whether it could possibly have been done differently at all” (*Against Expression* xxxix). And therein lies the Wittgensteinian paradox that animates the New Writing: on the one hand, “writing” has turned hybrid, allowing for media variation as well as the crossing of genres. On the other, it is a writing in which, as Wittgenstein insisted, ethics and aesthetics are one.

Notes

- 1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. von Wright; rev. ed. Alois Pilcher, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 44 (1940); subsequently cited as CV; Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Da Capo, 1971), 39.
- 2 MS 109, 84–7 (date: 2.9.1930). In the new edition of the *Kringel-Buch*, so named because it includes those entries Wittgenstein labelled with a “Kringel” or doughnut symbol in the left margin, this entry is assigned #52: see *Kulturen und Werte: Wittgenstein’s Kringel-Buch als Initialtext*, ed. Josef Rothhaupt and Wilhelm Vossenkuhl (Walter de Gruyter, 2013). In English translation, the entry may be found in CV #6.

- I have taken the liberty of emending the Winch translation, which is not always adequate.
- 3 Joseph Rothhaupt, "Kreation und Komposition, Kapitel 10" (manuscript), 71.
 - 4 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916*, 2nd ed., ed. G.H. von Wright, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 83–4 (19.9.1916).
 - 5 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Denkbewegungen: Tagebücher 1930–1932, 1936–1937 (Ms 183)*, ed. Ilse Somavilla (Innsbruck: Haymon, 1997), #29; for an inexpensive edition in French translation, see *Carnets de Cambridge et de Skjolden*, trans. Jean-Pierre Cometti (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), 39.
 - 6 Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 11. Cf. *Culture and Value*, 27–8 for similar observations about the beautiful.
 - 7 *Wittgenstein's Lectures Cambridge, 1932–35*, ed. Alice Ambrose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 35, 38.
 - 8 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Briefwechsel mit B. Russell, G. E. Moore, J. M. Keynes, F. P. Ramsay et al.*, ed. B.F. McGuinness and G.H. von Wright (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980), 47, 78, I cite further examples in "The Poetics of Description: Wittgenstein on the Aesthetic," in *Ordinary Language Criticism: Literary Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein*, ed. Kenneth Dauber and Walter Jost (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 231–44; see esp. 232.
 - 9 See *Briefwechsel* 78, CV 76, 47.
 - 10 *Notebooks 1914–1916*, 77; cf. Tractatus 6.421.
 - 11 *Wittgenstein's Lectures Cambridge 1930–32*, from the notes of John King and Desmond Lee, ed. Desmond Lee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 16,49, 58. The statements are dated Easter Term 1930 and Lent Term 1931.
 - 12 Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), #160, p. 28.
 - 13 Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), 157–8. My italics.
 - 14 See *ibid.*, 157.
 - 15 See Marjorie Perloff, "'The Madness of the Unexpected': Duchamp's Readymades and the Survival of 'High' Art," http://www.formaesentido.com.br/filmes_perloff.html/.
 - 16 Marcel Duchamp, *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp, Marchand du Sel/Salt Seller*, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), 74.
 - 17 Unsigned editorial, "The Blind Man," 6 May 1919, 4–5. Cited in Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), 185.
 - 18 George Heard Hamilton, "Marcel Duchamp Speaks" (1959) in *Étant donné: Marcel Duchamp 4* (202), 108–13; see p. 111. Cf. www.marcel-duchamp.com.
 - 19 Hugh Kenner, *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 60.
 - 20 For a suggestive treatment of a possible link between Wittgenstein and Duchamp, see Molly Nesbit, "Last Words (Rilke, Wittgenstein) (Duchamp)," *Art History* 21.4 (December 1998): 546–64. According to Nesbit, Duchamp's widow Teeny asserted that Duchamp had been reading Wittgenstein, although she is not able to document

- this supposition precisely. Nesbit relates Wittgenstein's concept that the meaning of a word is its use in the language to Duchamp's emphasis on the *infrathin* as measure of almost imperceptible difference in any designation of meaning. Cf. Marjorie Perloff, "The Conceptual Poetics of Marcel Duchamp," in *Twenty-First Century Modernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 77–120.
- 21 Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum*, June 1967; rpt. http://www.corner-college.com/udb/cproVozeFxParagraphs_on_Conceptual_Art_Sol_leWitt.pdf.
- 22 "Preface," *Philosophical Investigations*, German text with English translation by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, rev. 4th edition by P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 3–4. I have adapted the translation, which seems to me in various places incorrect. For example, "daß meine Gedanken bald erlahmten" does not mean "my thought grew feeble," but specifically that my thoughts were paralyzed – or, idiomatically, my thoughts froze.
- 23 In his contention that his key terms couldn't be defined, only exemplified, Wittgenstein resembles the Duchamp, who refused to explain what the *infrathin* was, giving instead the following examples:
- the warmth of a seat (which has just/been left) is *infrathin*
 - when the tobacco smoke smells also of the/mouth which exhales it, the two odors/marry by *infrathin*
 - 2 forms cast in/the same mold (?) differ from each other by an *infrathin* separative amount.
- All "identical" as identical as they may be (and the more identical they are) move toward this *infrathin* separative amount.
- I discuss this further in *Twenty-First Century Modernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 77–120.
- 24 Craig Dworkin, "The Fate of Echo," in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, ed. Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), xxvii.
- 25 Joseph Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966–1990*, ed. Gabriele Guercio (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1991). Conceptual art, writes Kosuth, "changed the nature of art from a question of morphology to a question of function" (18); or, again, "The art I call conceptual is such because it is based on an inquiry into the nature of art" (39). See also my "Writing through Wittgenstein with Joseph Kosuth," in *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 221–42.
- 26 Peter Bradshaw, "Christian Marclay's *The Clock*: A Masterpiece of Our Times," *Guardian Film Blog*, 7 April 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2011/apr/07/>.
- 27 Zadie Smith, "Killing Orson Welles at Midnight" (*The Clock*, a film by Christian Marclay), *New York Review of Books*, 28 April 2011.

From “The Fate of Echo”
[Introduction to *Against Expression:
An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*]

In the 1960s, conceptual art challenged some of the fundamental assumptions of the art world: the nature of the art object; the qualifications for being an artist; the fundamental role of art in its various institutional contexts; and the proper scope of activities for the audience (those who, not long before, would have been called simply “spectators”). Key conceptual works presented language as both the illocutionary origin of art and (in certain instances) as the artwork itself. Eschewing the visual emphasis of illusionistic or referential imagery, with its attendant call for aesthetic appreciation, narrative engagement, or psychological response, conceptual art equally abandoned the compositional bids for phenomenological experience or emotional intensities elicited by abstract art. Instead, conceptual art offered information. Abstraction, to be sure, had pioneered a mode of art that did not refer to something outside itself, but conceptual art substituted factual documentary – information about information – in place of the optical apprehension of composition, gesture, and the material facture of traditional media.¹ Furthermore, conceptual artists realized that if an artwork could be self-descriptive and also made of language, then that language could describe itself (as in Dan Graham’s “Poem-Schema,” for example).

More importantly, conceptual art followed the logic of Marcel Duchamp’s anti-retinal provocations to their logical extreme. If “what the work of art looks like isn’t too important,” as Sol LeWitt claimed in 1967, then perhaps, some artists wagered, the art need not be visible at all.² Dispensing with the retinal qualities of art altogether, these works no longer needed to be seen because “in conceptual art,” as LeWitt flatly explained, “the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work.”³ Moreover, he continued, “the idea itself, even if not made visual, is as much a work of art as any finished product.” Extending the post-war ethos of process over product to its logical extreme – a vanishing point where the product all but disappeared and the process extended back even before gesture to an initial mental notion or thought – conceptual art’s radical

interrogation of the status of the art object also renegotiated the role of the artist. Minimalist sculpture had already begun to gesture along those lines and would continue to reinforce conceptual art's related propositions. In one direction, the serial, modular, or permutational logics of Minimalist sculptures, such as Donald Judd's stacked wall units or LeWitt's open cubes, incorporated the cognitive as an essential aspect of the work; the artist established the parameters of a system which was then elaborated in space. In the other direction, the cool detachment of Minimalism's industrial or unskilled materials – construction-grade steel, hay bales, plywood, unmortared bricks – underscored Marcel Duchamp's implicit claim with the readymades that artists themselves need not personally sculpt or fabricate art objects. De-aestheticized and deskilled, aggressively unexpressive and resolutely non-subjective, Minimalism turned attention from the connoisseurship of manual craft and the hand of the artist to gestalt phenomenology and cognitive analysis, so that the model for the artist was less the unique Romantic visionary and more the Enlightenment philosopher-mathematician or the witty "pataphysician." Encouraged by Minimalism's attitude, conceptual art would position artists in an even more oblique relation to the art object and dethrone them from the seat of creatively original authorship.

Finally, with a shift in focus from physical products to the initial procedures to be followed (guidelines, parameters, recipes, et cetera), these works valued conception, in the sense of both origin and idea. "When an artist uses a conceptual form of art," as LeWitt explained, "it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art." LeWitt elaborated this Cagean ethos of non-intervention: "To work with a plan that is pre-set is one way of avoiding subjectivity ... the fewer decisions made in the course of completing the work the better."⁴ LeWitt's focus on a work's abstract inception hints at conceptual art's most daring wager. Having tested the propositions that the art object might be nominal, linguistic, invisible, and on a par with its abstract initial description, the next step was to venture that it could be dispensed with altogether. Lawrence Weiner's 1968 exhibition *Statements* – an exhibit taking the form, significantly, of a catalogue – contained two dozen self-descriptive pieces composed of short phrases, grammatically suspended by the past participle without agent or imperative, as if they had already been realized as soon as written (or read): "one aerosol can of enamel sprayed to conclusion directly upon the floor"; "two minutes of spray paint directly upon the floor from a standard aerosol can"; "one quart exterior green enamel thrown on a brick wall"; and so on. The grammatical form with which these phrases float free of particular agents underscore Weiner's insistence that his artworks existed as

statements, fully sufficient as they were printed, and not as particular enactments or unique objects. Although they have subsequently been performed, as far as Weiner was concerned the descriptive statements never needed to take any particular material instantiation. In his "Declaration of Intent," formulated the following year, Weiner lays out this conceptual faith in three articles:

1. The artist may construct the work.
2. The work may be fabricated.
3. The work need not be built.⁵

Here again, the grammar does much of the work; in place of the necessity and obligation that would have been signalled by "must," the modal "may" grants permission and opens the attendant possibility that the artist might *not* construct the work, and that the work might not, in fact, be constructed at all. Completing the separation of the artwork from its presentation, conceptual art had moved beyond Duchamp's anti-retinal stalemate and proposed a new state of artistic échec.

Conceptual art's insistent reinterpretation of the object of art – hunted all the way to the brink of extinction – highlights some of the fundamental differences distinguishing the art of the 1960s from the kind of literature produced by conceptual writing. First, recall that part of the radical force of conceptual art was its assertion that an artwork might not assume the familiar guises of painting (or drawing or sculpture), but could instead take the form of a text. Weiner's *Statements* catalogue was not a souvenir of his show, or a documentation of the exhibit, it *was* the exhibit. The crucial point, however, is not simply the occurrence of text, but how it is used (in the Wittgensteinian sense); to equate conceptual art and poetry because both use words is like confusing numbers with mathematics, as LeWitt figured it; one is misled because of a superficial resemblance of signs, failing to account for what one scholar has summarized as "the peculiar function of texts in the institutional context of visual art."⁶ One of those functions – to construe language itself *as art* and the art object as a text to be read – was, as we have seen, to challenge the retinal imperative of art with a deskilled anti-aesthetic. From the literary side, of course, the assumption has long been that poems are meant to be read, and so the mere idea of a poem made of words does not intervene in the discipline in the same way as conceptual art's linguistic turn. Indeed, the equivalent move for a poetry that wanted to model itself on conceptual art would be to posit a non-linguistic object as "the poem." That kind of conceptual poetry would insist on a poem *without* words. Additionally, the textual proposition of conceptual art undercut the

presumption of a unique art object; a significant move in the restricted economy of art's commodity system, the force of that negation is obviously lost in a modern literary context, where editions are the status quo.

More interestingly, the supposed "dematerialization" of the art object was bought at the cost of the rematerialization of language. In the critical dynamic of the visual arts, the turn to text initially signified something supposedly less visual and palpable than traditional media. But positing language as an alternative sculptural or painterly material cut both ways. From one direction, it suggested that visual art could be read through the lens of literary theory, while language itself, from the other direction, began to be seen as carrying a certain opacity and heft. Robert Smithson identified this newly doubled potential for art in his announcement of a 1967 exhibition at the Dwan Gallery; with an inversion of the expected terms, Smithson identified the new art as "LANGUAGE to be LOOKED at and/or THINGS to be READ." In a 1970 mural of dripped black paint and scrawled chalk text, a format recalling Situationist street graffiti from the summer of 1968, Mel Bochner proclaimed, with the haste of a manifesto and the apodixis of a foundational proposition: "1. Language is not transparent." In the move to oppose ideas to objects, conceptual art had to state those ideas in language, and the materiality of print, in turn, could not – in the final analysis – be ignored. "No ideas," as William Carlos Williams famously phrased it, "but in things."⁷ With conceptual writing, in contrast, the force of critique from the very beginning was just the opposite: to distance ideas and affects in favour of assembled objects, rejecting outright the ideologies of disembodied themes and abstracted content. The opacity of language is a conclusion of conceptual art, but already a premise for conceptual writing. The very procedures of conceptual writing, in fact, demand an opaquely material language: something to be digitally clicked and cut; physically moved and reframed; searched and sampled and poured and pasted. The most conceptual poetry, unexpectedly, is also some of the least abstract, and the guiding *concept* behind conceptual poetry may be the idea of language as quantifiable data. As Smithson emphasized with an addendum to his Dwan Gallery advertisement, appended in 1972: "My sense of language is that it is matter and not ideas – i.e., printed matter." Smithson's formulation, tellingly, recalls Stéphane Mallarmé's sense of poetry itself. Responding to Edgar Degas's complaint that it was easy to come up with good ideas for poems but hard to arrange particular words, Mallarmé wrote back to his friend: "Ce n'est point avec des idées, mon cher Degas, que l'on fait des vers. C'est avec des mots [My Dear Degas, poems are made of words, not ideas]." In conceptual poetry the relation of the idea to the word is necessary but not privileged: these are still poems made of words; they are not ideas *as poems*.⁸ A procedure or algorithm organizes the writing, but those procedures do

not substitute for the writing. Moreover, while any poem might have originated in an abstract idea, for most of those poems a variety of ideas could account for the final text. In conceptual poetry, in contrast, the text and its conception are uniquely linked: only one initial scheme could have resulted in the final poem.

Conceptual art's willingness to distance the artist from the manufacture of the artwork and to discount traditional valuations of originality is another vantage from which to compare contemporary writing with its art world precedents. That relation is particularly interesting, given that "precedent" is itself a key factor in assessing creative originality. In this case, attempting the most uncreative repetition ultimately disproves the possibility of a truly uncreative repetition. In the mid-1960s, Elaine Sturtevant offered some of the strongest challenges to prevailing notions of originality when she began reproducing the works of other artists and exhibiting them under her name: Frank Stella's patterned coaxial pinstripes; Jasper Johns' matte encaustic flag; Roy Lichtenstein's enlarged ben-day dots; Andy Warhol's gaudily coloured and bluntly misregistered hibiscus flowers. Sturtevant's works chided their audience, who too often glanced at a painting or sculpture rather than attending to its details; viewers were quick to identify "a Lichtenstein" and slow to notice the details that gave it away as a counterfeit (readers of the present collection should heed the admonishment; noting a method – transcribed radio reports; parsed grammar; alphabetized answers; et cetera – is no substitute for carefully *reading* the textual details of a work). Further, Sturtevant's imitations questioned the sense of property behind *le propre*, or what is one's own, by decoupling the artists' signature from a signature style. The twist, of course, was that many of the artists she duplicated had themselves made a point of featuring impersonal, iconic, or plagiarized images (Lichtenstein copied actual comic strip frames; Warhol's flowers were transferred from a magazine photograph by Patricia Caulfield; and so on). Sturtevant's forgeries implicitly ask how artists had so easily come to own what was never theirs to begin with: geometric lines; the American flag; someone else's commercial drawing or photograph; the look of mechanical mass reproduction. To complicate matters, Warhol had willingly loaned Sturtevant the screens used for the initial *Flower* prints, so in that case any material discrepancies were even harder to perceive and the question became more pointed, with more than a whiff of institutional and commercial critique: why, when one of the kids at the Factory made a print was it still considered "a Warhol," but not when Sturtevant printed from the same screen? Or to ask the question in a way that more clearly delineates the limits being probed by her work: could one forge "a Sturtevant"? The same question pertains to many works of conceptual writing. What, for example, is the status of a transcription of one day's *New York Times* after the publication of Kenneth Goldsmith's *Day*? If these works are so

unoriginal, if indeed anyone could do them, then why do they acquire such a strong sense of signature?

The answer is twofold. On the one hand, a work can never really be duplicated by formal facsimile. A retyping of *Day*, for example, substitutes the transcription of a literary text for the transcription of a journalistic text, to note just the most obvious difference. But even a subsequent, identical retyping of the same day's *New York Times* will always occur in the context that *Day* created: one in which retyped newspapers have been posited as literature and in which Goldsmith's intertext is inescapable. As this collection tries to establish, there are always precedents, often unknown, and so the important point is not simply that it has been done before, but that the intervention made by Goldsmith's work is irrevocable. Photographs had been badly silkscreened before Warhol, but Warhol's silkscreens became signatures because they established themselves as a referent which all subsequent works in that mode would have to acknowledge or labour to deny. Additionally, cultural contexts change over time, so that with some distance the replication (rather than the mere reproduction) of *Day* will not be a retyped newspaper, just as the aesthetic shock of Duchamp's *Fountain* and its institutional critique cannot now be replicated by placing a urinal in a museum, but would have to be approximated by some other means. For this reason alone, the tactics of twentieth-century conceptual art, when restaged by twenty-first-century poets, can never be simple repetitions. Equivalent objects, in short, do not constitute equivalent gestures.

On the other hand, as attentive readings reveal, identical procedures rarely produce identical results. Indeed, impersonal procedures tend to magnify subjective choices (to keep with the example of the newspaper: how would different transcribers handle line breaks and page divisions, layouts and fonts, et cetera?). The spoor of a personal signature remains in even the most deodorized works. More importantly, the question of forging a Sturtevant or a Goldsmith points out the degree to which creativity, like so many other traditional poetic values, has not been negated or banished by conceptual works but shunted to an adjoining track. The point is not that anyone could do these works – of course they could – but rather that no one else has. Judgments about creativity and innovation in conceptual writing are displaced from the details and variations of the final crafted form to the broad blow of the initial concept and the elegance with which its solution is achieved. The question remains not whether one of these works could have been done better, but whether it could possibly have been done differently at all. Here then is where conceptual writing shows up the rhetorical, ideological force of our cultural sense of “creativity,” which clings so tenaciously to a gold standard of one's own words rather than one's

own idea or the integrity of that idea's execution. The hundred-thousandth coming-of-age novel, developing psychological portraits of characters amidst difficult romantic relationships and family tensions, is somehow still within the bounds of the properly creative; yet the first or second work to use previously written source texts in a novel way are still felt to be troublingly improper. Retyping the *New York Times*, after *Day*, would be considered unoriginal; a story in which one generation must come to terms with a secret family history would still be given the benefit of the doubt. In part, conceptual writing is a litmus test for the reader's sense of where the demarcations between creative and uncreative writing lie.

There is no reason to believe that different institutions would develop at the same pace, even when they are as interrelated as art and literature, but one of the striking differences between these two spheres is the degree to which practices long unremarkable in the art world are still striking, controversial, or unacceptable in the literary arena. Following the theoretical provocation of artists like Sturtevant in the 1960s, outright appropriation became a widespread tendency in the following decades. In 1977, a small exhibition entitled "Pictures" opened at the non-profit Artists Space gallery in New York City, curated by Douglas Crimp (whose revised catalogue essay has since been widely cited); the show has become an almost mythic foundational moment for what came to be called "appropriation art." A few years later, a number of artists featured by the Metro Pictures gallery – including Sarah Charlesworth, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Richard Prince – established a critical mass of aesthetic poachers, presenting unauthorized reproductions of images in ways that radically expanded the limits of modernist collage. These artists continued to follow the lead of Duchamp's "readymades" and his demonstration that the artist need not personally fabricate the art object but might merely nominate it from another area of culture, such as the hardware store (or, in the case of the Metro Pictures artists, a newspaper or glossy magazine). Moreover, the Pictures artists took a cue from Andy Warhol's silkscreened repetitions of journalistic photographs, exploiting the power of mechanical reproduction to re-aestheticize and recontextualize images from popular media. Understood at the time in terms of Walter Benjamin's over-cited essay on "aura" and mechanical reproducibility, these works appeared as if they were bespoke illustrations for a number of contemporaneous French theories: the Situationist senses of *spectacle* and *détournement* as elaborated by Guy Debord, Gil Wolman, and Asger Jorn; Michel de Certeau's related concept of *bricolage*; Jean Baudrillard's ecstatic accounts of simulacra; the authorial deaths reported and autopsied by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault.

In the thirty years since the Artists Space exhibition, such wholesale appropriation has become a staple of contemporary art, recognized – and often eagerly embraced – by critical, commercial, and curatorial establishments. Indeed, appropriation is now so prevalent in the art world that Jerry Saltz has likened it to “esthetic kudzu.”⁹ The same techniques applied to literary texts, in contrast, are likely to elicit the response that such works – innovative or passé, good or bad – do not qualify as poetry *tout court*. Following a reading by Kenneth Goldsmith at Stanford University in 1997, for instance, one of the leading scholars of Modern poetry – a professor enthusiastic about a range of challenging and innovative writing from Ezra Pound to Robert Grenier, Robert Duncan to Susan Howe – was asked what he thought of the poetry reading. His response: “What poetry reading?” Years later, I was even more surprised to hear one of the central figures of Language poetry – a writer who had in fact himself incorporated transcribed texts into poetry – insist in numerous conversations that Goldsmith’s work was interesting, but that it was decidedly *not poetry*. I suspect that before long the literary status of appropriation will be much more like it is for the visual arts today, where the debate has moved on to questions well beyond such categorical anxieties.

Or, to put this slightly differently, both Sherry Levine’s rephotographed *After Walker Evans* and Goldsmith’s *Day* obviously raise some of the same general, theoretical questions about originality and reproduction (with the added twist that after Levine, Goldsmith appropriates the tactic of appropriation, inventively deploying unoriginality in a new arena). But rephotographing in 1980 and retyping in 2000, or exhibiting an appropriated image in a SoHo gallery and publishing an appropriated text as poetry, cannot be equivalent activities. Part of that difference has to do with the two media. Levine’s work inevitably entered into a century-old debate over the nature of photography, which initially had to fight for its status as a creative art to begin with; moreover, it resonated with a broader cultural concern about the political power of images and their functioning as signs. Goldsmith’s work, for its part, entered into a century-old rivalry between poetry and the newspaper and an arena already divided – in Truman Capote’s famous quip about Jack Kerouac – between “writing” and “typing.”

More importantly, part of the difference between 1980 and 2000 derives from the cultural changes brought about by an increasingly digitized culture. During those decades appropriation-based practices in other arts spread from isolated experiments to become a hallmark of hip-hop music, global DJ culture, and a ubiquitous tactic for mainstream and corporate media. Concurrently, sampling, mash-up, and the montage of found footage went from novel methods of production to widespread activities of consumption (or a “postproduction”

that blurs the traditionally segregated acts of production and consumption), coalescing into what Lawrence Lessig refers to as “remix culture.”¹⁰ In the twenty-first century, conceptual poetry thus operates against the background of related vernacular practices, in a climate of pervasive participation and casual appropriation (not to mention the panicked, litigious corporate response to such activities). All of which is directly related to the technological environment in which digital files are promiscuous and communicable: words and sounds and images all reduced to compressed binary files disseminated through fiber-optic networks. In a world of increasingly capacious and inexpensive storage media, the proliferation of conceptual practices comes as no surprise, and those practices frequently mimic what Lev Manovich argues is the defining “database logic” of new media, wherein the focus is no longer on the production of new material but on the recombination of previously produced and stockpiled data.¹¹ Conceptual poetry, accordingly, often operates as an interface – returning the answer to a particular query; assembling, rearranging, and displaying information; or sorting and selecting from files of accumulated language pursuant to a certain algorithm – rather than producing new material from scratch. Whether or not it involves electronics or computers, conceptual poetry is thus very much a part of its technological and cultural moment.¹² That moment is also, perhaps not coincidentally, one in which the number of poetry books published each year rises exponentially, and in which the digital archive of older literature deepens and broadens by the day. Under such circumstances the recycling impulse behind much conceptual writing suits a literary ecology of alarming overproduction. The task for conscientious writers today is not how to find inspiration, but how to curb productivity. As the conceptual artist Douglas Huebler wrote, in 1968: “The world is full of objects, more or less interesting, I do not wish to add any more.”¹³

That reticence is in keeping with conceptual writing’s continued exploration of projects that try to be “rid of lyrical interference of the individual as ego” (as Charles Olson famously put it).¹⁴ The emphasis in conceptual writing falls on work that does not seek to express unique, coherent, or consistent individual psychologies, and that, moreover, refuses familiar strategies of authorial control in favour of automatism, obliquity, and modes of non-interference. With minimal intervention, conceptual writers are more likely to determine pre-established rules and parameters – to set up a system and step back as it runs its course – than to heavily edit or masterfully polish. Indeed, the exhaustive and obsessive nature of many conceptual projects can be traced back to an unwillingness to intercede too forcefully; to use the entirety of a data set, or to rehearse every possible permutation of a given system, is to make just one

choice that obviates a whole host of other choices. The one decision removes the temptation to tinker or edit or hone. Above all, conceptual writing shares a tendency to use found language in ways that go beyond modernist quotation or postmodern citation. The great break with even the most artificial, ironic, or a-semantic work of other avant-gardes is the realization that one does not need to generate new material to be a poet: the intelligent organization or reframing of already extant text is enough. Repurposing or *détournant* language that is not their own (whatever that might mean), conceptual writers allow the chance and unpredictable disposition of that language to be determined by arbitrary rules; they let artificial systems trump organic forms; and they replace making with choosing, fabrication with arrangement, and production with transcription.

As with every avant-garde, the point is not that the techniques of conceptual writing are unprecedented, but that they are newly visible and relevant. To be sure, the figure of the uncreative writer is hardly a novelty. Jorge Luis Borges's Pierre Menard, for instance, publishes the same poem in two different issues of the same poetry journal, transposes Paul Valéry's masterpiece long poem "Le cimetière marin" from its heteroclite decasyllabics into the more familiar alexandrines of traditional French verse, and is the "author" (pace Cervantes) of the *Quixote*.¹⁵ Or at least of the "ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of the first part of *Don Quixote* and a fragment of chapter twenty-two."¹⁶ "He did not want to compose another *Quixote* – which is easy," Borges's narrator goes on to explain, "but *the Quixote itself*. Needless to say, he never contemplated a mechanical transcription of the original; he did not propose to copy it." Instead, Menard hoped "to produce a few pages which would coincide – word for word and line for line – with those of Miguel de Cervantes." The result, the narrator opines after a careful stylistic comparison of seemingly identical passages, "is more subtle than Cervantes."¹⁷ Herman Melville's Bartleby, in diametric contrast to Menard, does indeed copy and transcribe "mechanically" (at least before his perplexing work stoppage), duplicating "an extraordinary quantity of writing" with "no pause for digestion" and no taste for editing. Gustave Flaubert's two scribes, François Bouvard and Juste Pécuchet, also abandon their clerkships for a time, but they return to copying with the conceptual vengeance of inclusive, exhaustive, arbitrary systematization. Like interfaces to the proliferating database of printed matter in the Troisième République, their writing careers culminate in an uncreative frenzy of imitation and transcription. No longer seeking a referential or instrumental language, their graphomania evinces "plaisir qu'il y a dans l'acte matériel de recopier [the pleasure that there is in the physical act of copying]."¹⁸ As Flaubert imagined the final *jouissance* of their scribbling:

They indiscriminately copy everything they find: tobacco wrappers; old newspapers; posters; shredded books; etc. They discover a bankrupt paper factory in the neighborhood, and they buy old papers.

Then, they discover the need for a taxonomy. They make tables, dialectic parallels such as “crimes of the kings” and “crimes of the people,” “blessings of religion,” “crimes of religion” ... “Beauties of history,” etc.; but sometimes they are confounded by how to classify something properly ... enough speculation! Let’s copy everything! What matters is that the page gets filled – everything is equal: good and evil ... Beauty and Ugliness ... there are only facts – and phenomena.

Ultimate bliss.

The list of literary amanuenses goes on: Gogol’s Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin, another deliriously focused copy clerk; Moses taking God’s dictation; above all, the nymph Echo. In Ovid’s characterization:

She liked to chatter
But had no power of speech except the power
To answer in the words she last had heard.

...

Echo always says the last thing she hears, and nothing further.¹⁹

Echo, literally, always has the last word. And she sets the first example for many conceptual writers: loquacious, patient, rule bound, recontextualizing language in a mode of strict citation. Ostensibly a passive victim of the wrath of Juno, Echo in fact becomes a model of oulipean ingenuity: continuing to communicate in her restricted state with far more personal purpose than her earlier gossiping; turning constraint to her advantage; appropriating others’ language to her own ends; “making do” as a verbal bricoleuse.

Conceptual writing puts proof to the mythology of figures such as Echo, recognizing their tactics not just as allegorical conceits or fictional characterizations, but as viable strategies for actual authors in their own rights. Moreover, conceptual writing separates those who would rather read *about* Menard or Flaubert’s *bonhommes* from those who dream of actually reading what they supposedly spent so much time – inspired, sly, compulsive, obstinate, pernicious, mechanical – copying out. It is the legacy of Echo, recontextualized as the birthright of an author rather than a victim, and it is her fully reconceptualized challenge to those who would instead choose the confession of Narcissus or the romance of Orpheus as their muse.

Notes

- 1 Ian Wilson makes the interesting argument that “the difference between conceptual art and poetry, literature, and philosophy is that conceptual art takes the principles of visual abstraction, founded in the visual arts, and applies them to language. When it does that a nonvisual abstraction occurs” (Ian Wilson, “Conceptual Art,” in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* [Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2000], 414).
- 2 “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” 13.
- 3 LeWitt’s sentence has been frequently reprinted with the infelicitous typo “idea of concept.” I have quoted from the first publication in *Artforum* 5:10 (“Paragraphs on Conceptual Art”), Special Issue on Sculpture (Summer 1967).
- 4 LeWitt, “Paragraphs,” 13.
- 5 First published in the catalogue *January 5–31, 1969* (n.p.); later appended to many of Weiner’s works.
- 6 Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon, 2011): 27. See LeWitt’s sixteenth thesis in his “Sentences on Conceptual Art”: “If words are used, and they proceed from ideas about art, then they are art and not literature; numbers are not mathematics” (in Alberro and Stimson, 107). In an interview with Jeanne Siegel, Kosuth denies any relationship between his text-based art and [concrete] poetry with the following assertion: “Absolutely no relationship at all. It’s simply one of things superficially resembling one another” (*Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings 1966–1990* [Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1991], 51). Kosuth protests too much, but his general point is well taken. Jack Burnham makes the same observation: “Conceptual art resembles literature only superficially” (“Alice’s Head: Reflections on Conceptual Art,” in Alberro and Stimson, 216).
- 7 William Carlos Williams, “Paterson,” in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, 1909–1939* (New York: New Directions, 1986), 264.
- 8 The important exception is Darren Wershler-Henry’s *The Tapeworm Foundry (and/or the dangerous prevalence of imagination)* [Toronto: House of Anansi, 2000], the one book of poetry closest to art works such as Weiner’s *Statements*.
- 9 Jerry Saltz, “Great Artists Steal,” *New York Magazine*, 10 May 2009.
- 10 See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: La culture comme scénario: Comment l’art reprogramme le monde contemporain* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2003); and Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture: The Nature and Future of Creativity* (New York: Penguin, 2004).
- 11 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001); see esp. 212–43 and passim.
- 12 For a more detailed examination of this condition, and its political resonance, see Craig Dworkin, “The Imaginary Solution,” *Contemporary Literature* 48.1 (Spring 2007): 29–60.
- 13 Douglas Huebler, “Untitled Statements,” in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Howard Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 840.
- 14 *Charles Olson: Selected Writings*, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966), 24.

- 15 Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964), 37.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 39.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 42.
- 18 Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, ed. Alberto Cento (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1964), 124.
- 19 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), 68 and *passim*.

Was Ist Los

Here is an operation. In 1988 the composer Steve Reich, who at one point was called a minimalist, used the relatively new technology of the sampler to create a work based on the digitized human voice. The work grew out of phrases and sentences, the cadences of which suggested corresponding musical figures. Double strands laid out like objects upon their shadows. The voice writes the music. Listening through this music, specific language emerges: testimonials from Holocaust survivors, overburdened with meaning, unassailable. Well, a thing only really appears when it's turned into a weapon. *Ovens, showers, lampshades, soap*: an innocuous group of words, unless we're told that the context is Germany in the 1940s.

Where to locate the power in this operation? First, let us try to assemble some of its recognizable traits. It is an act of writing that does not hesitate to remove material from its native context, a move often seen as inappropriate or even criminal, at least in the realm of pop culture. According to this logic, an original is somehow violated through the creation of its double, a process seen as one more step in the lamentable cultural slide from representation to repetition. In fact, sampling is not concerned with repetition. Its purpose is the creation of new, discrete events. Each reproduction is an original and a new beginning. Each, in fact, is the first in a potentially infinite sequence, which is to say an infinite sequence. This is where the gesture's violence is to be found, and why it is attended by cultural anxieties. These concerns are often understood to be copyright related, which is to say money motivated, but it's likely that they stem just as much from misgivings about the implications of instrumentalizing human expression. In any case, there's no longer such a thing as a copy.

Artists are universally recognized as experts in the field of human expression. Naturally they have been quick to recognize these issues. I wonder ... if sampling may be understood as a process of using stolen documents as raw material for form abuse, might this not be true of all advanced art? Luckily it isn't

necessary to answer this question, as a thing doesn't have to be true, merely testable. With this task in mind we will turn to the realm of music, a superior place to test artists' reactions to the intrusion of digital techniques, which were introduced to music quite early, relative to other art forms. The notion of "intellectual property" as regards most written material was codified in Europe in the sixteenth century, a response to the new text-copying technology of print. The old laments about ephemerality, which measured no more than the distance between speaking and sensuality, suddenly fell silent. It was almost a hundred years before this notion really took hold in the world of music and a composer might actually own his composition. Previously, songs were understood to be common property, and, what's more, mutable, much in the way computer programs were initially understood as communal efforts to be shared, altered, and redistributed. A hundred-year lag! Although in this respect music seemed to have fallen behind the printed word, it soon leapt ahead. The practice of text copying has aged gracefully since the dawn of intellectual property, and its main exponent remains the printed page, but music has all along been subject to sudden shifts in the controlled reproduction and dissemination of commercial recorded material.

Let us reflect on these changes. To take an example from opera, Toscanini's tenure at La Scala wrought changes that would eventually turn the form into the consummate bourgeois entertainment. Prior to his arrival, the orchestra was seated on the same level as the audience, an audience with none of the docile characteristics of today's opera-goers; rather, a mob of hardy commoners, robust peasant folk, drinking, eating, and jesting: *"Let us meet at the opera and then decide whence we go ..."* *"Well-met, friend, pray share this flagon ..."* *"Scubberdegullion!"* *"Lass!"* etc. This is the lumber of life.

It must be emphasized: Toscanini had the luck of good timing. Architecture is the model in Western metaphysics, and as such is a necessary corollary to ritual. At just this moment the bourgeoisie was working itself into a supreme ecstasy of privacy, decorum, and interiority. Built spaces were spaces of fantasy. The opera is such a fantasy, a ritualized repetition of aristocratic tradition. A depletion, yes, but also a preservation, of forms lacking the vitality to proceed under their own power, delivered in the sorts of patrician packaging necessary to fire the bourgeois imagination. The emptying gestures of ritual are a force of preservation, just as death is the romanticizing principle in life. In this light, the phenomenon of a proper house for opera can be seen as a secret handshake between the middle classes and the aristocracy. For their part, aristocracies dutifully keep alive those endangered pleasures that repel the bourgeoisie. A slow sinking sensation, a sneaking suspicion: "Now, as then?" In our time there is no such thing as a bourgeoisie. Yet ... Well, why not? One dreams all day long, just

as during the night. It is possible that cultured people are merely the glittering scum that floats upon a deep river of production.

But what results from this? If architecture is the model in Western metaphysics, we are in some sense the inhabitants of older buildings, and ours is the business of living in a ruined house. It is useful to take a hard look at the word *ruin*, a word that splits. On the one hand, it could refer to the sorts of ancient structures cherished in the early nineteenth century: squalid, overgrown, graffiti-covered, surveyed at sunset for best effect. Yet it might also indicate those same ruins today: sandblasted free of graffiti, restored and conserved, made lucrative, seen only in the full daylight of "open hours." In the first example, ruin implies benign decay; in the second, active preservation, make-work, and industry.¹ Locating pleasure in benign decay is a perversion, for these structures are useless and wasteful, a spilling of seed, like gay sex, like gay sex.

All that which is not made useful and which serves no profitable function is seen as the unrecuperable waste of a society. This material may be understood as a force that crystallizes society's blockages, making visible a sort of cast of its bowels. The Boston Museum of Science features a display of "petrified lightning," which is merely a lumpy brown rod of sand fused at the instant of extreme heat. The exhibit stands for the operation by which a scientific process is mystified, replaced by a ruin under glass, making a fetish of waste. My anecdotal mention of this exhibit itself belongs to a certain class of artistic vitrine that treats cultural detritus similarly, wringing art from suburban architecture, say, or exurban wasteland. It is here that our strands come together, for it is in music that one may now locate such fetishes and vitrines. In the era of the picturesquely crumbling abbey or castle, poetry was king of the arts, and it was this form that drew all the radical young dudes. A century later, on the other side of modernism, in an age when any ancient scrap heap is carefully made over in the image of safety and security, music is the art toward which all the others aspire. It's here you'll find the young romantics. What accounts for this change? As with the adoption of ideas of intellectual property, the schematic shifts in music lag behind those of the written word. This is the lake of our feeling.

It was not until the affront of the sampler that music really went to work anxiously mapping and itemizing the husks of metropolises constructed by earlier settlers. Seeking a new classicism. With all the hedonism that follows a period of calamity.² The classical style (if one may be so vain as to label something that exists beyond time) is often said to stretch from Haydn to Beethoven. It might be best understood as a single unbroken lineage in which Brahms writes with Beethoven looking over his shoulder, a carefully organized sequence of events, preserved on paper and embodied in the concert hall. The twentieth century, however, put an end to this careful sequence, substituting a wildly

metastasizing growth based on the duplicable recorded signal. The arrival of the digital copy crystallizes this development neatly, almost allegorically, almost too neatly. You might think that music is in dissolution, heading away from form, increasingly resistant to the physical, and so also to structures of ritual,³ but you'd be wrong.

Come what may, everything is reused. Artists rummage through the toolkits of past artists for approaches they may make use of. The task is to take these instruments and fashion new tools. You want a fine-art approach, you borrow the tool from commodity culture. Look for the use, not the meaning! And if it's done wrong, no problem, there is produced a nostalgia for the done-right way. For these reasons, the modern idea of a renovated ruin may be more relevant for art than the nineteenth century model of picturesque decay.

But it still eludes me ... what is so particular about the sampler? Take a close look at the economic and technological particulars of this tool. In 1979, the first commercial sampler hit the market for around \$25,000. The *Fairlight*. What a name! Ha, ha, ha. And so spendy! The steep price was typical of these early machines, which were consequently purchased by institutions, primarily well-funded university composition labs. In other words, this was a brief period when most of the people exploring sample-based music were classically trained academic composers, who recognized in the computer a spectacular means of testing their high-flying propositions.⁴ This moment is emblematic of music's modernist style, which all along had a tendency, as with the abstruse proposals of Schoenberg or Webern, to make advanced theoretical training a prerequisite for participation. Now it was expected of students that they not only cultivate a familiarity with the usual histories and methodologies, but also rely entirely on the academy for production tools. After all, many middle-class homes featured a piano, but none a computer workstation. It was a natural endpoint to modernist music's evolutionary chain, which flourished on a delicate diet of technology, money, and control. Hardly characteristic of modernist music alone, it is true, but this moment beautifully illustrates it.

But the moment was fleeting. The sampler's arrival upset the balance, and, as often happens with young technologies, the market seeped in, all the strictures slipped, old model of the pyramid, new model of the pancake ... Ten years after the introduction of the *Fairlight*, any composer could buy a decent sampler for less than a grand, add a newly available personal computer, and wind up with a versatile home studio. The same was true of any teenager producing techno or rap, the experimental musics of the period.⁵ All this headlong change left a wake of wreckage and trauma, and, in academic computer music, a unique and peculiar musical period, a curiosity, the equivalent of a geographically isolated evolutionary zone where unique life forms go largely undiscovered. Actions of

concealing belong to violence. A bruised music, which seems still to have no name, unsure whether it was the start or the end of something.

Around the same time sampling was introduced, the music industry developed MIDI, a kind of universal machine language that allows electronics to synchronize and exchange information. Packets of information, commands in fact, are relayed from one piece of gear to the next, allowing a synthesizer of one manufacture to get in line with a drum machine of another. These silent commands, such as “start note” and “end note,” are known as *events*. Arguably a language, and certainly a system of control, destined to be the new coin of the realm, a currency of loins and coins. Because it was intended for swift, industry-wide adoption, the concept had to be widely familiar, rather than intelligible only to technicians, engineers, and programmers. That meant attaching a friendly front-end to the code. The public happens to be most comfortable with the piano, and this became electronic music’s user interface. This is why the *events* lurking behind most of the music you hear on the radio actually preserve the slight, barely perceptible movement of a fingertip somewhere striking a key. Strike the key and trigger an event, which is immediately sequenced in a series of other events. A chain of control achieved through a simple depression. When I am depressed, there is power at work somewhere.

Many are interested in the idiom of a form, few in the grammar. Personal computers, for example, were originally made so as to be programmable by their owners, but when consumers eventually rejected this aspect it was removed or hidden. Similarly, while the combination of sampled sounds, MIDI, and digital manipulation promised all sorts of possibilities, it turns out that most people don’t want to build sounds that have never been heard. They want sounds corresponding to existing phenomena, invocations of reality at the touch of a finger, like paint straight from the tube: brass, woodwinds, car accidents, shrieks, breaking glass. The machine recalls events and dispatches them in a digital relay that is by design simply on or off, making obsolete the weak signal, the half-understood communication. A zero-sum spell.

So, you found the sampler’s perfect expression early on, when you hit on the idea of employing sampled human voice as a re-pitchable synthesizer sound. An electronic keyboard simulates a piano, often noting even the force with which the keys are struck: it wants you to believe that it is a percussion instrument. The voice-sample technique, then, is the process of generating limitless copies of a unique and resonant human utterance, refashioned as a sprawling kit of silicon-calibrated fake drums. The voice becomes a structural element under total control; it is made useful, as opposed to evocative or expressive. That which reliably promises communication becomes pure instrumentality, a move based on the notion that instruments give us what we want – predictability,

security, control – rather than the confirmation of an accurate representation of the real. It goes to show you that when your desires become reality, you don't need fantasy any longer, nor art.

The technique was immediately popular among academic composers and pop producers alike,⁶ but soon disappeared from both realms, possibly because it seemed dated, but more likely because sampled and repitched voice is disturbing, a speech terrible and inhuman, an emulation gone bad. The sampled word is the zero degree of the word, as found in the dictionary, or in poetry. Here the communicative imperative, which depends on repetition and difference, was symbolically short-circuited, and, moreover, from within the cloak of language. It is not surprising that the technique fell into disfavour. Man fall from a tree, that tree be felled, man fall in a well, that well be filled.

Samplers continue to offer one entirely new experience, at least on the level of consumption: the recognition, while listening to an unknown piece of music, of the basis for a sample used in a familiar piece. As you look up with bewildered pleasure, the music charges on, diverging from the repetition you expected. You briefly glimpsed a private, inaccessible field between two disparate experiences, a mental correlate to the phantom step at the top of the stairs. Whatever pleasure you can sustain must rely on simultaneous presence and absence.⁷

Digital duplication was one of the twentieth century's few new schemas. Such developments draw the curtain on older powers, and, by the end of the 1980s, around the time Reich completed his sample-based work, the configuration *avant-garde music* was thoroughly depleted, a constellation made cold by forgetfulness. All forms of depletion are heralded by the degradation of language, and, just as the eclipse of Rome's power was contemporary with the decline of Latin, so the eclipse of avant-garde music was indicated by its wish to transform embodied language into an instrument. A desire to be, rather than to seem. You could argue that sampling poisoned the well. On the other hand, it is true that in homeopathic medicine, and sometimes in magic, you put a drop of the bad thing, the thing you fight, into water or some other medium. Sampling may be invasive, negating repetition, disordering us, but then that's the wish of every man, to disorder, to mayhem. You must fight something in order to understand it! Voice sampling, possibly all sampling, gives us a text that is critical of reading.

Graffiti performs a similar operation. The gesture of graffiti must preserve that which it seeks to destroy. Were it to entirely efface its object, its particular critique would vanish. None, after all, is worse shod than the shoemaker's wife. The work of Broodthaers sometimes follows this logic, most clearly in his piece *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, with its pleasantly incestuous abuse of

the francophone avant-garde. The publication of Mallarmé's poem "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard," a work distinguished by its typography and disposition of the words upon the page, marked the first time that a poem's conception and meaning was determined through the mechanical printing process. A lyric automation of the design function. In 1969, Broodthaers made a series of pieces that reproduced the exact page layout of Mallarmé's poem, and the layout alone, since he effaced each line of text with a solid black bar. This gesture, while it banished all communicative symbols, retained the striking look and feel of the work.⁸ Mallarmé's piece was emptied out, reduced to seductive packaging. This is a move typical of "appropriation," which may be considered simply an advanced form of packaging. These depleted forms were engraved onto aluminum plates, as if prepped for mass production, and presented as fine art. Broodthaers claims and then augments Mallarmé's poem to produce a new, third body, a field between the works. The whole is without novelty, save the spacing of one's reading; the blanks, in effect, assume importance. The madness of the "a self-annihilating nothing" prescription. But this was only to be expected, since Broodthaers was an imitation artist. It may be that the supreme triumph of such advanced art is to cast doubt on its own validity, mixing a deep scandalous laughter with the religious spirit. There is a violence in this turn, the same violence that attends graffiti: "Don't think, look!"

In regular usage, the word *graffiti* describes an urban decay-threat, akin to mould, understood as pathology. It may be pathological, but not because it's vandalism, rather because it dreams of total saturation through an open-ended sequence of events, each a slight variation on the last. Such total coverage is a futile and perverse premise, an infinite possibility wedded to perpetual disappointment, a pursuit ripe with frustration. Like the poor man who sells his saucepan to buy something to put in it. Then again, graffiti, like any human expression, is basically a search to find a style and context that makes further expression possible. Graffiti Culture (and why does it take so long for people to map a "culture" on to their violence?) represents the anarchic, expressive territory of those who have subverted painterly representation from the standpoint of cool alienation. A person inscribing a coded sign on the side of a bridge piling enacts a ritual repetition: language is defaced by pictures. Writing that will never have a book. This isn't the business of living in a ruined house, it's the business of representing a ruined house, its interior trappings sketched out for all to see. The art object is seen as an object of contemplation, not to be parsed, but to be puzzled over. Its secrets may have to do with art, but with something else as well, which hovers beyond, with no name forthcoming.

In my view, it's refreshing to watch a form deplete itself: "Ah, now it becomes easier to see it as not a belief but a historical movement, which is to say

a movement of thought. Easier now to trace the social shift and extrapolate out as far as desired: all design, all art, all packaging."⁹ Take vacuum forming, an industrial process that gives us the ubiquitous polystyrene packaging of batteries, toys, and toothbrushes, as well as of luxury items like boxed candies and cosmetics. Casual research into the use of this process in the plastic arts suggests that the chief instances, including Broodthaers's rectilinear plaques and Öyvind Fahlström's Esso/LSD reliefs, take the logic of the commercial sign as their model. This is congruent with a sustained twentieth-century artistic investigation of advertising and display, from Rudy Burckhardt or Walter Benjamin's interest in the sloughed-off detritus of commodity culture, to a more recent fascination with corporate monograms. What would it mean to employ such a process for the purpose of reproducing not the structures of language and capitalist syntax, but those of the human form? Making a package for conservative statuary and classical figuration, for art itself: a violent cough, as when the human voice is "repurposed" as an instrument. What it means is, it shows how far we've come with our packaging. Full circle, the lowest shall be highest. In the evenings, you can stroll out to see how we're coming along with the construction of the temple.

Facts are, after all, opinions.

– by Ghandi

Notes

- 1 The French have a saying: the consumer has only three basic needs, to be safe, to be loved, to be beautiful. This is the desire of ruins in our time.
- 2 Historically, all new forms attack classicism; it's a move characteristic not only of Romantic poetry, but also of the neo-expressionist painters of the 1980s, for whom the darkest place was under the lamp.
- 3 The sudden shift from wired phones to mobile phones. The telephone is introduced as a wire-bound domestic appliance, a singular site, in fact often attached to the wall, and it serves multiple people, whether through the party line, or later the shared "phone in the hall," or, ultimately, the family phone. With the introduction of the mobile phone this model is upended, replaced by a roving non-site at the service of one.
- 4 It's the engineers who strike ground in digital creative arenas. This pattern is apparent not only in early computer music, but also in early computer-graphics experiments, and in the earnest, fresh-faced CompSci graduates who are now enabling Hollywood's growing dependence on CGI. Something to do with Leonardo.
- 5 This raises the question of amateur production. As with all strategies of appropriation, sampling cannot be conceived of in terms of amateur or professional roles. This is part of its violence. Collecting and illegally redistributing material has no

- professional dimension; the person who compiles a mix tape for a friend is not an amateur. A licit practice that approximates this manoeuvre is that of a corporation that cheaply purchases rights to déclassé cultural material, like bygone dance music, from those now forced to part with it cheaply, thence to repackage these goods for re-consumption, either under the banner of nostalgia (the low-end approach), or for the archiving fetish of the would-be collector (the high-end approach).
- 6 I once recalled someone standing by a keyboard, blurting out, "I don't know what to say!" The phrase belonged to a female character on an early Cosby show, and was spoken into a new sampling keyboard demonstrated by Stevie Wonder, who appeared as himself. With some deft adjustments he multiplied her apparently random words across the span of the keyboard, repitched appropriately, basso profundo to mezzo-soprano, all subject to easy control through key depression. It was in fact Stevie Wonder, in 1981, who purchased the very first of the famous Emulator samplers, fresh off the assembly line. A quaint memory. What a time I chose to be born!
- 7 This experience is utterly different from that of recognizing one composer's melodic quotation of another's work, as different as is the scan from the photograph.
- 8 "Look and feel," a term popularized by the computer industry, is often used to describe the overall aesthetic of a particular operating system. Like the shade of seduction used to paint the information architecture. A well-known example is the Macintosh's successful graphic user interface, which was subsequently copied throughout the industry. The term gained notoriety through a series of lawsuits – Xerox against Apple, Apple against Microsoft and Hewlett-Packard – brought on the basis of whether or not it was legal to appropriate aesthetic qualities crystallized in code. Look and feel, in its current sense, is a notion that did not really exist prior to the personal computer, but one that now affects all consumer realms based on digital technology.
- 9 Compare emblematic New York graffiti tags of the 1970s, like Zephyr, Futura, or PhaseII, with those of the 1980s such as Sony, Seiko, and Casio, and then with those of the 1990s, by which time the best sense-making letter combinations were used up: Revs, Kuma, Sems, Naers. A graceful arc from poetry to consumer fetish to emptied form. Digital tags such as screen names and Internet addresses will not follow this arc, which belongs to the past. Décor Holes.

Echo Ἠχώ

I am an appellate attorney by trade. Appellate comes from appeal, meaning “calling,” a word of early-fourteenth-century origin, from the French *apler*, to call upon, accuse, and the Latin *appellare*, to accost, address, summon, name. To appeal to someone is to solicit a response. To solicit a response from someone is to invite speech. More accurately, it is speech calling for more speech. An appeal thus presupposes an originary voice, like etymology itself, and a respondent voice, like the call of the law itself. For the law is not a point of origin, but a point of counterpoint, just as words mean in opposition though they start in consensus. I am a conceptual poet by avocation. Poetry to me means that which exists as poetry within the institution of poetry. This is also a simple matter of call and response, for I could argue that even those attempts to exclude me from the institution of poetry are institutional attempts, and, as you know, once something is institutionally engaged, there you go. Or rather here we are. Listening to my voice within this – a certain poetic context.

All of my callings are about mimesis. Radical mimesis, the very real representation of the Real. Perhaps by virtue of their more formalized engagement with reproduction, women have been the containers of the Real, and men have fashioned their reproductions around this representation, and vice versa.¹ We don’t need to dive into the pools of prose on this somewhat banal thesis, for this is not my purpose or my point. My question is about conceptualism as mimesis, about reproduction as representation. For conceptualism is often reproduced text, most commonly via appropriation or erasure or the mash-up. Reiteration and regurgitation, though sometimes we swallow. In each of these techniques, there is an allegorical representation of what’s been (or being) said somewhere else, to some other affect and end. An echoing. Echo comes from Echo (Ἠχώ, *Ēkhō*), the Greek meaning “sound,” now meaning, consensually: 1. a repetition of sound produced by the reflection of sound waves from an obstructing surface. 2. a sound heard again near its source after being reflected.

3. any repetition or close imitation, as of the ideas or opinions of another. 4. a person who reflects or imitates another. 5. a sympathetic or identical response, as to sentiments expressed. 6. a lingering trace or effect. 7. [...] a mountain nymph who pined away for love of the beautiful youth Narcissus until only her voice remained."²

Echo from the myth of Echo, heretofore primarily significant in terms of her failed call and response with Narcissus, undisputed hero of psychoanalysis and pop-psychosis, emblem of our emblematic age. Echo, to recap, was a nymph punished by Hera for her gift of gab – for Echo would distract Hera with discursive narratives of great interest while Zeus consorted with an assortment of other nymphs. Detecting this, Hera cursed Echo to mere reiteration; wandering one day through the wood, Echo surprised Narcissus on a hunt. Being no more or less immune to visual allure than the next fellow, Echo happily repeated Narcissus's calls to "Come," and "Let us join." As she reached for the boy, he fled, saying, according to Golding, "I first will die ere thou shalt take of me thy pleasure," to which she could only respond, "Take of me thy pleasure."³

Now while much attention has been focused on Narcissus, the cute one, very little seems to have fallen upon Echo. In her essay "Echo," Spivak rightly points out that the myth of Narcissus is "a tale of the construction of the self as object of knowledge."⁴ Spivak sees the story of Echo in this tale as a story of punishment in which the punished ethically asserts her colonized subjectivity, as the Latin cannot literally reiterate Narcissus's use of the second-person interrogative (which repeats in English as the imperative) when Narcissus asks, "Why do you fly from me?"⁵ Via this grammatical or, more precisely, conjugational gap, Echo becomes the unintended refusal of the trap of the sovereign subject.⁶ For her part, Irigaray argued that Echo's fractured reiterations were a perfect example of an imperfect mimesis, a subjective subversion of the mirror that women are supposed to be for men, an exercise Spivak dilated and described as "strategic essentialism."⁷ In this sense, Echo herself becomes the obstructing surface that resounds.

But I am interested in Echo as pure malevolence. As an instantiation of a kind of radical evil that I advocate as the fate of poetry – poetry as pure materiality, as pure presence, as the copious fact that propels one into the kind of Dionysian fatalism that causes hearts, minds, and corks to pop, that is to say, to unstop. And by fate, of course, I mean state. For as with myth and poetry, what will be already is.

There are two motifs to consider relative to Echo: rape and *connaissance*. *Connaissance* most familiarly as familiarity. And *connaissance* also as reconnaissance, as what my Army daddy and granddaddy would recognize as an information-gathering adventure, and what we here might profitably consider

as rethinking, or thinking come again. The difference that lies in repetition, the difference that makes all the difference.⁸

For those who have not studied their Ovid, all gods rape. Sometimes forcibly, sometimes fraudulently, sometimes consensually. For just as children cannot legally consent to sex with an adult – given power imbalances between parties and an inequity in comprehension of what the act entails – so too the consent of any mortal to sex with a divinity is mooted as beyond comprehension, beyond *connaissance*. There is an interesting aside here about the rape of a Virgin, a rape we rather callously celebrate. However, more to my point, Narcissus is the direct product of a rape, his mother ravished by a river-god; Echo's fate of re-presentation is the result of her collusion in Jove's dalliances with mountain nymphs, which Human Resources would consider sexual harassment, given, at minimum, the institutional power imbalance between parties. Thus, in a prime example of *contrapasso*, Echo is not only deprived of agency, internally defined as original narrativity, but becomes the agent of a-subjectivity, of the use of the subject as object, of forcible aural copulation. Given, as Lacan said in other words, that the ear is the orifice we cannot close.⁹

For his part, Lacan added the voice, along with the gaze, the phoneme, and the nothing, to the list of Freudian partial-objects (breast, faeces, and phallus), objects of desire, cause of partial drives. He later reconceived the voice as the object of the desire of desire, the *objet petit a*.¹⁰ Speechless in this sense, soundless, in the sense of the said as the unsaid, and vice versa. And, of course, the voice in psychoanalysis is in both senses the very fact of analysis. Put another way, the nothing that cannot be said that must be endlessly reiterated. The discourse of the hysteric, constantly asking what she wants, the discourse of the master, who stupidly tells her. In another context, I have posited a discourse of the slave as the discourse of conceptualism: the slave repeats, but to no other and to no end.¹¹

The slave repeats. This is repetition as mere mirroring, and for those of you who care, the discourse of the slave is rendered schematically as the mirror-image of the Lacanian master's discourse.¹² The upshot of the discourse of the slave is that it produces nothing. It is the point at which call does not effectuate response. For there is no original, and the normal discursive apparatus fails. It is the engagement of non-engagement, best exemplified by the childhood pastime of simply repeating what your sibling was saying until he or she became suitably enraged. Because what he or she knew was that you were instantiating the conditions under which they absolutely failed as a cognizable subject.¹³ Put another way, the discourse of the slave produces, in the master, the divided subject – that which the master must repress in order to retain his mastery. Conceptualism does this as Echo does this, for the fact is that Echo

presents Narcissus with a false and foolish choice, one that exposes him to nothing but the horror of himself. Put another way, "Call all you want, but there's no one home."

When Narcissus was an infant, his mother asked Tiresias the trans-sexed seer¹⁴ whether he will live to a well-ripened age. Tiresias says he will, as long as he does not know himself. Lacan says that "the function of language is not to inform but to evoke."¹⁵ Celan says, "*La poésie ne s'impose plus, elle s'expose.*"¹⁶ Lacan says, "What I seek in speech is the response of the other. What constitutes me as subject is my question."¹⁷ Kafka says, "Guilt is never to be doubted."¹⁸ Put another way, to know oneself is to know the guilt of having a self.

For his part, Barthes believed that listening creates an "inter-subjective space where 'I am listening' also means 'listen to me.'"¹⁹ At first glance, so to speak, Echo is one such space, but she is the one – so to speak – who is not one. She listens, but does not speak. She repeats. She is the voice inside your head outside your head, the voice that is yours and not-yours, you and not-you. The voice as matter of fact, the voice as the fact of death, of your death. The recorded voice. Echo is malevolent because she bears witness to the false hope of intrasubjectivity. More, she lays bare the hypocrisy of this hope, this desire that is not a desire for anything but desire. For the only thing worse than meeting one's soulmate would be to meet one's soulmate. Echo is radically evil because she exposes the fact of the unspared self.

What Echo gives Narcissus is Narcissus himself – he cannot but "know himself" as she regurgitates the sounds from his mouth, pouring them into his ears. To hear one's voice is to declare "I don't sound like that." To hear one's voice is, like Castorp spotting his hand beneath the X-ray, to see what one should expect to see, but does not intend to see: one's own grave, one undone, "dissolved into airy nothingness."²⁰ But this is tiresome. Me telling you what to think. It's the hackneyed use of the voice as voice-over, authorial and authoritative.²¹ Voix noirs: "Let us join."

In her admirable book *The Acoustic Mirror*, Kaja Silverman said that "the voice is the site of perhaps the most radical of all subject divisions – the division between meaning and materiality."²² Consider Benjamin's considered opinion that the essential quality of literature is "not statement or the imparting of information – hence, something inessential." A bad translation, said Benjamin, was "the inaccurate transmission of inessential content."²³ The true task of the translator was to break through literality to produce "the echo of the original."²⁴ Put another way, there is no need to translate experience, meaning for meaning, signifier for signified, but there is a mandate to transcribe. For in this sense, Derrida was wrong – it is not the letter that will always reach its destination, but

its sound. The essence of presence is the voice. I don't need to tell you what to think if I can tell you what you are thinking.²⁵

Conceptualism is a radical mimesis conjoined to radical alterity: the reiteration defeats the originary intent, the originary articulation, by demonstrating that there is no real point of real origin. There is no correspondence of communication, no relation from one to one, no "listen to me" in the "I am listening." There is a textual place, and in this place, there is the receipt of the place, the given possibility of meaning without meaning.

My *Statement of Facts* project is the first volume of a trilogy of self-appropriations taken from my appellate briefs and re-presented as poetry. I represent indigent sex offenders and Sexually Violent Predators. All my clients are guilty because they are said to be so. Guilt, like poetry, is an act of rhetoric, a speech act, an act often of some witnessing.²⁶ *Statement of Facts* reiterates the reiterated narratives provided by witnesses; the crimes stay mostly the same, though the voices and ancillary details change. If the phoneme is the infra-thin distinction between statements, the infra-thin of violence is its meaningless facticity – the random individuality of its random victims. Put another way, for the first time in poetry, a rape is a rape is a rape.

Conceptualism in this sense is a con-text, and I will be cuntish here, for if the ear is the orifice we cannot close, the mouth is the trap we cannot keep shut. So that citation is revealed as castration, it mocks authority by showing the lack of authority from the non-source of authority. To rephrase Brecht, what is the crime of being Derrida compared to the crime of citing Derrida? Perfect mimesis is radical as it takes the essence of the thing without the thing's permission and puts it to no end. The annihilation of the function of the text reveals the textual abyss which is, as I have stated elsewhere, a mountain guised as a void. There is no reading but thinking, no material but materiality. No information but information processing. The question is not about the translation of experience, but the need to transmit experience, revealed in its transcription. Leaving the trace of poetry.

What is poetry? Simply put, poetry is not not-poetry. Last March I was asked to lecture at an undergraduate poetry class outside Chicago. I gave them a poem by Wordsworth and told them to make it into a poem. They could do anything to Wordsworth they liked except add words. They then read their constructions, their cuttings and pastings, their deconstructions, the poem they found when they erased. For my contribution, I read the Wordsworth poem unchanged by me, some stupid poem about a tree. *Mutatis mutandis*, the ensuing conversation had nothing to do with either the stupid poem or the stupid tree, but everything to do with poetry.

Gender is (at least partially) performance, says the lady. So is poetry. Conceptualism fuses performance and performativity, subject and object like the reflected image of a woman, not as two great things that go great together but as a common occupation. Conceptualism creates a place for latency – in the subject that encounters the object. Reading *Statement of Facts*, one reacts, but it is your reaction. You cannot help but know yourself. Similarly, or contrarily, there is my *Boycott* project, in which I take iconic feminist texts and perform an intervention modelled on a combination of Lacan's maxim *la femme n'existe pas* and artist Lee Lozano's untitled 1970s boycott project,²⁷ substituting all references to women with their male counterparts, so that the world is made entirely of the sex that is one. And how does one encounter such a world? How does one read lines such as "One is not born, but rather becomes a man," and "Men don't have penis envy, men have dick envy." This, too, is a statement of facts.

In his admirable book, *A Voice and Nothing More*, Mladen Dolar says, "Ethics requires a voice, but a voice which ultimately does not say anything." The reason for this content-silence is that the voice may act "as a pure call which commands nothing specific and offers no guarantee. In one and the same gesture it delivers us to the Other and to our own responsibility."²⁸ Our own responsibility – not, it should be noted, our own responsibility *for*.²⁹ The ethical voice is "enunciation without a statement. This is the crucial point, the touchstone of morality: the voice is enunciation, and we have to supply the statement ourselves ... The enunciation is there, but the subject has to deliver the statement and thus assume the enunciation, respond to it and take it on his or her shoulders."³⁰

My *Statement of Facts* is published as print-on-demand. When several publishers refused or dropped the project as unethical, that is to say, as "too" unethical, the availability of print-on-demand not only permitted a brave and fundless publisher to host the project,³¹ but also shifted the site of enunciation. The responsibility of the iteration now falls directly onto each reader, shifts literally to the mode of production. Echoing the content itself, or vice versa. For *connaissance* is context. Con- as in criminal, involving an abuse of confidence, a persuasive lie, and I will be convincing here, for the fact is that there is no totalizing reading of the work, no reading at all, no author to gloss over or with whom to contend, no point of disputation or illumination, just sheer materiality. Just the statement of fact. Just the shit in your head. Put another way, the voice means. Put another way, this is pure excrescence, or the excrescence of excrescence – the shit the shit shits and what to make of it? Within conceptualism, the statement is revealed not a speech act but an act act.

I have said elsewhere that conceptual work is always allegorical.³² I am interested in allegory because allegory is the scratch to the itch of transmission. Allegory is excess meaning, meaning that cannot be contained or circumscribed

by the object that triggers it. In the world post-Benjamin, post-1980s appropriation, post-object, but not post-objection, where the emergent field is as level as the noggins it swims in, allegory is nothing more, and sometimes much less, than part of the materiality of a work. It means nothing but that it means. This is its pathos and promise. Put another way, I am a mouthpiece. I reiterate and refract the words of others and of myself indiscriminately in order to make them mean. Not something else. Just mean. Those who would call upon me to respond to their reading with my own are looking to me for mastery, or at least subjectivity. But as Robert Fitterman has said, "I am interested in subjectivity, just not my own." What I mean or what I mean *by* is irrelevant to the act of the text. What I mean is meaningless to you, the ear, that is to say, the con-text of the constituent subject. Or should be. Con- as in cunt, for the cuntish truth is that what cannot be repeated is the con-text. And that is the only remaining place of poetry. Authorship doesn't matter. Content doesn't matter. Form doesn't matter. Meter doesn't matter. All that matters is the trace of poetry. The Echo-effect.

Heidegger said, "The echo is the human response to the Word of the mute voice of being."³³ Law itself is the echo of a desire that cannot and must not be fulfilled: Thou shalt not kill but manifestly thou shalt kill, and often. Thou shalt not have any other gods before me confirms the existence of multiple omnipotents. Narcissus is ethical because he does not, in Lacanian terms, cede his desire. Echo is ethical in Kantian terms because she does her duty. The truth is that truth is nothing but an effect of language – a rhetorical effect. Like guilt, like poetry, an echo-effect, a testimonial to the silence that is not silence, where there is no gap permitting self-awareness beyond the sheer and terrifying awareness of self. Unmitigated self, self as raw object of raw self as the other opens the mouth and has one's own vomit vomit out. Put another way, *stop calling stop calling I don't want to think anymore*.³⁴ Which may finally put one in the way of Antigone, who said, most unethically, "I speak for me."

Notes

- 1 Raising the question of the temporality of the Real relative to the temporality of the echo. If the Real relative to sexual difference is situated as imminent, i.e., as in the near future (as in the fore-shadow, the threat, the bit of paper browning before it burns), or as Elizabeth Grosz has suggested, the future anterior, the what-will-be-when-it-has-been, and the Real relative to Woman is situated as historical, i.e., as belonging to a grab-bag tradition of gender/gendered tradition, it is my proposition that inasmuch as both *priori* and *posteriori* are true, time being, as we know, a bowl or context, then *Woman-as-past* and *Woman-as-future* (which may correspond neatly to the collapsible or co-lapidary tropes of representation and reproduction) are crummily yet cozily conjoined by the Real of the (-)Woman (()),

- identified by Lacan in Seminar XX. See Elizabeth Groz, *Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005) ["Sexual difference is that which has yet to take place, and thus exists only in virtuality, in and through a future anterior, the only tense that openly addresses the question of the future without preempting it in concrete form or in present terms. Sexual difference does not yet exist, and it is possible that it has never existed."], 175–6.
- 2 <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/echo?s=t>.
 - 3 *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, trans. Arthur Golding (1567) (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 105.
 - 4 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Echo," *New Literary History* 24 (1993): 23.
 - 5 *Ibid.*, 24–5. Other translations for "fugis" here include "fly'st" (Golding, 1567), "run away" (Martin, 2004), and "run" (Miller, 1916, and Humphries, 1960). Golding, 107; *Metamorphoses: A New Translation by Charles Martin*, trans. C. Martin (New York: Norton, 2004), 106; *Ovid III Metamorphoses Books I–VIII*, trans. Frank Justus Miller (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 2004), 151; *Metamorphoses*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 69.
 - 6 Spivak rightly points out that Echo's actions must be unintentional as any intent would replicate the stance/perspective of the subject/master ("Echo," 32–3).
 - 7 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 76–7, 152. See also Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 263–4 ("Even Her Voice Is Taken Away from Echo"); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Feminism, Criticism and the Institution," *Thesis Eleven* 10.11 (1984/5): 176–87. This version of the discourse of the hysteric has been roundly critiqued as essentially essentialist – rather a non-Realist attack on the non-real.
 - 8 In her excellent reading of a draft of this essay, Divya Victor brought up *méconnaissance*, the fundamental misunderstanding that psychoanalysis posits as necessarily existing between the conscious and unconscious of the subject. As Victor rightly notes, "Poetry establishes the condition of a *subject-in-the-dark*, rather than a *subject who is illuminated* – hence, reconnaissance is precisely the ambush of difference in the dark" (note to author, 4 July 2010). And while this is all good and true as tulips, what I am going for here is not the *méconnaissance* that permits reconnaissance, but the *connaissance*, the con-texted subject. Thus, the tender spot lies not in a fundamental *misunderstanding*, but a greater horror of an all-too-human understanding of the inhuman self. The bush of dark difference, so to speak, the forced (unwilling) failure to suspend belief.
 - 9 "In the field of the unconscious the ears are the only orifice that cannot be closed." Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 11)*, ed. Jacques-Alain Millar, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), 195. And does then the literal become the clit?
 - 10 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1977), 315.
 - 11 Vanessa Place, "The Discourse of the Slave," unpub. paper presented on 2 February 2010 as part of *Poetics Plus*, a Poetics Program Production of the Department of English at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

12 To (¬) wit: $S_2 \rightarrow S_1$
 $\quad \quad \quad _ _ \downarrow$
 $\quad \quad \quad a // \$$

- 13 As Victor also pointed out, this mirrors the rage felt by the analysand is “listened to” by the analyst – which is the rage at the fundamental fact of our segregation (note to author, 4 July 2010). It is worth adding perhaps that the hysteric (amply embodied by Woman) self-abates this rage by insisting (again) on her misunderstanding. And she’s not wrong about that.
- 14 Tireseas went both ways and back again, and was thus the perfect oracle for Echo/ Narcissus, who were the perfect FTM and MTF and back again couple, with their reverberating and reflexive subjectivities. Though note that Spivak felt that while “Echo has to be female,” Narcissus could “go both ways” (“Echo,” 26). Note too that Narcissus was cursed to his female state by a male admirer (“So may he himself love, and not gain the thing he loves!” as overheard by the goddess Nemesis) (Miller trans., 108).
- 15 Lacan, *Écrits*, 86.
- 16 Paul Celan, *Collected Prose*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (New York: Routledge, 2003), 29.
- 17 Lacan, *Écrits*, 86.
- 18 Franz Kafka, “In the Penal Colony,” in *The Complete Stories*, trans. Nahum Norbert Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 145.
- 19 Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 246.
- 20 Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. John E. Woods (New York: Knopf, 1995), 215.
- 21 Such as with the *akousmatikoi*, those probationary pupils of Pythagoras who were to sit absolutely silent and listen to the master lecture from behind a screen; and in *acousmatics*, where the (compositional) sound comes from behind a veil of speakers (loud); and in reference to the off-screen voice in cinema.
- 22 Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 44. Classic cinema in this way used the voice-over to disembodify the male into “invisibility and anonymity” while isolating the “synchronized female voice” “from all productivity,” 39.
- 23 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 69–70.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 76.
- 25 Victor argues with me that the essence of presence is not voice, but sound: voice pacifies sound so that it becomes an “emollient” for logos, and thus permits the self qua self. Thus, Victor thinks the parents’ objection to the child going “blub blubblub” is due to this disassociation between sound (not-self) and voice (self): “She doesn’t sound like herself ... and is therefore not supposed to *be there, present*” (note to author, 4 July 2010). I argue back that, to the contrary, what is unbearable here is not the failure of voice to pacify sound but the failure of the two (voice & sound) to be separated via language, as in some sort of communicability – there’s no transmission because there’s no transmission. The child thus falls like a ball into

the Real, unveiling the lack of distinction between sound voice in the same manner that the recorded voice bares too much of the mirror-sound. I am of course correct in this.

- 26 "Even if it communicates nothing, the discourse represents the existence of communication; even if it denies the evidence, it affirms that speech constitutes truth; even if it is intended to deceive, the discourse speculates on faith in testimony." Lacan, *Écrits*, 42.
- 27 Helen Molesworth, "Lee Lozano: Kunsthalle Basel," *Artforum*, September 2006 (<http://artforum.com/inprint/id=11498>).
- 28 Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 98.
- 29 The Kantian ethos. It occurs to me that the movie theatre is a perfect example of this: we delude ourselves into believing that it is the shared experience (narrative, fragmented) of the film (visual/acoustic, formerly strips) that constitutes the moviegoing experience. But it is really the willingness (to pay) to sit side by side in the dark with strangers for two hours. When the ears override the eyes (such as via the inane chatter of those around us – and the "blub blubblub" of others is always inane), the real thereby intrudes on the imaginary, the real extrudes, and we want nothing less (and often more) than to murder our neighbours. So too, as Teresa Carmody has pointed out, the real in/ex-trudes unpleasantly in and with poetry in *Statement of Facts* (conversation with author and Caroline Bergvall, 7 July 2010).
- 30 Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 98–9.
- 31 To wit, Blanc Press, Matthew Timmons, publisher. One of the drawbacks of this method, of course, is a concomitant inflexibility in pricing, as well as a rather blind allegiance to a vague corporate machine, which should feel more radically constructivist than it does indie-vanity. Still, the books are pretty, and ever-ready.
- 32 Place, Vanessa and Robert Fitterman. *Notes on Conceptualisms*. Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse. p. 13.
- 33 Quoted in Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 97.
- 34 Lady Gaga, "Telephone" (2010).

Sharon Hayes and Most People

Most people are other people. Their thoughts are some one else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation ... What the artist is always looking for is a mode of existence in which ... the outward is expressive of the inward.

Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis* (1897)¹

In a remarkable essay written in Reading Gaol while serving the end of his prison sentence for gross indecency, Wilde reflects on what his time in prison has taught him about "the true" life of the artist. As unfashionable and conservative as many of Wilde's main points are, several points emerge, most notably a quotation from Emerson, "Nothing is more rare in any man than an act of his own," which Wilde reformulates more powerfully as "Most people are other people." This point is, in a sense, subsumed in what could be construed as the essay's main point, namely, that Christ models the life of the artist. In the idea that "most people are other people" and *not* artists or Christ, however, we find an interesting paradox that brings us back to the first, rather radical idea.² Christ is proposed as the "first individualist"; he also apparently lived the notion that "there is no difference between the lives of others and one's own life." By allowing what he calls Christ's "imagination" to reconstruct his relation to others, Wilde is not only opening a door to understanding his own apparent shifts in behaviour and in spiritual and aesthetic beliefs. He is also suggesting a way in which Christ's relation to otherness is only a more exquisitely moral version of what "most people" live through.

Wilde's rhetoric is intense, existential: where Emerson is talking about one's "acts" being another's, Wilde formulates this multiplicity as being about personhood. It is also potentially political: he allows not only for the individual to change position with another individual, literally to *be* another, but for the innumerable *people* to become "other people." Here the distinction between Christ/artists and the rest of us becomes more fluid, for indeed it is Christ's ability to

incarnate otherness – in particular, the most wretched of others, taking “the entire world of the inarticulate, the voiceless world of pain, as his kingdom,” making “of himself its eternal mouthpiece” – that, for Wilde, makes him a model for artists. Yet, as he puts it, Christ is “the supreme individualist, the first individualist in history,” suggesting that his model of incarnating otherness is a different model than that which we follow, dumbly, parroting others and living out their expectations or examples. On the one hand aligned with a Romantic notion of fused souls and poignant with Wilde’s heartbreak over his lost affair with Lord Douglas, on the other hand surprisingly contemporary, this concept of *being another* and *being others* articulates a deep destabilization of the self that one would be hard pressed to read as apolitical, at least in our moment.³

One might therefore suspect that an aesthetic more radical than first suggested is hidden in *De Profundis* – perhaps despite its author. In it, the individual self is not absolutely limited to being *one* self. The self does not merely contain multitudes, as Whitman puts it; instead, the self is otherness, a concept familiar to us from both existentialism and psychoanalysis, but not yet totally ingrained in our understanding of art. Wilde’s aesthetic otherwise maintains that form reveals content and is premised on a seemingly intact binary between the interior self and its exteriority. His 1895 text thereby enunciates a paradox: how does one become another person or people without disrupting the unity of the self, which in its turn provides the basis for “form [that] reveals.”

The artist Sharon Hayes cites from *De Profundis* in her work *I March In The Parade of Liberty But As Long As I Love You I’m Not Free* (2007–8). It is a work that, broadly speaking, draws contemporary reflections on performance and iterability into the larger field of reflections – on love and language, aesthetics and art, morality and politics – that were Wilde’s own.⁴ For eight days in the winter of 2007–8, Hayes walked from the New Museum (which commissioned the piece) at its then-new location on Manhattan’s Bowery, stopping every few corners to speak through a megaphone at whatever crowds were around. The long, single address, which sounds as if Hayes is reading aloud but was simply memorized and spoken, is directed at a lover who has been absent for a protracted period.⁵ As it wears on, amid intimate reminiscences, entreaties to her absent lover, and despair at the catastrophic world after 9/11, slogans from the gay liberation movement begin to be interspersed with intimate declarations: “Love is so easily wounded. Out of the closets into the streets!” Almost as if to underscore the reality of her love – our sense that we are indeed hearing Hayes’s own love story, that there is some “truth” to what she speaks – her voice shifts between the shout of the sloganeer and the tender voice of the letter-writer.

From the outset, Hayes’s speech indexes its own time and place: “So that you have a picture of where I am, I’m standing on the street, at the corner of



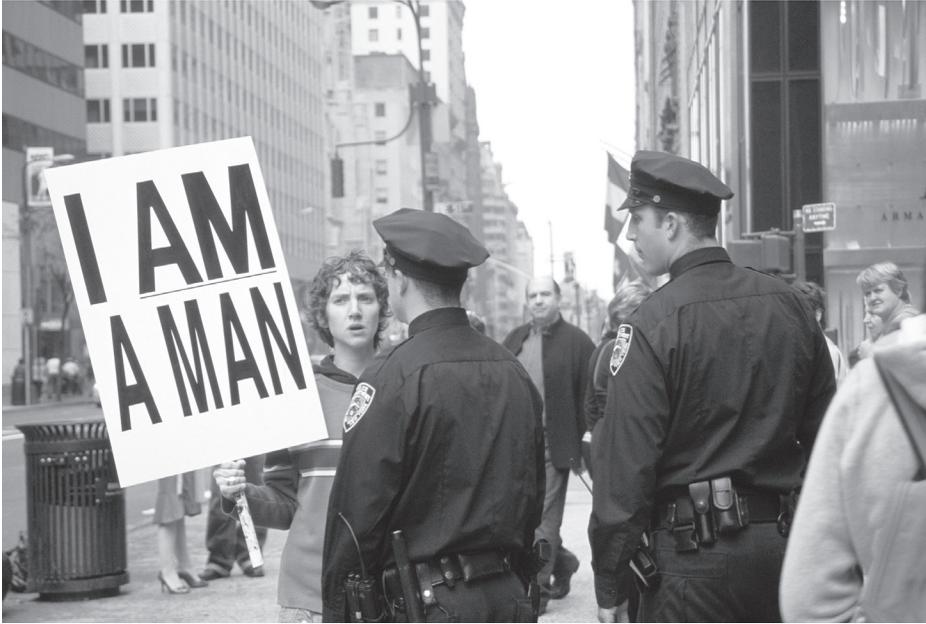
Sharon Hayes *I March in the Parade of Liberty, but as Long as I Love You I'm Not Free*, 2008 documentation of performance, New Museum, New York, NY courtesy the artist & Tanya Leighton Gallery photo by Andrea Geyer.

Grand Street and Bowery. I'm speaking into a megaphone. Today is Saturday December 8th." From there, however, multiple ambiguities proliferate, some affected by those frameworks of time and place. For example, when Hayes yells out Stonewall-era slogans, it is after remembering participating in a "gay and angry" march with her missing lover – an update of the late 1960s invention of a gay activist movement. But she describes it in a manner that calls attention to how a dreamlike state of being in love could mix with the "reality" of the streets. A euphoric sense of possibility and closeness opens, but is it about closeness to another person, or to another time? The slogans are eerily outmoded: "A dream is a dream, reality is real / Open the door to the way we feel / Out of the closets onto the streets" follow fast upon each other, almost mimicking the couple that tumbles out of bed and into visibility. At stake is not only the ambiguity of the private/public divide that the gay liberation movement was forced to negotiate in response to legal dicta.⁶ That perhaps fictional divide plays out over the ambiguity of phrases that might be uttered to a lover, but could also describe marchers' urgency in response to a cruelly indifferent public: "Nothing is real but you"; "If you long for me I long for you." Does the moan "We were so in love that day," seemingly commenting on a recollection of a day in which

the two lovers marched, arm in arm, in the same city in which Hayes now walks alone, refer to an agonizingly clear recollection of intimacy, or to the marchers more generally, in love with the possibility of change and the gathering-up urgency of their moment?

In this way Hayes frames the Wildean principle of transferability: her speech can be both utterly “hers” – infused with the intimacy of a lover who remains anonymous to us, but whose imprint on her is palpable in her language – and utterly general. She is both her *self* and *other people* – in particular, all the other people who are marching, who feel betrayed precisely by the public that refuses to hear or see them. It is not merely that some language in her speech refers to “her” love story and some refers to the historical situation. As she makes clear from her first mention of the date – “Today is Saturday December 8th/ Last Saturday was World AIDS Day” – every moment is both privately meaningful and historically marked. Quotes pulled from *De Profundis* as well as placards from the 1971 Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade disperse Hayes’s discourse, unfixing it from a central speaking voice, an indexed time/place, and a single context. But she is also “reperforming” (in the broadest possible sense) Wilde’s 1895 performance at his own trial, and the collective performance of gay identity at the post-Stonewall marches.⁷ She is not only exploring a history of performed identities that can be tracked according to a simple lexical shift – from Victorian England’s “queer” to 1970s New York’s “gay,” as Alan Sinfield points out – but directly addressing the different functions (and operations) of performance and re-performance with respect to identity and politics. As central as “re-speaking” is to politics and particularly LGBT politics, I would like to propose another framework through which to translate the urgency and relevance of Hayes’s work: on the one hand, an expanded notion of “performance” that defines it through the matrix of affect and emotionality that I believe is important to her work; and, on the other hand, through her relation to her own one-time teacher, Yvonne Rainer.⁸

Not only is Hayes “citing” Rainer in certain broad and recursive respects – primarily, in citing Rainer’s own relation to appropriation and citation – she is also performing a new mode of citation that is central to her development of art’s potential relations to history and politics. These relations emerge very palpably in *In the Near Future*, begun in 2005 and iterated differently (in London, New York, Vienna, Warsaw, Brussels, and Paris) over the course of the next few years. In each performance Hayes carried signs that repeat exact phrases from past protests – “Organise or Starve”; “We are Innocent”; “I am a Man.”⁹ Sometimes, the repetition of these outmoded phrases allows us to read new meaning into both the historical moment and the present. To take the most



In the Near Future, New York (detail), 2005 multiple-slide-projection installation courtesy the artist & Tanya Leighton Gallery.

obvious example: Hayes carrying a sign reading “I am a Man” speaks to shifting notions of gender and personhood that could renew and re-signify that familiar and moving civil rights-era slogan, which built its power from the seemingly self-evident truth it once displayed. Today we would understand that “a woman” could be “a man”; that the boundaries between genders are fluid and far more performative than genetic. At the same time, we can now read that gender fluidity into the original iteration, in which black sanitation workers in Memphis defended the idea that, as Reverend James Lawson put it, “at the heart of racism is the idea that a man is not a man” – without ever questioning the crucial term, *man*, within their precept. What citation does in this case is to historicize the original moment and the present; seeing Hayes carry the placard also opens up questions about her self, her interiority, her thoughts and feelings. “I am a Man” – in which the self she declares bears an oblique relation to the young woman we see – is again the clearest example. Her wide-legged, powerfully stable stance while holding a placard reading “Ratify E.R.A. Now!”; her silent stare off into space as her placard asserts “Actions Speak Louder Than Words”: these are captured photographically in ways that perhaps amplify the muteness of her interiority against the “received” language of the placards.

Looking at the photographs, we think not only about the historical cleavage between the 1970s, at the height of debates over the E.R.A.'s ratification, and now; we perceive a young woman mutely addressing hurrying, bustling crowds that in turn ignore her, as her wondering expression suggests that she can't quite figure out how she landed where she is, or where everyone has gone.

Hayes and Rainer discussed citation and appropriation in an email conversation conducted on the occasion of the publication of *Work the Room: A Handbook of Performance Strategies*, edited by Ulrike Müller.¹⁰ In it, Hayes describes a reperformance by Ron Vawter of the Jack Smith section of *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith*, the 1992 work that allowed monologues by the two characters to contrast two different approaches to gay male identity, AIDS, and politics. She writes:

In the Vawter there is something akin to what I am most interested in about and around the performative copy: the collision and collapse of two temporal moments, two instances of speech. What I like about Vawter's piece is that his repetition of Smith's performance references the theatrical convention of repeatedly enacting a script, but exposes an important distinction between theater and performance: the difference between the "performer" and the "character." The character is a device specifically constructed to be "filled" by multiple actors across multiple geographic, ethnic and temporal affiliations. One actor can be seen as better than another but there is, most often, no sense of an "original." The performer on the other hand, if you allow me this somewhat ungrounded distinction, is singularly attached to the performance that they enact. Such that Ron Vawter cannot "perform" Jack Smith without carrying Jack Smith along with him.¹¹

Meanwhile, in a 1976 interview Rainer describes her own shift from working with dance – as both a performer and a choreographer – to film with respect to her last performance work ("without slides or film"), *Grand Union Dreams*, 1970:

It contained the separation of performers into characters. That was the beginning of my film work. It had mortals, heroes, and gods ... I was getting into making relationships between people other than the kinetic, dancelike relationships ... The conventions of cinematic narratives seemed to offer more possibilities, were more interesting to me to operate both within and against than were the conventions of dramatic theatrical narrative, i.e., the play dialogue and monologue format. There was no decision to make. I was already thinking in terms of framing and voiceover.¹²

It is striking that we find almost the same formulation in Rainer's interview in 1976 that Hayes will use in 2005. Moreover, this distinction that underlies Hayes' performance practice is part of what enabled Rainer to move from dance to film in the 1970s.¹³ Rainer contends that film allowed her to "contain" – show, demonstrate – "the separation of performers into characters." Hayes's account insists that Jack Smith was turned not into a "character" in the conventional theatrical sense; instead, his performance re-emerges in a new time and place and through Vawter's complex reinscription (Vawter's own body; the sense in which he is inhabiting Smith's body and cinematic images; his voice redoing Smith's inimitable intonations and pronunciations). For anyone who has seen a film (or live performance) of Jack Smith (or indeed Vawter's reperformance), the tension is evident: Smith is already what is colloquially referred to as a powerfully "theatrical" presence, a "character," in a way, and it takes all of Vawter's talent and skill to turn mimicry into a reperformance rather than a caricature. Hayes is contending that in such a reperformance what emerges is the extent to which Smith is not a character but rather already embodying – as she puts it elsewhere – how "performance, as a form, allows for certain very precise examinations of the performative operations of subject formation."¹⁴ Thus, we would see in Vawter's reperformance a layering of his own subjectivity – at that moment, inflected with 1990s awareness of the AIDS crisis along with other elements – that is both different from Smith's and formed through the ability to "cite" Smith's language.

Yvonne Rainer's early film work does something similarly invested in language, though often in her work "language" is defined by its relation to the film apparatus, and particularly her use (in early films such as *Lives of Performers*, *Film about a Woman Who...*, *Kristina Talking Pictures*, and *Journeys from Berlin/1971*) of voice-overs and intertitles. But performance – out of which, as a dancer and choreographer, she emerges – haunts this early film work. Most explicitly, it is framed by the internecine romances and roiling relationships that take place "backstage," among a group of performers, in her first feature-length film, *Lives of Performers*, 1972. She "breaks up" these relationships (breakups, jealousy, absence, and betrayal are the film's ostensible subject matter) by breaking up the identities of her characters, perforating them with the relentless alternation between character and performer. Throughout the film, performer/characters ceaselessly break with filmic convention: at various times, they address the audience when answering each others' questions; they acknowledge the actor/role axis by speaking an actor's notes or directions (for example, the dancer Valda Setterfield will speak the line "Valda is disconsolate"); and they frame each other's lines as lines (with Rainer speaking



Still from Yvonne Rainer, *Lives of Performers* (1972). Performers: John Erdman, Valda Setterfield, Shirley Soffer, Fernando Torm. Courtesy of the artist.

the phrase “Fernando says,” for example, just before Fernando speaks. Such breaks with filmic convention set up the binary between performer and character even without the framework of “backstage romances” that provides the film with its narrative dimension.

Lives of Performers is also powerfully involved with the rapports between language, bodies, and identity. Language, in *Lives*, builds off of not only film but the phenomenological body so crucial to minimalism, and its contrasts with the sexual body so crucial to feminism and the performing body so crucial to dance. For example:

VALDA: I want to finish about the airport. I have to tell you this. When you kissed me goodbye, or rather, you were leaning against that rail with your feet crossed – the way you do – and I moved in to kiss you goodbye because people had begun to board the plane. You reached for the back of my neck with your left hand and drew me toward you. Your right arm was bent so your forearm was against your chest. As you pressed me against you and kissed me, my breast momentarily rested against your hand, which didn’t move.

FERNANDO: Yes. Is that what made you think of those lines “all day he sits before you face to face, like a cardplayer. Your elbow brushes his elbow; if you should speak, he hears”?

SHIRLEY: “The touched heart madly stirs.”

YVONNE: Bullshit!¹⁵

In this passage, Robert Lowell’s 1962 translation of Sappho’s *Poem of Jealousy* providing the re-cited lines (“all day he sits ...”; “The touched heart madly stirs”) breaks up Valda’s otherwise meticulously factual, “objective” description of two bodies meeting. If the latter reminds us of clichés about the affectlessness of Conceptual (or Structuralist/Minimalist) language, the lines of Sappho’s poem (albeit in their most austere translation) almost polemically undercut the description’s claims to objectivity. Ultimately, the scene not only frames language, and in particular poetic language, as providing the lens through which a subjective experience can be articulated or known (per Merleau-Ponty’s claims). It suggests that the character comes to know what has happened (in this case, Valda’s incipient jealousy and its effects on her subconscious experience of her relationship with her lover) through cited language. It is the character/performer “Yvonne” (“Bullshit!”) who calls out pretension in this circuit of cited language. But *Lives of Performers’s* framework of breaking and developing identities through the character/performer axis allows this scene to operate performative citation with particular sharpness. We understand that the performer is explicitly tied to lines that come to her from beyond the stimuli for “action” on set; they are “scripted.” The ways in which this logic fundamentally plays out within our lives and experiences may be clichéd; the concept that citation thereby becomes crucial to “subject formation” – in other words, that subject formation does not take place in our unique or spontaneous utterances, but also in the enactment of being “other people” – is less so.

Stella Adler summed up the actor’s relation to language with the terse formulation “The words stink.”¹⁶ David Krasner explains: “The actor must justify the words by way of the acting, rather than the other way around.”¹⁷ Adler and Krasner only articulate (perhaps with less remorse) the broader, general sense that words are an external structure to be filled out. Hayes’s works contend instead that words are not what “fills” characters but rather what enables in us our ability to develop – not only on a personal, subjective level, but with respect to history, and especially our present moment and our recent past. What she means by this is perhaps clearest in respect to her own work. For certainly Hayes does not “fill” characters: her voice, expression, and dress might describe an individual or a type, but it is her language that enacts the special

shiftiness between a self and the collectivities – “most people” or some? – that her Wildean aesthetic of transferability frames.¹⁸ In the expressivity of her language, she points to the importance of performativity in not only the filling out of our public personae, our “types,” our existence as discrete individuals, but the complex of our internally multiple selves and how they form, together, what we call interiority. With particular emphasis on language, Hayes develops the ways that we build and enact selves, especially those involved with the riskiness of love, politics, and identification.

The first three words of *I March*, “My dear lover,” do not do much to develop “a character,” and indeed neither do any of the speakers’ reminiscences, entreaties, etc., which leave her as something of a blank even while we begin to feel we might know her lover a little. (The only details about the speaker that emerge have to do with her feelings about the absent lover.) In amplifying this “borrowed” speech through a megaphone, a series of street corners, and her timorously raised voice, the speaker declares herself as a lover. She takes risks, going both backwards (to a time when her lover heard her) and outwards (to “the street,” the same one that feeds so many of her memories). These risks hinge both on ways in which her speech turns inwards, describing interior states (of longing, wistfulness, desire, etc.), and on the ways in which her discourse is perpetually re-anchored to the worldly indices of time, place, and historico-political context. A *character* can only use such indices insofar as she is someone else’s invention. But a *performer* – someone who is defined by the fact of performance – draws attention to how the “citational aspect of speech” is precisely that which builds us.

Hayes’s work asserts this complex approach to linguistic subject formation only to leave it open to further questions. Does it build us into discrete individuals? Or into members of a community – what we might call, after Wilde, “some people?” Let us not forget the double bind from which Wilde’s *De Profundis* emerged: legal trials built out of not only his own performance but a powerfully performative judicial language; and his own frankly literary debt to ideals of self-expression, to psychic interiority, and by the end of his life, to a morality surpassing even politics. For Wilde, an artist expresses an interior – even if it is questionably his or her *own* interior – and at least some of the conflict that *De Profundis* attests to revolves around Wilde’s anxiety about his “own” interior. He almost disclaims the responsibility associated with the “mimicry ... [and] quotation” that make up most of our “opinions ... lives ... passions.” Perhaps the most powerful impulse we can find in Hayes’s work is the recovery of that sense of responsibility: the sense that by repeating we do not enact or perform – and thereby develop our “selves” – without the full obligation to the “most

people” we are occupying. As the title of her 2005 collaboration with Andrea Geyer asserts: *In Times like this only Criminals Remain Silent*.

Notes

- 1 (London: Methuen & Company, 1905). Available online at http://upword.com/wilde/de_profundis.html.
- 2 Wilde treats Emerson’s idea with a kind of characteristic derision – “Their thoughts are someone else’s opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation” – that I think should not completely obscure its interest for contemporary readers.
- 3 Some contemporary philosophers articulate ideas that are only slightly more secular and sophisticated than Wilde’s, most prominently Giorgio Agamben, whose extremely influential notion of the *homo sacer* refashions a familiar Christian theological principle into a model one might argue is foremost a model of *reading*. For treatments of the relation of this problematic to contemporary performance, see Frazer Ward, *No Innocent Bystanders: Performance Art and Audience* (Hanover N. H.: Dartmouth College Press, 2012), and my “Performance Life,” in *Texte zur Kunst* 79 (September 2010): 158–64.
- 4 The field of performance studies that has treated the relation between performance and iterability has exploded in the last decade: see, for just a few examples: Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Sven Lütticken, ed., *Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art* (Rotterdam: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 2005); Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
- 5 The piece can be heard (though not seen) via the audio recording at <http://www.shaze.info/#>.
- 6 Notably, the sodomy laws – which in turn reflect on Wilde’s own incarceration – that were finally overturned in 2003 with *Lawrence v. Texas* had persisted in fourteen states despite the gradual repeal of such laws in 36 other states since 1971.
- 7 Numerous commentators have discussed these and I will not go into the history of queer and gay identity performances apart from noting a couple of accounts: “I believe [that] the trials helped to produce a major shift in perceptions of the scope of same-sex passion. At that point, the entire, vaguely disconcerting nexus of effeminacy, leisure, idleness, immorality, luxury, insouciance, decadence and aestheticism, which Wilde was perceived, variously, as instantiating, was transformed into a brilliantly precise image”; Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 3. Ed Cohen notes that “even more than his status as a successful contemporary author, it was Wilde’s self-produced image as a unique (if not *outré*) cultural figure that catalyzed the public interest in the trial” – a point that Cohen demonstrates with copious citations from newspaper accounts of the trials. See “Typing Wilde: Construing the ‘Desire to Appear to Be a Person Inclined to the Commission of the Gravest of All Offenses,’” in *Talk on the Wilde Side* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 135.

- 8 Hayes studied with Rainer at the Whitney Independent Study Program, a non-degree program that puts young artists, curators, and critics or historians into regular contact with established figures in the field.
- 9 As the Anglicized spelling “Organise or Starve” – shown in London – implies, the language of the placards was site-specific.
- 10 “Familiarity, Irony, Ambivalence (and love, hate, envy, attraction, revulsion, hubris as byproducts of the ‘performative’ act): an email conversation between Sharon Hayes and Yvonne Rainer,” in *Work the Room: A Handbook of Performance Strategies*, ed. Ulrike Müller (Berlin: B_Books, 2006); published on the occasion of the symposium “Public Affairs/Öffentliche Angelegenheiten” at the Museum of Modern Art/Ludwig Foundation, Vienna, 2003.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 35.
- 12 Yvonne Rainer, in “Profile: Interview by Lyn Blumenthal,” in *A Woman Who... Essays, Interviews, Scripts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 68–9.
- 13 While Hayes is primarily a performer, the still and moving image reproductions of her work play an important role not only in their dissemination, but frequently, in their conception. For example, three video installation works – *Parole*, 2010; *After Before*, 2005; *Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) Screeds #13, 16, 20, & 29*, 2003 – are only fully realized through their commentary on how of video and/or audio tapes transmit cultural knowledge, and their complex, sometimes multi-screen or poly-vocal installations.
- 14 Hayes, in “Familiarity, Irony, Ambivalence...,” 36. This, of course, recalls Judith Butler’s theories of linguistic performativity, extremely important for not only the contemporary generation of (especially academically trained) artists, but for readers of J.L. Austin, whom Hayes quotes early in the email conversation with Rainer, and all those considering how sexuality, the “illocutionary” force of both judicial and extra-judicial language, and identity intersect. “If agency is not derived from the sovereignty of the speaker, then the force of the speech act is not sovereign force. The ‘force’ of the speech act is, however incongruously, related to the body whose force is deflected and conveyed through speech. As excitable, such speech is at once the deliberate and undeliberate effect of a speaker. The one who speaks is not the originator of such speech, for that subject is produced in language through a prior performative exercise of speech: interpellation. Moreover, the language the subject speaks is conventional and, to that degree, citational. The legal effort to curb injurious speech tends to isolate the ‘speaker’ as the culpable agent, as if the speaker were at the origin of such speech. The speaker assumes responsibility precisely through the citational character of speech. The speaker renews the linguistic tokens of a community, reissuing and reinvigorating such speech. Responsibility is thus linked with speech as repetition, not as origination.” Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 39.
- 15 “Lives of Performers,” originally published in *Yvonne Rainer, Work 1961–1973* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design; New York: New York University Press, 1974), repr. in *The Films of Yvonne Rainer*, ed. Yvonne Rainer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 63.
- 16 Stella Adler, *On Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 301, cited in David Krasner, ed., “I Hate Strasberg: Method Acting in the Academy,”

in *Method Acting Reconsidered: Theory Practice Future* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2000), 10.

17 Ibid.

18 This is not to say that there is no “stereotyping” that goes on in her performances; far from it. In *I March*, Hayes uses dress and other aspects of her physical appearance to frame a “little late 60s / early 70s retro,” just as in *Everything Else Has Failed! Don't You Think It's Time for Love?* she “was going for a ‘dyke temp’ ... someone who was required to try to fit into some kind of business norm but couldn't quite pull it off” (email communication with the artist, August 2009). Rather, in claiming that the real focus of her work is on the linguistic development of the meanings of reperformance, I am merely echoing her own emphasis in her accounts of her work: “In Brecht's epic theater, demonstrators propose that the event has taken place; what you are watching is a repeat. To think through my actions in *In the Near Future* as a certain kind of demonstration that asks for a form of critical viewership is helpful.” Sharon Hayes interviewed by Julia Bryan-Wilson, “We Have a Future,” *Grey Room* 37 (Fall 2009): 78–93.

Keynote: What Do We Mean by Performance Writing?

The following piece is the exact text of the keynote I delivered on opening the first Symposium of Performance Writing at Dartington College of Arts in April 1996. By then, I had become the director of this very new (we opened to students in September 1994) and pedagogically radical writing program, taking over from its founder, John Hall. We organized the symposium to bring together a number of practitioners and critics working within the broader fields of literary writing, performance poetry, performing arts and the visual arts. From the start it was clear to the small team of us teaching the course that the value of such a program was not only its powerful pedagogic framework but its extension into the world of practice. As writers and text-based artists, we wanted the symposium to bring together a loose and very diverse circle of practitioners and thinkers who were proving through their own work the potential and necessary nature of Performance Writing as an emerging thought process for writerly investigation.

As will be clear from the polemical and playful tone of this address, the keynote itself was always meant to function as a public address, a call-out to writers and arts practitioners, far and wide, both in Britain and abroad. It wished to announce and celebrate the impact of thinking about writing as an interdisciplinary and audio-visual method of language work and of language inscription. It wished to show that the great avant-gardes of the early century and of the 1950s had been fully absorbed and were now being revitalized by writers and artists making their own mark of it through their own contexts and methods. More fundamentally, this keynote sought to provide a shorthand guide for starting to think as writers and text-based artists about the deep sociocultural transformations of reading and writing habits that were taking place and have since intensified in the wake of the digital revolution.

This event and a series of other public festivals created during my directorship helped establish the course as a first of its kind. The keynote has been reproduced since in a number of contexts where the question of writing and its locative performativity are actualized, yet still contentious.

This being a keynote, an opening gesture, I won't dwell too long nor go into too much depth. I suppose it will suffice here to air a number of questions and provide some overall pointers as a general background for the papers and panels and work we're going to be engaging with for the next two days.

Part of the pleasure in wishing to establish cross-disciplinary dialogues around a resonance such as Performance Writing is the fact that we all, as practitioners and critics, meet here in the knowledge that *only* the very diversity of at times seemingly incompatible starting-points, in both theory and practice, can turn the possibility of Performance Writing, beyond a BA degree, into a culturally networked area of investigation.

I suppose this is the time to ask why are we here, exactly.

I think we all have a vague sense of what Performance Writing might entail, which we can link back to our own work and approaches, but what of the overall idea that brings us here? Is there an overall idea? What is Performance Writing?

I think that's a good starting-point, so let's do a Gertrude Stein on it and talk about it for what it is not. This won't stabilize any answer particularly, but it will hopefully guarantee that it doesn't get looped into itself prior to the question being fully asked. So, what is Performance Writing not?

Is Performance Writing not writing?

Is it writing which performs not writes?

Is it not performance which writes?

But then does writing not perform?

And when does writing not perform? And what kind of not performance are we talking about? Is it not performance to write or is it not writing to not perform?

Some examples. Is it not Performance Writing to site some text in a space or on a wall or on electronic boards or is that not installation art? or is that not public art? Is it not Performance Writing to treat spoken writing as part of a sound composition or is that not music? or not sound art? Is it not Performance Writing to inscribe words on a canvas, spray them on a wall, layer text into photographs or carve them into wood, steel, or other solids or is that not visual art? or is that not graffiti art? or is that not poetry? Is it not Performance Writing to use text as part of a body-related piece or is that not performance art or is that not dance or theatre? Is it not Performance Writing to bleed a word into flesh or is that not Jenny Holzer? or is that not tattoo art? or is that not activism? Nor is it Performance Writing to generate text for the page or for the screen or for a book or is that not video art? or is that not literature? or is that not visual art? or is it electronic art?

You might be starting to think that Performance Writing is all of the above, or you might start to think that it is none of the above. Mostly you might think

that the dialectics of either/or induce a slight irritation, some vague déjà-heard. That at a deeper level what is at stake might be less a question of classification than one of applied definition.

I wouldn't like you to think that as soon as I read "This is not a pipe" I go "Oh Performance Writing." Well, I might. But bearing in mind that, for all the push and shove of postmodern practice and discourse, the overall historical classifications (music, literature, theatre et al.) are proving all the time less appropriate to read formally and place critically the kind of language work which is being produced, some concerted excavation of the *intradisciplinarity* of much textual work, or work which features writing in one form or another, is called for. To establish through and beyond the literary, a broader understanding of writing, its structural and functional strategies.

I would like to suggest that each artistic discipline, writing, or rather literature, among them, with their specific histories and developments and points of collapse and regeneration should be read *more* and explored *more*, not merely according to their specific discourses and histories, with the inevitable narrowing down and cocooning which ensues, but as so many criss-crossings of sophisticated skills borne out of these histories and questioned through the mental and material constructs of textual contemporaneity.

The contemporaneity of the notion of Performance Writing is that it can only locate itself as part of the atomization of literature, music, theatre, and so on. In that, of course, it inscribes itself in line with the aesthetics of suspicion, disruption, and reappraisal which have to such a large extent determined the frame of mind of this century's effusion of experimentality. In this sense, Performance Writing needs to highlight the many kinds of *tensions* which arise from the concerted pooling of differing writing practices. And explore the kinds of relationship text-based work entertains when developed in conjunction with other media and other discourses.

The act of writing becomes then as much a question open to literary analysis as one open to the broader investigation of the kinds of formal and ideological strategies which writers and artists develop textually in response or in reaction to their own time and their own fields.

I'm aware that much has been and is being written along those lines. But it all remains generally dispersed across so many fields and tucked away as so many side-projects that, unless one happens to make cross-disciplinary text-work a specific area of research, the likelihood is that much will escape one's attention.

It is also important to point out that, although much theoretical and poetic work has been done – this is especially true of exploratory poetry and deconstructive philosophy – to widen the literary debate and incorporate to it various notions of materiality (and the materiality of writing is an essential aspect of Performance Writing), it is largely true to say that the whole approach to

writing remains in these fields primarily located on the page. This ignores and cuts short the debate on all writerly work which extends beyond the page.

The poet and critic Johanna Drucker points out that if much post-structuralist analysis has usefully conceptualized the idea of textuality and textual performativity, it still falls short of addressing and critiquing the *range* and *scope* of materials available to writing and how this range may affect the very idea of writing.

Marcel Broodthaers's work is a useful case in point. Indeed, a large part of his work concerned itself, sometimes at a sarcastic level, with the investigation of poetic means and poetic conventions. However, he chose to do so by locating a writerly activity not primarily on the page but in objects and spatial constructs. He would locate the points where objects and words, syntax and architecture, apply direct, difficult pressure onto each other. Both in intent and product, his work displays an awareness of the act of writing and of its points of fission. So is the literary field's indifference to his work an example of literary blindspot? Is it lack of vocabulary? I would argue that along with the development of a shared terminology, it is a shift in attitude with regards to what defines the writerly that we should wish to operate.

A number of debates in the visual and performing arts as well as in cultural studies have applied deconstructive theories to question and articulate the importance of the *contextualization* of practice, the *siting* of work, the *locations* (and *relocations*) of identity in the contemporary arts. It is questions like these which could provide the extra-literary pointers we need to get to grips with the wider implications contained within the idea of Performance Writing. Hence, the textual does not only throw up the question of the literary, it also urgently prompts an interrogation of the impact the use of writing applies on visual, sonic, or movement arts. And vice-versa.

It is also paramount that the impact of this cross-fertilization does not remain fixated at a formal level, but that it acutely and insistently, one might say intravenously, makes a point of examining the personal motivations and urgencies for work, the ways in which such forms are used and function in their relation to social, cultural modes of identification, and often oppressive models for representation.

Indeed, writing's link with language inevitably forces the appraisal of writing as so many activities which at one level or other grapple with the psychosocial and political violence of any collective language, however localized.

I don't know whether the idea of Performance Writing can in itself provide the means to instate theoretical grounding and clarity of practice in the cacophony of textual cross-disciplinarity, but I certainly hope it provides a step on the way.

So rather than entertaining ideas of aesthetic orgy or formal fusion, anything goes as long as there's something like a bit of something which looks like

writing in it and leaving it at that, my sense is that Performance Writing would wish to inscribe itself within debates that revel in conflict.

Conflict at a formal as well as an ideological level. The conflicts and tensions at work within and between any of the elements a writer may choose to explore, sometimes collaboratively. The conflicts and tensions exposed by the expressed or subtextual semantics of such a piece. The way it resonates at a local-subjective as well as a wider cultural level. Performance Writing would be about *detail*. A close attention to the workings, the sitings, and the political dimensions of atomized writing practices – whether on or beyond the page.

It is in this complex and responsive reading of the performance of writing that one can most clearly make sense of this field, not primarily as a unified academic discipline, not even necessarily as one delineated, hybridic artform, but rather as an area of joint practical and critical investigation of the many uses writing and language are being put to and push themselves into.

In this sense, Lorna Simpson's stylized photographic combines of portraiture and verbal clichés, Heiner Goebbels' text-sound theatricalities, Gary Hill's conceptual use of text and video as sculptural environments, or Susan Howe's acute paginations of some of her poetic texts, to name but a few, do not merely read as inherently divergent or potentially parallel activities. More importantly, they read in relation to the act of writing, the performance of writing itself. Meaning, the extent to which its literarity is *sine qua non* (or not) to both the process and production of the overall piece whatever its media and context of reception.

As Susan Hiller could have said, a frame is not square by nature. Similarly, could one not argue that there is more, not less, to writing than the page, more, not less, to writing than language, more, not less, to text treatment than syntactical or morphological experimentation? And that to engage with writing in such extensive material terms, both as writers and readers, is what inscribes the performance of writing? A performance of itself at a relational level.

You might think that all of this really provides a very stretched-out definition of performance. And doesn't fully address the writing traditions which come out of theatricality and are still being carried through in much live work. Should theatrical writing be privileged in our appraisal of Performance Writing on account of its long-standing history? If anything, this does make writing's relation to performance more strenuous and difficult to disengage from established conventions of production.

This is a long debate. Indeed, how do we clarify the ambiguity between performed textuality and spoken writing. Perhaps I could sketch it out in terms of process. What is the process of live performance in its relation to writing? Is it writing's role, in that context, to function as a guiding background, as the

blueprint of a live piece? This would mean that the text remains absorbed, subsumed, by the live performance.

What if the writing were to openly interfere with the live piece? What if it were to force a disjunction between performing a hidden text and performing writing?

Can one turn the hour-glass and argue for the specificities of a live writing (I use the term with caution) where the performer's presence is cut open, emptied out, absented by the writing's own presencing (*mise-en-présence*), much like late Beckett, the Wooster Group, Laurie Anderson, Forced Entertainment's *Speak Bitterness* would seek to instigate. I remain excited by this idea of a live situation where writing is another performer and as such needs to be addressed explicitly. During and as part of the live piece.

In other words, the performance of writing would be this observation which seeks to *locate expressedly* the context and means for writing, both internal and external to language, whether these be activated for and through a stage, for and through a site, a time frame, a performer's body, the body of a voice, or the body of a page.

This does not really imply spontaneous and magical multilayering, simultaneity of process and product, cooking and eating at one and the same time. But it does rest with the idea that everything about a piece of work is active and carries meaning. Any treatment, any font, any blank, any punctuation, any intonation, any choice of materials, any blob, however seemingly peripheral to the work, is part of the work, carries it, opens it up, closes it in, determines it. This is its performance. Its points of impact.

So where does the text start or end? In the case of a text for the page, does it start and end at the words? at the fonts? at the presentation layout? at the edges of the page? or in the case of a text-sound piece, does the text start and end at the recitation? at the vocal treatments? at the overall composition? How are we to articulate this? The critic Marjorie Perloff talks of contemporary poetry as an activity which increasingly defers the activity of reading. Which increasingly highlights the tensions between the visual and the verbal aspects of writing. One could take this further and say that practitioners who engage with a process of writing inevitably forward an intervention of language and of reading which destabilizes and refocusses the processes of looking and/or of listening.

Of course, we might start to wonder whether writing can function as a sound effect or as a mark-making device. Whether writing can be fetishized into a word-thing or a word-sound. Whether reading can be turned into looking and listening.

I said earlier that writing's link with language inevitably forces the appraisal of writing as an activity which grapples with the psycho-social and political

dimensions of any collective language. Only at the risk of turning writing into a look or a decorative device can this be played down.

Writing questions the authority of language with language, through language, as well as beyond language. No performance of writing takes place without it. This is part of the responsibility which comes with writing. What makes writing, writing.

For at its most direct, writing (whether visual or spoken) takes its cue from the social body of language, however distended this cue may be.

This may generate or force up formal, ideological unreadabilities, aesthetics of erasure or aesthetics of presencing, extreme dislocations, specific realignments of language through writing which do occur as a response to the psycho-social situations it highlights or undermines. Whatever the context or materials, the overt tensions and dynamics between language and writing are difficult to ignore. So can language be used as an image, can the text function as an object? Is that still writing?

What of language occupies the writing, what enables it, what prevents it, what forces its relocations, what makes a piece readable, what occupies the making and the performing of writing, and what occupies the reading, the reception of writerly activities?

With this, I'll ask again: Where does a text start? where does it not end?

Friday 12th April 1996

[Postscript]

Of course you might wonder whether I'm trying to say that as soon as I see a text on a wall or as soon as I hear a layered, treated section of language in a sound piece I go Oh! Performance Writing. This of course would be very tempting. PERFORMANCE WRITING is about tension and pooling. Atomization of verbal and visual language forms and localization of intent. Concerted, precise use of these materials and how they inform each other, language among them.

Another example. The Mexican writer and performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña mentions in an interview that he uses performance in a very different way from his writing. That where performance might impede the materialization of his point of view he goes with writing and vice versa. This might seem logical. A question of moods. A question of appropriate skills for appropriate uses. And that's exactly the point. But it's got a catch. And it lies with us. Do we as audience as reader read Gómez-Peña as a writer or do we read him as a writing performer? Does it matter? Well yes if one considers the writerly an exclusive domain of the literary. But then what validates writing as literature? Is it writerly skills or is it cultural domain?

Rescuing the Past: Repetition and Re-enactment in Jeremy Deller, Andrea Geyer, and Sharon Hayes

The urge to rescue the past as something living, instead of using it as the material of progress, has been satisfied only in art.

Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

Readers of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* must wait until the third part of the book for Zarathustra to explain his doctrine of the eternal return, and even then they receive not a theoretical explication, but, instead, what Zarathustra calls a “vision” and a “riddle.”¹ He feels compelled to tell these in response to a clichéd account of the eternal return offered by one of his followers, a dwarf: “All that is straight lies. All truth is crooked, time itself is a circle.”² Zarathustra protests this jingoistic trivialization of his doctrine and suggests as an alternative image for the eternal return his vision of a gateway with the word “Moment” inscribed on it:

From this gateway Moment a long eternal lane stretches *backward*: behind us lies an eternity. Must not whatever *can* already have passed this way before? Must not whatever *can* happen, already have happened, been done, passed by before? And if everything has already been here before, what do you think of this moment, dwarf? Must this gateway too not already – have been here?

Before something “can happen,” it is already “here” in the gateway. In Zarathustra’s vision, it is the gateway, the moment of emergence, that returns; this moment is the “having been here” that precedes every happening. This vision corresponds to Gilles Deleuze’s understanding of the eternal return as “the continual rebeginning of what has been; and ... the instantaneous return to a kind of intense focal point.”³ The “here” is this “focal point”: it is a non-event that precedes and makes possible the event; it is a non-actualized remainder

that does not pass over into what occurs. This is what returns: the possibility of another beginning.

Zarathustra continues his rebuttal of the dwarf as he goes on to tell the story of “a young shepherd [he] saw” who lies “there” where he previously envisaged the gate, “writhing, choking, twitching, his face distorted, with a thick black snake hanging from his mouth.” “The snake,” Zarathustra explains, “crawled into his throat – where it bit down firmly.” As Zarathustra tries unsuccessfully to rip the snake out, a voice suddenly emerges from within Zarathustra: “It cried out of me: ‘Bite down! Bite down! Bite off the head! Bite down!’” This cry, repeated four times, offers a repetition-riddled solution to the shepherd’s problem: the writhing, snake-like shepherd must free himself by means of a bite, the same act with which the snake has anchored itself in his mouth. The shepherd follows Zarathustra’s orders: “Far away he spat the head of the snake – and he leaped to his feet. – No longer shepherd, no longer human – a transformed, illuminated, *laughing* being! ... I heard a laughter that was no human laughter.” The no-longer-human aspect of this laughter turns the story of the shepherd into a riddle. The bite, suffocating and deadly when performed by the snake, becomes something else, something enigmatic when repeated by the shepherd, or by this inhuman or superhuman being that once was the shepherd.⁴ By heeding Zarathustra’s demand to repeat, the shepherd returns, at the moment of biting, to the “here” that precedes the “happening” of the snakebite and thereby returns to the bite’s unrealized potential. But what is realized here? Nothing more than a break, nothing more than a beginning and an end.

Nietzsche’s parables allegorize the eternal return, but they can also serve as allegories for the practice of re-enactment in contemporary art. The term “re-enactment” has been used to designate a wide range of practices, including the restaging of performances (Marina Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces* [2005]) and historical events (Jeremy Deller and Mike Figgis, *The Battle of Orgreave* [2001]), and the respeaking of historical documents (Sharon Hayes, *Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) Screeds #13, 16, 20 & 29* [2003]). Adam E. Mendelsohn has described re-enactments as “a hybrid of performance, theater, folk art, Conceptual Art and video art” and questioned whether there is anything that really distinguishes re-enactments from other art practices.⁵ Other critics have located the specificity of re-enactment in its historicizing force, its ability to raise awareness of historical events. There is certainly a historicist and pedagogical aspect to many re-enactments, as Julia Bryan-Wilson points out: they arise, in part, from the “need ... to set the record straight” in the face of historical amnesia and revisionism and to allow “for a younger generation to hear the record in the first place.”⁶ But re-enactments do more than just enable “an experience of the past in the present” or effect a “translation [of history] into a real space with real objects

and authentic bodies,” as the curators of a 2007 re-enactment exhibition put it.⁷ Re-enactments should not be understood, as they are by many critics, as just bridging the distance that separates us from the past. Instead, more than anything else, re-enactments make the present seem strange and distant, and thus make it into the time of historical experience, in which the transformation of the self and the world seems possible. For Bryan-Wilson, re-enactments allow for the present the past to be experimented with: “More than just recovering the past, these re-speaking projects use archival speeches to ask questions about the current place of stridency and forceful dissent, and the possibilities of effective, galvanizing political discourse.”⁸ They do this by allowing for moments of non-coincidence, when speakers deliver texts that are not their own and thereby experience (and allow for their audiences to experience) non-identity.⁹ Bryan-Wilson and Sven Lütticken (in his essay “An Arena in Which to Reenact” that accompanies the catalogue for his 2005 exhibition “Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art”) focus on this aspect of re-enactments and reflect on the theoretical aspects of re-enactment. This essay aims to expand on their work by offering a theoretical account of the place of self-difference in re-enactments.

As in Nietzsche’s eternal return, re-enactments bring together repetition and difference, re-creation and invention; they are emphatically embodied; and just as Zarathustra’s tales are meant to oppose the dwarf’s clichés, re-enactments are oppositional, taking aim at established notions of politics and history. Re-enactments attempt to create the conditions for historical experience, which is to say: the experience of the world and self not as natural, but as transformable. They aim to break what Adorno and Horkheimer call the “spell” of naturalness cast on the present and to oppose what they identify in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as “the new ideology” in which facts become “mythical” and “immune to intervention.”¹⁰ The goal of philosophy, for Adorno and Horkheimer, is to historicize this naturalness and show that the world has been made by humanity and can be changed by it. In this way, they follow the model of history articulated most forcefully by Walter Benjamin in the *Arcades Project*, in which he proposes a method of quotation and montage inherited from the avant-garde that would “awaken” his readers from the slumber induced by the triumph of capitalism in the nineteenth century.¹¹

Quotation is intimately related to history for Benjamin, and it is central to many practices of re-enactment in contemporary art. In his *Port Huron Project* (2006–9), Mark Tribe re-enacted speeches from the 1960s and 1970s at the sites where they were first given; in her *Art Worker’s Coalition (revisited)* (2006–, ongoing), Kirsten Forkert distributes, for rereading, texts written by AWC members; and in *Art Must Hang* (2001), Andrea Fraser performs a speech originally



Sharon Hayes, *Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) Screeds #13, 16, 20 & 29*, 2003
Four-channel video projection: colour, sound; 9, 10, 20, 15 min. each.
Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin.

delivered by a drunken Martin Kippenberger.¹² Perhaps the most prominent among quotational re-enactments are the works of Sharon Hayes. In the past decade, Hayes has returned again and again to quotation in projects like *My Fellow Americans 1981–1988* (2004), a ten-hour performance in which she read all of Ronald Reagan’s “Addresses to the Nation”; and the performance and slide projection *In the Near Future* (2005–9), “an ongoing investigation into the figure of the protester,” in which she stands on the street with signs that, in some cases, quote historic protests or protest movements (such as “Ratify ERA Now” and “I AM A MAN”).¹³ Hayes also participated in the collaborative project *9 Scripts from a Nation at War* (2007), a ten-channel video installation that includes a reading of “the transcripts of 18 of the Combatant Status Review Tribunals held at the US military prison camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba between July 2004 and March 2005.”¹⁴

In her 2003 video *Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) Screeds #13, 16, 20 & 29*, Hayes partially memorized the text of the four audio recordings that Patricia Hearst made when she was held captive by the SLA in 1974 (see page 96). In four videotaped performances (one per Hearst tape), Hayes gives her audience transcripts to correct and prompt her with; they read along, off camera, quoting from Hearst just as Hayes does. Almost every sentence Hayes speaks is interrupted by her amateur souffleurs (who remain off camera but seem to be a mixed-gender group of about twenty people). She constantly corrects herself and often asks for lines, remaining deadpan even when the audience occasionally cracks up, as when Hearst's tape resonates unexpectedly with Hayes's performance: "I've been stopping and starting this tape myself," Hearst says (and Hayes repeats), "so that I can collect my thoughts, that's why there are so many stops in this." There are many stops in Hayes's performance, too, but they aren't for Hayes to collect her thoughts. The gaps are instantly filled by audience members shouting out lines, competing for Hayes's attention, and sometimes drowning out one another. The video shows only a close-up of Hayes's face against a white background. Viewers of the video can only see the drama playing out on her face, but they can hear the often chaotic audience rustling the pages of the transcript and attempting to keep Hayes on track.

For Yvonne Rainer, Hayes's performances "demonstrate both virtuosity and its absence."¹⁵ In the case of the *SLA Screeds*, this can be seen in her partial memorization, which in itself is a virtuoso act, not just a failure to correspond to the original. Her performance requires reflection on the specificity of this virtuosity. What is the exact happy medium between memorizing and not memorizing? How does one *partially* memorize a text? Her virtuosity has the effect of creating tensions between inevitability and chance, between a naturalized performance and its defamiliarizing interruptions, and between fidelity and infidelity to the original. These tensions correspond to the way in which Hayes describes her work in general, as "rewinding to certain moments in time in part to entertain a possibility that things could have unfolded in a different way."¹⁶ The halting delivery of Hearst's screeds rewinds them or, better, unwinds them by making them into fragmentary, tentative documents, at least for a moment. Hayes's works do not resuscitate historical speeches as they were but, instead, aim to evoke the possible futures that could have emerged, and still might, from individual and collective speech acts. She opens up her texts to history. And she chooses texts, like Hearst's and like Reagan's, that are particularly resistant to affirmation and identification. Hayes returns to Hearst's screeds to feel out a speaking position that is dated, possibly coerced, and estranged, and at least partially non-expressive, even when Hearst spoke them for the first time.

Hearst later recanted her SLA screeds and activities, which were, as originals, already carefully and collaboratively composed.

Hayes's performance emphasizes political speech's embodied aspects, which audience members also engage as they "feed" her lines.¹⁷ The partial memorization causes them to hang on every word, Hayes's and Hearst's, and pay close attention to Hayes's efforts – visible on her face and audible in her speech – and the difference between present and past speech acts. The spectators, in Hayes's original audiences and in her video audiences, inhabit the text in an estranged way similar to but not identical with the way in which Hayes does.

Hayes's return to 1970s political movements is accompanied by a return to questions that arose in early 1970s video art, concerns that Rosalind Krauss frames in terms of self-absorption and the erasure of temporality, but that can be reframed as a tension between self-absorption and detemporalization, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, self-difference, temporalization, and, as Anne Wagner has argued, address.¹⁸ Hayes's respeaking disturbs any belief in video as the site of a present, presence, or self-identity. In this way, she recalls early examples of video art that estrange the present (such as Lynda Benglis's *Now*, Bruce Nauman's *Lip Sync*, and Richard Serra's *Boomerang*) and use quotations (like Serra's *Surprise Attack*, in which he quotes excerpts from Thomas C. Schelling's *The Strategy of Conflict*, and John Baldessari's singing of Sol LeWitt's "Sentences on Conceptual Art" in *Baldessari Sings LeWitt*).

Perhaps it is this critical attitude towards presentness that causes Hayes to distance herself from the term "re-enactment": "I don't re-enact past events but I do use material from specific past moments."¹⁹ Perhaps Hayes doesn't think of her work as re-enactment because the term implies a desire to reconstruct a historical event as it was. Hayes eschews gestures to authenticity, such as the staging of performances on the site of their original enactment. In a conversation with Yvonne Rainer, Hayes also dismisses the word "performance"; her projects, she claims, should be understood as "performative copies" or an "enactment of performatives rather than performance."²⁰ She goes on to specify that this means "an utterance which does something in its repetition."²¹ Hayes's works are performative copies not because they are copies of performances that have already taken place and whose performative force lies in the past and must be resurrected by her, but because her copies are, in themselves and precisely as copies, a specific kind of performative or speech act. She "respeaks" past speech acts and in the process breaks them down, showing not only how they may originally have relied on a "moment in which a body and a text and a time and a place coalesce," but also how "that is one moment among many" and how the act's repetition can occur even without that coalescing.²² What

kind of speech act is it when Ronald Reagan's speeches are read by the wrong speaker of the wrong gender in the wrong place at the wrong time? Hayes examines the effects that such a respeaking has when all the right conditions do not obtain.²³ Just as partial memorization is not merely the failure to correspond to an original, the performative copy as speech act has its own powerful effects specific to the non-coalescing of the original speech act.

But Hayes does not leave the exact copy and the faithful re-enactment outside of her works; they still play a role. In *SLA Screeds*, the original is present, in the hands and mouths of the audience members who police her performance and discipline her when she fails to repeat verbatim. In *My Fellow Americans*, the performance script consists of the transcripts of Reagan's speeches. Hayes's works stage the tension between the exact copy and non-coalescing re-speaking.²⁴ There is no exclusion of the original and no exclusion of the exact copy; they are included as poles of attraction in her works. This inclusion makes difficult what might seem to be a self-evident classifying gesture between faithful and unfaithful re-enactments (or performative copies). Every re-enactment contains within itself this spectrum as a tension.²⁵

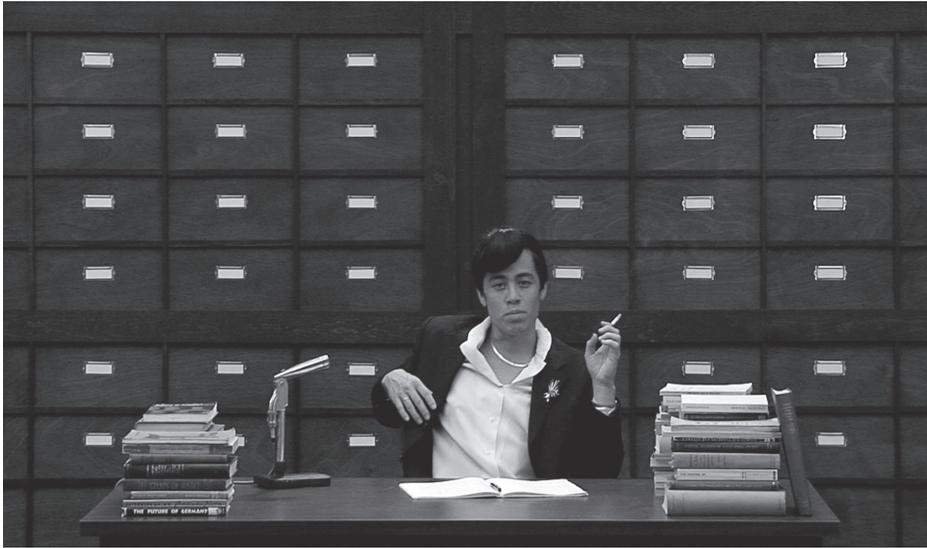
One of the most often discussed re-enactments, Jeremy Deller and Michael Figgis's 2001 *Battle of Orgreave*, seems, however, to aim for faithful reproduction – and to be based on exactly the kinds of identity and identification that are absent in Hayes's works. In the filmed version, the organizers and participants emphasize accuracy, and the artists engaged the services of a professional re-enactment company, EventPlan, that prides itself on fidelity.²⁶ Deller restages, for a live audience and for filmmaker Figgis's cameras, the violent clashes between the police and striking miners that took place in June 1984 in the South Yorkshire town of Orgreave. Deller and Figgis's work is very different from Hayes's; theirs involves thousands of actors, who carefully rehearse and coordinate their actions with a large film crew working on location. Their re-enactment seems to aim for the appearance of the very coalescence that Hayes eschews, including adhering to the original gendered distribution of roles.²⁷ In *The Battle of Orgreave*, the cast is entirely male, as are all the talking heads in the filmed documentation, with one exception (and with the exception of archival footage of Margaret Thatcher). *The Battle of Orgreave* seems to be about masculinity – the masculinity of the police, the miners, the re-enactors – as much as it is about the history of the labour movement in the United Kingdom. But its staging of gender is complex and, at least in one key moment, explicitly non-coalescing. In the final shot, the camera zooms in on a girl watching, from a second-floor window, as the re-enactors run down a street repeating their chant "The miners, united, will never be defeated." The girl takes up the miners' chant and repeats

it verbatim but playfully, looking straight at the camera. In this final moment, *The Battle of Orgreave* shifts gears and no longer re-enacts the coalescence of masculinized past and present, but, instead, foregrounds non-coincidence.

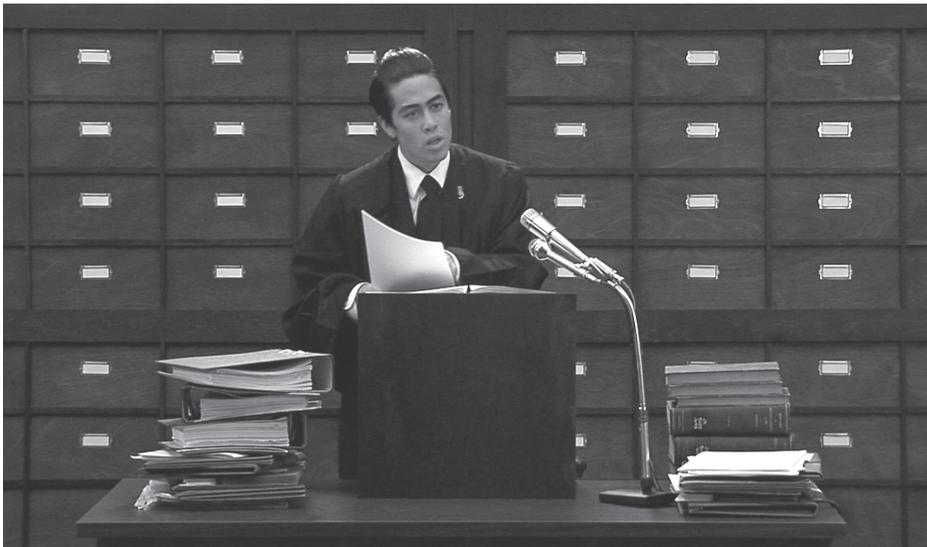
Earlier in the film, in an interview, a participant from the original demonstration suggests that a more effective, realistic chant would have been “the workers, united, will never be defeated,” because the miners were in fact defeated, while a united workers’ movement remains a mere possibility. Such a chant, he says, would allow for the battle of Orgreave to be transformed into a different kind of battle, one that could be expanded beyond its original scope and beyond a specific date in 1984. Although the text of the chant remains the same in the film, body and text seem to coalesce differently in the last moments of the film than in 1984, but of this one cannot be certain, for there must have been similar moments of women’s participation in the original Battle of Orgreave. In the final moment, Figgis highlights the irretrievable loss of Orgreave – it can be restaged, but its results cannot be reversed – while also opening it up for use in different kinds of protest movements and in different, non-conforming performances.

A survey of canonical and recent re-enactments reveals the centrality of non-coalescing gender performances: Hayes re-speaks Reagan; Fraser re-performs Kippenberger; and Abramović re-stages Acconci, Nauman, and Beuys. It may be that gender is so often re-enacted differently because it is a contested site where the natural and historical meet.²⁸ This is particularly clear in Andrea Geyer’s *Criminal Case 40/61: Reverb* (2009), a six-screen video installation in which the artist Wu Tsang performs a script composed of quotations from the documentation of the Eichmann trial. Tsang plays, in costume, all the roles: he is Eichmann, he is Arendt, he is a judge and an audience member (see pages 101–2).

Tsang’s performance contributes to the denaturalization of the trial, but eventually, as one watches, comes to seem quite natural. Historicization – the opening up of the present to history and transformation – occurs in this tension between artificiality and naturalness, between exorcism (of the demonic spell of second nature described by Adorno and Horkheimer) and enchantment (by the becoming-natural of Tsang’s performance).²⁹ Geyer presents a similar tension in a 2004 essay that draws on Walter Benjamin’s “The Storyteller” to offer a theory of narration: “In its telling and retelling, a story is constantly moved, partially forgotten and reinvented at the same time.”³⁰ Geyer “reinvents” the Eichmann trial, and this has the effect of undoing an understanding of history as identical to itself, or as an intact, reified “whole”: “The meaning of narrative in representing a history, a condition or situation, stands opposed, with its continuous slip-pages, to the determined forms of ideological formation of ‘a history,’ ‘a truth’ or ‘a reality’ as a hegemonic whole.”³¹



Andrea Geyer, still from *Criminal Case 40/61: Reverb (Reporter)* 2009, HD video, color, sound. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Thomas Zander.



Andrea Geyer, still from *Criminal Case 40/61: Reverb (Prosecutor)* 2009, HD video, color, sound. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Thomas Zander.



Andrea Geyer, still from *Comrades of Time (Nikki)* 2011, HD video, color, sound.
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Thomas Zander.

Geyer's 2010/11 work *Comrades of Time* has a similar effect. Each of the seven videos in the installation features a single woman actor who addresses the camera and delivers a monologue made up of quotations from public and private texts by Weimar Republic-era writers. The videos adopt the style of the history museum video: the serious actors are filmed on a soundstage; they wear simple period costumes; and they speak in front of a desk that is meant to suggest the study of an intellectual (with a few anachronistic effects, like a number of late-twentieth-century editions of works that their scripts have been quoted from). Their scripts are at once addressed to a public and to intimate correspondents; they reveal an earnest belief in revolution and in the power of philosophy and art. In the video *Nikki*, the actor proclaims "the right of a future"; she insists, as in many avant-garde manifestoes and political documents from the era, on the "need for a new language," and speaks about "the hope that must not be allowed to die." "Art and literature," the actor in *Anna* says, "contain the anticipatory illuminations of that which has not yet come." The videos' artificiality belongs to their anticipatory character: to be natural would be to coincide with the present and its expectations of appropriate acting. Geyer stages non-coincidence not as halting, flawed, corrected repetition, as Hayes does in her *SLA Screeds*, but in videos that aim for polished, seamless delivery.

In a conversation that was part of Geyer and Hayes's duo exhibition in 2010 in Göteborg, Geyer presents as queer the kind of futurity that she aims to evoke

in her work: "Within the queer community today, the continuous anticipation and staging of collectivity, politically and metaphorically, can be seen as a political move ... that needs for its own end to remain an anticipation or a continuous staging to allow and be able to engage the complex shifts, changes, and radical diversity that this community will always bring with it. It is interesting to think of our work [Geyer's and the work of her conversation partners: Hayes, Pauline Boudry, and Renate Lorenz] as part of this process."³²

Anticipation has no end but anticipation; it is nothing more than historicity, nothing more than the sense of the present as open to transformation. Geyer's final sentence here leaves open the relation of her work (and the works of her conversation partners) and historical developments in queer politics. Their art, she argues, is not the representation of politics but itself part of politics.

Geyer's title *Comrades of Time* quotes the title of an essay by Boris Groys in which he argues for an understanding of the present as the "site of the permanent rewriting of the past and future."³³ "Comrade of time" is a literal translation of the German term for "contemporary," "Zeitgenosse." To be a "comrade of time" in Groys's sense and in Geyer's videos is to be engaged in this production of anticipation by staging and re-enacting history. Geyer, like Hayes, would probably resist the use of the term "re-enactment" because of the importance of non-coincidence and difference in her videos, in which no original event is repeated. *Criminal Case 40/61: Reverb* doesn't restage the Eichmann trial; instead, it quotes from its documentation. And *Comrades of Time* uses a montaged script of Geyer's own creation. Why, then, present these videos as re-enactments when they do not re-enact anything? Why impose the term "re-enactment" on Geyer's works if she doesn't use it? And why use it for Hayes's works if Hayes explicitly distances herself from it?

Nietzsche's bite is instructive for thinking about the definition of re-enactment. The bite is the emblem for the eternal return of the same even though it seems far from what is usually understood as repetition: a human biting off a snakehead is different than a snake clamping down on a human tongue. The shepherd's bite doesn't seem like what would usually be called a repetition. Instead, it seems more like a variation on the original event.

In a well-known passage in *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze argues that there is not, on the one hand, an exact repetition and, on the other hand, variation. Variation, he argues, cannot be opposed to repetition because "there is no bare repetition which may be abstracted or inferred from the disguise itself." Deleuze aims to create a new concept of repetition that includes differentiation, and he insists that repetition repeats the possibilities, or the potential for disguise and variation, that are already inherent in the original. "The variations,"

Deleuze writes, “express ... the differential mechanisms which belong to the essence and origin of that which is repeated.”³⁴ Or to adopt Hayes’s vocabulary: every repetition, for Deleuze, is a non-coalescing performative copy that shows the contingency of the original coalescence and points to the possibilities for difference that are already there in the original.

If repetition were free of variation, the original event would be identical to itself and would be exhausted in its first occurrence. But no event is ever self-identical; every event harbours difference within itself. This is why it seems important to consider Hayes’s and Geyer’s works as re-enactments. The injection of their work into the body of works known as re-enactments puts into relief the forms of self-difference that emerge even in re-enactments that seem to reconstruct the past as it was, as a stable past identical to itself. Their works allow for a definition of re-enactment that takes into account the kinds of difference that emerge in repetition.

Repetition varies and disguises because differentiation belongs to the repeated event itself as self-differentiation. The snakebite becomes a human bite because the snakebite contains within itself, as a possibility, the self-difference that allows for it to be repeated differently. “The mask” – variation, differentiation, transformation – “is the true subject of repetition,” Deleuze insists.³⁵ The snakebite’s repetition repeats the unrealized possibilities within it. Deleuze’s claim can itself be repeated and varied: the mask is the true subject of history, and it is the true subject of re-enactments. To re-enact is to extract the possibility of difference from the past, to rescue the past as different from itself, as open to multiple futures. Geyer’s and Hayes’s works are repetitions in this sense, as is Deller and Figgis’s. Re-enactments stage non-identity even when they aim for accuracy, and they repeat even when they are far from faithful. Re-enactments are self-differentiating performances in which artists and performers turn to history to become something other than self-identical subjects – if not Nietzschean “transformed, illuminated, laughing beings,” then at least beings aware of themselves as historical and transformable, as different from themselves.

Notes

- 1 Parts of this essay appeared in chapters 1 and 5 of Patrick Greaney, *Quotational Practices: Repeating the Future in Contemporary Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
- 2 This and all quotations from Nietzsche are from Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). *Ibid.*, 125–6. All emphases in Nietzsche quotations are in the original.
- 3 Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953–1974*, trans. Mike Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 121. The reading of Nietzsche and repetition here

- draws on Giorgio Agamben, "The Eternal Return and the Paradox of Passion," in *Nietzsche in Italy*, ed. Thomas Harrison (Saratoga, CA: Anma Libri, 1988), 14; Maurice Blanchot, *L'entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 238; Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 89; and Arne Melberg, "Repetition (In the Kierkegaardian Sense of the Term)," *diacritics* 20.3 (Autumn, 1990): 71–87.
- 4 On the bite, see Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volumes I and II*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 181.
 - 5 Adam E. Mendelsohn, "Be Here Now," *Art Monthly* 300 (2006): 14, 16. To this hybrid should be added two other kinds of performance: the pageant and the amateur historical re-enactment. On pageants, see Linda Nochlin, "The Paterson Strike Pageant," *Art in America* 63.3 (1974): 64–8. On the relation of historical re-enactments (of the Civil War, of the 1917 October Revolution) to contemporary art practices, see Robert Blackson, "Once More with Feeling," *Art Journal* 66(1) (2007): 28–40; Allison Smith's work in Nato Thompson, ed., *Ahistoric Occasion: Artists Making History* (North Adams, MA: MASS MoCA, 2006), 102–13; and Matt Wolf and Allison Smith, "Reenacting Stonewall, Jackson That Is," *Journal of Aesthetics & Protest* 1.4 (2005): 222–3.
 - 6 Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Sounding the Fury," *Artforum* 46.5 (January 2008): 96.
 - 7 Inke Arns and Gabriele Horn, "Foreword," in *History Will Repeat Itself: Strategies of Re-enactment in Contemporary (Media) Art and Performance*, ed. Arns and Horn (Revolver: Frankfurt am Main, 2007), 7–9, translation modified.
 - 8 Bryan-Wilson, "Sounding the Fury," 5. For instance, Sharon Hayes's *SLA Screeds* (discussed below) allows for the retracing of Patty Hearst's radicalization, as she is transformed from a kidnapped heiress into the revolutionary "Tanya" (her nom de guerre) who quotes George Jackson's *Blood in My Eye* and engages in shooting practice to prepare to defend herself against the FBI. The collaborative *9 Scripts for a Nation at War* serves the valuable purpose of turning archival documents – like transcripts of hearings at Guantanamo – into public events. In these cases, there is certainly a desire to educate about historical events, but the re-enactments are more than just the realization of this desire. See Cynthia Chris, "Storytelling and Translating: On the Work *9 Scripts from a Nation at War*," *Springerin* 13.4 (2007), <http://www.springerin.at/dyn/heft.php?id=53&pos=0&textid=0&lang=en>.
 - 9 For artists and audiences, re-enactments raise a number of basic questions that Andrea Geyer posits as central to contemporary art practice: "Who am I? Who is speaking? What are the structures that form identity and the position from which it is spoken? Who is listening?" Andrea Geyer, "Now, Then, and How: Notes on Artistic Practice," in *The Artist as Public Intellectual?* ed. Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen (Vienna: Schlebrügge, 2008), 128.
 - 10 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 119.
 - 11 In curatorial and critical accounts, it is Benjamin who is most often invoked to theorize re-enactments, to explain how the use of the past calls up the future. *The Arcades Project* is, in part, a reaction against Nietzsche: the eternal return, for Benjamin, is the return of the commodity, which poses as the eternally new but actually is nothing but eternal sameness. See Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), vol. 1: 663, 673, 677 and vol. 5: 175.

- 12 See Bryan-Wilson, "Sounding the Fury," 95–6; and, on Fraser, Sven Lütticken, ed., *Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art* (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 2005), 61–9 and 117–24.
- 13 Not all of the signs in *In the Near Future* are quotations; some are of Hayes's invention. See Sharon Hayes, untitled artist's statement in the exhibition brochure *Communitas: Die unrepräsentierbare Gemeinschaft, the Unrepresentable Community* (Graz: Camera Austria, 2011), n.p.
- 14 See Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Changing the Subject: On 9 Scripts from a Nation at War," *Artforum* 46.2 (October 2007): 123–4.
- 15 Andrea Geyer and Sharon Hayes, *Andrea Geyer/Sharon Hayes*, ed. Cynthia Chris (Heidelberg: Kehrer, 2009), 21.
- 16 Hayes in Geyer and Hayes, *Andrea Geyer/Sharon Hayes*, 27.
- 17 Sharon Hayes, "I March in the Name of Liberty but As Long As I Love you I Am not Free" (lecture, Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid, 26 November 2009), <http://www.museoreinasofia.es/archivo/videos/2009/sharon-hayes.html>.
- 18 Rosalind Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 3–18; Anne Wagner, "Performance, Video, and the Rhetoric of Presence," *October* 91 (2000): 59–80.
- 19 Sharon Hayes, "Speech Acts," interview by Roger Cook, *Frieze*, March 2010: 97.
- 20 Sharon Hayes and Yvonne Rainer, "Familiarity, Irony, Ambivalence (and love, envy, attraction, revulsion, hubris as byproducts of the 'performative' act): An email conversation between Sharon Hayes and Yvonne Rainer," in *Work the Room: Performance Strategies*, ed. Ulrike Müller (Berlin: b_books, 2006), 34.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Hayes in Geyer and Hayes, *Andrea Geyer/Sharon Hayes*, 70.
- 23 On Ronald Reagan as the figure par excellence of unity and cohesion, see Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 160 and 180–1.
- 24 This tension is similar to one identified by Elizabeth Freeman between the force of the present, its ability to transform historical material, as well as the pressure of the past, the "temporal drag" that acts as a kind of undertow connecting present political movements to "disavowed political histories." Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 65.
- 25 See Elizabeth Freeman's related remarks on Elisabeth Subrin's *Shulie* in Freeman, *Time Binds*, 71.
- 26 EventPlan highlights the authenticity of their re-enactments: "From retraining ex-Jordanian army troops as Roman legionaries to restaging the Battle of Orgreave – the infamous 1984 clash between NUM miners and riot police, we've organised all sorts of very successful projects ... If you seek reliability, quality and historical authenticity, look no further. Years of experience allow us to instinctively pick the right specialist extras and/or suppliers for each project, so no mistakes and no embarrassments." EventPlan's website, "Home Page: Professional Historical Event Planning and Management Services," <http://www.eventplan.co.uk/>.
- 27 EventPlan's website specifically addresses gender conformity: "Where groups allow cross-dressing, females depicting male soldiers ... should make an attempt to disguise themselves where possible, with no makeup being worn and obviously modern female hairstyles hidden under hats/helmets. With no disrespect intended,

- obviously female soldiers pretending to be men often harm the 'believability' of a display in the eyes of the audience and spoil photographs/videos, so we wish to avoid this as much as possible." "Terms and Conditions of Participation in EventPlan 1940s Themed Events," <http://www.eventplan.co.uk/>.
- 28 Hayes makes a similar observation about her project *Revolutionary Love*: "The event, particularly as it was recorded on video, looks like something that is both actual and staged. And I am particularly interested in the way in which that tension between actual and staged reverberates against the construction and performance of queerness more generally." Hayes in Geyer and Hayes, *Andrea Geyer/Sharon Hayes*, 94.
- 29 See the related discussion of "the intrusion of the supposedly static category of ritual into the quintessentially dynamic character of the event" in William Sewell, Jr, "Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille," *Theory and Society* 25 (1996): 841–81 and especially 868–71.
- 30 See Geyer, "Now, Then, and How," 128.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 129.
- 32 Geyer in Geyer and Hayes, *Andrea Geyer/Sharon Hayes*, 94–5.
- 33 Boris Groys, *Going Public* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2010), 90.
- 34 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 17.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 18.

From *Notes on Conceptualisms*

1. Conceptual writing is allegorical writing.

1a. The standard features of allegory include extended metaphor, personification, parallel meanings, and narrative. Simple allegories use simple parallelisms, complex ones more profound. Other meanings exist in the allegorical “pre-text,” the cultural conditions within which the allegory is created. Allegorical writing is a writing of its time, saying slant what cannot be said directly, usually because of overtly repressive political regimes or the sacred nature of the message. In this sense, the allegory is dependent on its reader for completion (though it usually has a transparent or literal surface). Allegory typically depends heavily on figural or image-language; Angus Fletcher’s book *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* argues that this heightened sense of the visual results in stasis.

Walter Benjamin, Paul de Man, and Stephen Barney identified allegory’s “reification” of words and concepts, words having been given additional ontological heft as things.

For the allegorist, the author-artist uses the full array of possibilities – found and created – to collage a world that parallels the new production (collectively) of objects as commodity.

Words are objects.

Note that allegory differs from symbolism in that symbolism derives from an Idea, while allegory builds to an Idea. Images coagulate around the Idea/Symbol; images are jettisoned from the allegorical notion. The work of the work is to create a narrative mediation between image or “figure” and meaning. Goethe felt this meant allegorical writing was fundamentally utilitarian (and therefore more prose, symbolism then more “poetry in its true nature”).

compare:



Note the potential for excess in allegory. Note the premise of failure, of unutterability, of exhaustion before one’s begun.

Allegorical writing is necessarily inconsistent, containing elaborations, recursions, sub-metaphors, fictive conceits, projections, and guisings that combine and recombine both to create the allegorical whole, and to discursively threaten this wholeness. In this sense, allegory implicates set theory: if it is consistent, it is incomplete; if complete, inconstant.

All conceptual writing is allegorical writing.

2. Note that pre-textual associations assume post-textual understandings. Note that narrative may mean a story told by the allegorical writing itself, or a story told pre- or post-textually, about the writing itself or writing itself.

2a. Conceptual writing mediates between the written object (which may or may not be a text) and the meaning of the object by framing the writing as a figural object to be narrated.

Narrativity, like pleasure, is subjective in the predicate and objective in the execution (*i.e.*, “subject matter”).

In this way, conceptual writing creates an object that creates its own dis-objectification.

2b. In allegorical writing (including both conceptual writing and appropriation), prosody shifts from or shuttles between a micro attention to language to macro strategies of language, *e.g.*, the use of source materials in reframing or mixing. The primary focus moves from production to post-production. This may involve a shift from the material of production to the mode of production, or the production of a mode.

If the baroque is one end of the conceptual spectrum, and pure appropriation the other, with the impure or hybrid form in between, this emphasis can be gridded:

<i>Production</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>Material</i>	<i>Post</i>
Pure appropriation	+		+
Hybrid/impure	+	+	+
Baroque		+	+

2c. Note the allegorical nature of conceptual writing is further complicated (or completed) given that in much allegorical writing, the written word tends toward visual images, creating written images or objects, while in some highly mimetic (i.e., highly replicative) conceptual writings, the written word *is* the visual image.

Note there is no aesthetic or ethical distinction between word and image.

2d. Sophocles wanted a true language in which things were ontologically nominal. This is true in fiction and history.

Fiction meaning poetry.

Poetry meaning history.

History meaning the future state of having been.

This is the job of Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*.

2e. In his essay "Subversive Signs," Hal Foster remarks that the appropriation artist (visual) is "a manipulator of signs more than a producer of art objects, and the viewer an active reader of messages rather than a passive contemplator of the aesthetic or consumer of the spectacular."

Note that "more than" and "rather than" betray a belief in the segregation or possible segregation of these concepts; conceptualism understands they are hinged.

Note that in post-conceptual work, there is no distinction between manipulation and production, object and sign, contemplation and consumption. Interactivity has been proved as potentially banal as a Disney cruise, active as a Pavlovian dinner bell.

2f. The allegorical aspect of conceptualism serves to solder and wedge the gap between object and concept, keeping it open and closed.

2g. In this sense, conceptualism implicates set theory: the degree of constancy/completeness of the "subject" and "matter" is modulated by the limited/unlimited nature of the linguistic object-image.

This mandates the drawing of the set. This implicates the one-that-is-nothing and the being-that-is-multiple posited by Alain Badiou.

Metaphysic concepts = possible modes of aesthetic apprehension rather than *actual* ethical observations. In other words, just as Leibniz is useful for judging the quality of any fictitious universe, the precepts noted here are handy for contemplating other verses: poly-, multi-, and re-.

Note Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*: the self is an Imaginary construct, made of parts of one like an other so to be recognized as one by an other, thus made contingent. Mimicry/mimesis being the means by which the subject makes the imaged self. Contingency/multiplicity is therefore the one true nature of universality.

Radical mimesis is original sin.

Allegorical writing (particularly in the form of appropriated conceptual writing) does not aim to critique the culture industry from afar, but to mirror it directly. To do so, it uses the materials of the culture industry directly. This is akin to how readymade artworks critique high culture and obliterate the museum-made boundary between Art and Life. The critique is in the reframing. The critique of the critique is in the echoing.

Note the desire to begin again.

...

Failure is the goal of conceptual writing.

In *Sentences on Conceptual Art*, Sol LeWitt writes: "If the artist changes his mind midway through the execution of the piece he compromises the result and repeats past results."

I have failed miserably – over and over again.

4. If allegory assumes context, conceptual writing assumes all context. Thus, unlike traditional allegorical writing, conceptual writing must be capable of including unintended pre- or post-textual associations. This abrogates allegory's (false) simulation of mastery, while remaining faithful to allegory's (profound) interruption of correspondences. Allegory breaks mimesis via its constellatory features – what scattershot this is. Conceptualism's mimesis absorbs what Benjamin called "the adorable detail."

4a. The degree of adorable detail in conceptual writing may calibrate to the writing's overt allegorical status.

5a. Benjamin Buchloh points out in "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art" that 1920s montage work is inherently allegorical in its "methods of confiscation, superimposition, and fragmentation."

More: "The allegorical mind sides with the object and protests against its devaluation to the status of a commodity by devaluing it for the second time in allegorical practice."

Buchloh here, via Benjamin, is recasting allegorical strategies through a Marxist lens: in a culture where objects are already devalued by their commodification, an allegorical relationship to the art object (or text) further highlights the process of devaluation.

One might argue that devaluation is now a traditional/canonical aim of contemporary art. Thus there is now great value in devaluation.

Adorno and Horkheimer: "Culture is a paradoxical commodity. So completely is it subject to the law of exchange that it is no longer exchanged; it is so blindly consumed in use that it can no longer be used" (*The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*).

Conceptual writing proposes two end-point responses to this paradox by way of radical mimesis: pure conceptualism and the baroque. Pure conceptualism negates the need for reading in the traditional textual sense – one does not need to "read" the work as much as think about the idea of the work. In this sense, pure conceptualism's readymade properties capitulate to and mirror the easy consumption/generation of text and the devaluation of reading in the larger culture. Impure conceptualism, manifest in the extreme by the baroque, exaggerates reading in the traditional textual sense. In this sense, its excessive textual properties refuse, and are defeated by, the easy consumption/generation of text and the rejection of reading in the larger culture.

Note: these are strategies of failure.

Note: failure in this sense acts as an assassination of mastery.

Note: failure in this sense serves to irrupt the work, violating it from within.

Note: this invites the reader to redress failure, hallucinate repair.

5b. "Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them." (Craig Owens: *The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism [Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture]*).

One might argue that confiscation suggests capturing, or re-penning. Re-iteration or re-cognition seems more apt, as the work is re-invented via its adoption.

5c. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin identified the skull as the supreme allegorical image because it "gives rise to not only the enigmatic question of the nature of human existence as such, but also of the biographical historicity of the individual. This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing ..."

The skull is the heart.

The same may be said for the image of an iPod.

5d. Craig Owens' article on female appropriation art of the 1980s, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," points out that Buchloh's article on allegory missed the crucial gender-fact that these artists are all women, and that "where women are concerned, similar techniques have very different meanings."

Stephen Heath: "Any discourse which fails to take account of the problem of sexual difference in its own enunciation and address will be, within a patriarchal order, precisely indifferent, a reflection of male domination."

Note that the absence of mastery is old hat for females and other others. Christine Buci-Gluckmann: "This discourse through the other is also discourse of the Other."

Again, Badiou speaks of the singularity of the void and the multiplicity of being: the only single entity that exists is the entity of not-being. Thus, is the absence of mastery necessarily the presence of slavery? The answer may depend on in whose image the slave is made.

Note that woman has been the likeness of a likeness.

Note the fidelity problem, or the failure of fidelity.

5e. Radical mimesis is radical artifice: there is nothing so artificial as an absolutely faithful realism. (*See Courbet, see James, see Goldsmith's Day.*)

See the story of women.

Inconstant as a mirror.

...

Note: to what degree the authorial framing of text as art removes aesthetic control from the reader.

Note: to what degree has art removed aesthetics from ethical consideration?

6b1. Note the regime under which conceptual writing has flowered is the repressive market economy; this is a banal observation, nonetheless true. Note that there is no escape from this regime, which will banalize and commodify any mass attempt at subversion. (The story of counter-culture since the 1960s.)

In other words, capitalism has a knack for devouring and absorbing everything in its path – including any critique of Capitalism.

Furthermore, Capitalism is naturally a meaningless system. In *On Violence*, Slavoj Žižek writes: “The fundamental lesson of globalization is precisely that capitalism can accommodate itself to all civilizations.” Thus capitalism is a medium. Thus the medium is the message.

6b2. In conceptual writing, writes Goldsmith, echoing LeWitt, “what matters is the machine that drives the poem’s construction.” Increasingly, for conceptual writers, that machine is now a literal machine. Moreover, as in search engine-based poetry, the process of construction may be another machine. In this sense, both construction and constraint are informed by market needs and consumer inquires (a procedural loop).

Note that this dissolves the standard difference between worker and bourgeois, serving as a perverse fulfillment of the socialist promise that labor, not leisure, will be the source of self-realization. One might argue that, as it turns out, when work is play and play is work, our alienation is complete. Allegorical writing underlines this development and its tensions by drawing attention to the conflation of work (research) and play (composing), particularly as they tend to suggest the same received or hollowed modes of (non)production and (non)meaning.

...

Production (industrial age) replaced by simulation (information age).

Simulation replaced by medium.

6b4. Note: the allegorical imperative in temporal specificity. To make *now* mandates the adorable detail as both grounding and background.

6b6a. Note that in allegorical practice, the commodity-object is revalued as an object via allegorical practice itself. There is restoration at work, and the promise of fetish.

6b6b. Note that in this way, allegory lies in the allegorical content as well as the allegorical gesture.

6b5. Representivity could = signification. A crisis in signification today would mean meaning, not unlike what meaning meant for Mallarmé in 1890. Would mean there was an alphabet in the alpha sense: there are not empty signifiers any more than there are empty selves. Or the arch possibility hereof. A crisis in signification in this sense means a crisis in insignification – we may mean more than we had previously planned.

...

A crisis in signification = a crisis in representation.

There are two end-points in addressing such a crisis:

1. Render the object closed.

2. Render the object open.

Conceptual writing can be conceived as open or closed.

Conceptual writing is a matter of equivalencies.

Conceptual writing is open if it does not limit its possible readings.

Open conceptual writing is typically open horizontally: there are multiple readings, but not multiple meanings or levels of reading. In this sense, it may be somewhat closed.

Closed conceptual writing typically attempts to limit its possible readings through some overt articulation or inscription. Closed conceptual writing is open vertically: fewer possible readings, but multiple meanings or levels of reading. In this sense, it is somewhat open.

Open conceptual writing depends more heavily on a pre-existent or simultaneous narrative for its reading(s).

Closed conceptual writing leans less, though is often more overtly (internally) allusive.

This is allegorical. This is sentimental.

7b. Christine Buci-Gluckman (*Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity*) writes about the senti-mental: the union of sense & concept.

Note that Kant maintains only the concept (e.g. Beauty) is permanent. Note that conceptualism maintains that only the concept (e.g. the idea) is (exists). Note that Conceptualisms maintain only the concept of "is" (e.g. materiality or other invocation) is permanent.

...

"I" am autobiography, text and context.

"I" am innocent/guilty.

Objectivity is old-fashioned, subjectivity *idem*.

The Subject is the properly melancholic contemporary entity.

The Subject exists in a perpetual substantive eclipse: more s/object by turns and degrees.

...

7a. Because allegory has a literal surface, it can dodge the hermetic bullet. And because allegory is tethered to its pre- and post-text, it cannot.

To the degree conceptual writing depends upon its extra-textual features for its narration, it exists – like the readymade – as a radical reframing of the world.

Because ordinary language does not use itself to reflect upon itself.

...

7d. Transparency is self-refuting.

...

10c. Language. (What is the constituent grammar?)

- Conceptual writing is sometimes typing.
- Conceptual writing is sometimes grammar.
- Conceptual writing is annoying.

...

10f. The medium is the meeting-point.

MICHAEL GOLSTON

The Melancholy of Conceptualism

Never has poetry been less winged.

Walter Benjamin

All conceptual writing is allegorical writing.

Robert Fitterman and Vanessa Place

Allegory is *deep shit* – or is it really just the surface crud of writing, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing? Along with its cynical twin, Irony, it presides over some of the more troubled literary sensibilities of the past several centuries. Traditionally signalled by its predilection for initial capital letters, Allegory always brings us blankly to the surfaces of texts – to *ink* and to *alphabet* – as if to demonstrate the flat and final conventionalisms of writing and thinking – and to a philosophical miasma stretching back along the sightlines of Benjamin’s angel of history, from the disarticulations of postmodernism to the melancholia of the baroque. Periodically it rises like the grotesque fish depicted on antique maps, agitating literary waters, muddying transparencies and sending ripples over quietist surfaces, distorting and making palpable its chief opposite, the Mirror held up to Nature.

Given all the bad press it’s received, the trope has proven remarkably resilient: Allegory has successively been declared the modal armature of modernism, the central trope of postmodernism, and the primary mode of post-postmodernism. Whenever a new development in the arts is announced or discerned, Allegory is dusted off and claimed by some configuration of the literary avant-garde as its principal mark of difference. Walter Benjamin early on explains the allegorical base of surrealism, and the trope travels with Salvador Dali in the early 1930s to America, where local modernists are initially allergic to it. After the Second World War, it resurfaces in the art criticism and collage poems of John Ashbery,

who describes the surrealist roots of American art hybrids like abstract expressionism and pop art, and it gets imported into discussions of minimalism and conceptualism by artist/critics like Robert Smithson. Then in 1980 Craig Owens alleges that “postmodernist art may in fact be identified by a single, coherent impulse” – and while this statement may now strike us as naive, his contemporaries in large measure agree with him. The perpetrator of the new and disconcerting sensibility in the arts is the *allegorical impulse*, so dubbed by Owens, and for the next twenty years the trope takes centre stage in the debates then raging about postmodernism. Allegory, it turns out, is more than just an antiquated poetic trope, dismissed by Goethe and Coleridge and permanently laid to rest by the romantic sentimental lyric and the modernist “machine made of words.” Instead, it has evolved into the cutting blade of the cultural edge, its formal disjunctions and the semiological arbitrariness at its core perfect analogues for the alienation and crises of late capitalist culture. Fuelled by the newly translated books of Benjamin and the gasoline of de Manian deconstruction, everything from the commodity fetish to subjectivity itself, from the rhetoric of critical interpretation to the basic configuration of the linguistic sign, is declared allegorical – and therefore hollow, contingent, and arbitrary. The sense of melancholy is palpable; the Modern Language Association has never fully recovered.

Allegory *surfaces* in Conceptualism, which is the first American avant-garde poetry movement explicitly to embrace the trope. For the Conceptualist, allegory operates at meta-levels – idea, concept – altogether beyond any “content” in the text as such. This is partly because in Conceptualism, it is no longer the “matter” of language that matters: it is generally taken for granted that nothing can happen at the level of the syntagm; or, at any rate, whether anything can or cannot happen there is no longer the point. The Conceptualist poet generally does not micromanage grammar, syntax, phrases, or sentences, because Conceptualist writing most often is copied text that is shifted, sifted, and resituated. Meaning takes place in the framing of whatever material is being treated and in the appropriative gesture itself. Unlike Language poetry, Conceptualism has no hard linguistics at its base: this is not a utopian writing busy exploring new ways of knowing by conscientiously transgressing the rules of standard English. Technical terms popular with the Language poets like *metaphor* and *metonymy* play at best a cosmetic role in Conceptualist poetics – or, better, they are used to discriminate meaning above the level of the sentence, to use Ron Silliman’s formulation.

Conceptualist allegory, then, is a kind of a return of the repressed: if American poets generally dismissed or ignored or even forgot allegory during the long twentieth century, it roars back to the outermost crust of Conceptualist

poetry, whose practitioners pronounce it their principal mode of proceeding. Part of this has to do with the free and generally uncritical application of post-modern theory on the part of Conceptualist poets, who are post-theoretical in the way one understands people being post-feminist: the vocabularies of Lacan and Derrida and Kristeva have been absorbed into the very textures of exposition and poetic performance altogether. One hears more of Benjamin than of Roman Jakobson in Conceptualist poetics; of Marcel Duchamp than of William Carlos Williams or Ezra Pound; of the high Baroque than of the High Modern. Oulipo and proceduralism are the new old standards; full-blown appropriation, in the form of straightforward copying, has come entirely into its own; the writing is pitched as studiously uncreative. Morticia Place dolefully officiates over the death of poetry, like Keats's Queen Ops presiding over the waning Titans. The wings of Benjamin's burned out angel have turned to stone.

The Conceptualists' *bête noir* is the same Romantic lyric subject – or “subject,” in the parlance of *Notes on Conceptualisms* – that has been the target of one branch of the avant-garde at least since Arthur Rimbaud's “Je est un autre.” In 1950's “Projective Verse,” Charles Olson wryly announces its incipient passing; the Language poets repeatedly and roundly condemn it; and the attack is ongoing in Conceptualist compleyns against writing workshop staples like the cultivation of personal voice, self-expression, and originality. Whole staedels of subjects have been liquidated in the flattened fields of Poemland – but Echo keeps on mirroring Narcissus, attenuated into contours of the literary landscape as she may be. Some of us are getting tired of the tenacity of this Holy Ghost – or maybe tired of the incessant whining *about* that tenacity – but what to do? Some form of the subject always seems to slip in the back door. Genius, while now Unoriginal, is after all Genius still: from the Latin *genius*, “a quasi-mythological personification of an immaterial virtue” (OED). This sounds like the classical definition of Allegory itself: can the poet never stop seeing the Reflection in the Pool?

If nothing else, then, when Rob Fitterman and Vanessa Place begin their 2010 chapbook *Notes on Conceptualisms* with the statement “Conceptual writing is allegorical writing,” they align contemporary Conceptualism with traditions in classical and biblical literature, medieval marginalia and mystery plays, Trauerspiel melancholy, Frankfurt School theory, Deconstruction, and recent trends in the arts stretching from Surrealism to Minimalism and later. This might be purely strategic: Conceptualism, in classic Baroque fashion, scrupulously trimming the lawns around its institutional mausoleum, replete with all the bibliographic melancholy that such a project implies. Like Allegory, Conceptualism is a morbid, museal, dead thing, with its shit-eating grin – and happy to be so.

Interlude 1: Periplus by the Lime-Tree Bowery My Prison: or, The Tempest in a Teapot

Scene: *On an antique map, an island somewhere between the Hudson and East Rivers. The wizard Kenneth, goldsmith alchemist, is at work in the still cave of the witch Poesy, where he spends his Day turning literary gold into lead. He is assisted in his labours by the bad-tempered structuralist dwarf Meme, who thirty years ago gave up his subjectivity in order to acquire the Helmet of Transparency, a fedora that renders him invisible. Kenneth uses Meme to harass the older native inhabitant of the island, the Bruce, whose profit on learning Kenneth's speech is that he knows how to curse. As the curtain rises, the Bruce is creeping toward Kenneth's cave [pronominal Andrewsiana (s)talks without]; the wizard and Meme are distracted by a magical vanishing banquet that Kenneth has designed for the confusion of his nemeses, the usurper Flarfists.*

The oldest definition of Allegory describes it as *a metaphor extended into narrative*. To make an allegory, I take a metaphor and elaborate it into a story – the metaphor “Life is a pilgrimage,” extended into narrative, becomes the allegorical tale of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. St Paul's rendering of Hagar and Sarah in Genesis as allegories for the Old and New Testaments in his Letter to the Galatians might be classified as an early instance of Conceptualist transcoding. Likewise, the metaphor “language is geology,” subjected to narrative extension, becomes Craig Dworkin's Conceptualist text “Shift,” in which he describes “tectonic grammar” by “replac[ing] a handful of words in the introductory chapter of a geology textbook with terms from the introductory chapter of a linguistics handbook”:

Tectonic Grammar is a unifying model that attempts to explain the origin of patterns of deformation in the crust, asemantic distribution, semantic drift, and mid-morphemic ridges, as well as providing a mechanism for language to cool (in simple terms, language is just an immense spheroid of magmatic inscription which has crystallized into solid words where it has been exposed to the coldness of space).

Fredric Jameson terms this sort of practice “allegorical transcoding” and sets it at the centre of postmodern sensibility: he defines it as “the setting into active equivalence of two preexisting codes, which thereby, in a kind of molecular ion exchange, become a new one.” Concerned as it is with the relations between the textual surface (the outer “crust” of the text) and the dynamics of various tectonic “lexical plates” (semantics-as-magma, “morphemic ridges,” “underlexicalized slabs”), “Shift” might itself be read as an elaborate allegory of the rising to the surface of Allegory in Conceptualist poetics, as in this passage from the section “Crustal Structure and Plate Boundaries”:

The boundaries between lexical plates are dynamic features, converging, diverging, and melding from one type to another as they migrate through the language's surface. In addition, lexical boundaries can disappear as two plates become part of the same lexical mass, and new lexical boundaries can be created in response to changes in stress regimes in the text. (14)

This passage both enacts and describes Jameson's "molecular ion exchange." In allegory, lexical boundaries disappear as discursive registers converge to make new semantic objects. "Shift" then might be read as marking the *historic* shift in postmodern poetics to an overtly and transparently allegorical mode: Dworkin's Conceptualist allegory lies entirely on the surface, on the outermost crust, of his text.

This logic of homology links Allegory with Surrealism, as Benjamin noted: both are founded ultimately on the analogical structure of the *pun*. At the same time, according to Stephen Greenblatt, "one discovers that allegory arises in periods of loss, periods in which a once powerful theological, political, or familial authority is threatened with effacement." Historically, then, allegorical writing can function as *code*, as a means to encrypting secret messages for knowing eyes. Allegory is the trope of coterie, hidden in the machineries of pun.

Interlude 2: *Surfacing on the margin of the antique map, the Loch van Nessa monster declaims: "Consider the materiality, horizontal and vertical, of words themselves. The double-aught or emptied eye sockets stuck in the middle of "book" and "books," the heave in Heaven and god's huff in "Hell": paranoiac-critical skull, grinning through the lattice of the alphabet. Meanwhile, the Pilgrim Christian Bök – a fitter man was never known – sails from the north bearing a new testicle, written into a paramecium, in which St Paul demands the allegorical impulse, declaring Hagar the Old, Sarah the New, Covenant. Christian reads Allegory where Judah read history. Bök reads book; books read Book, umlaut eyes over staring O's.*

Baroque allegorical literature, Benjamin tells us, is a matter of managed extravagance: it shocks the reader by employing linguistic exaggeration, violence, and voluptuousness, its rich language breeding inky ambiguities through the use of neologisms and figuration. Through its "outlandish linguistic creations," "the language of the Baroque is constantly convulsed by rebellion on the part of the elements which make it up." It is also an art – Benjamin calls it a *cult* – of the ruin, "fragmentary, untidy, and disordered," in which "language is broken up so as to acquire a charged and intensified meaning in its fragments": "It is common practice in the literature of the Baroque to pile up fragments ceaselessly." Baroque poetry is resolutely *anti-transcendental* and *irradiant*, replacing

the *intimate* and the *mysterious* with the *enigmatic* and the *concealed*. But the broken fragments of Baroque art are always scrupulously *organized*: the ruin is constructed intentionally: “Hence the display of the craftsmanship, which shows through like the masonry in a building whose rendering has broken away.” Baroque Allegory is heavily crafted, working toward complexity and “extravagant pomp” rather than raw disorder or chaos. Benjamin describes “the endlessly preparatory, circumlocutious, self-indulgently hesitant manner of the Baroque process of giving form” to the disassociated fragments it construes. Baroque form favours the visual and the runic, the plastic, the bibliographic and the monumental, the decorative, and finally the sepulchral, the immobile, the petrified, and the concrete.

Interlude 3: K. Firefiz Silem Mohammed, gentle Flarfist knight of the Deer Head nation, pricking on the plane, confronts the dragon Errour, foul mother of foul texts:

*Therewith she spewd out of her filthy screen
A floud of information horrible and blacke,
Full of great lumpes of text and websites raw,
Which stunck so vildly, that it forst him slacke
His grasping hold, and from her turne him backe:
Her vomit full of blogs and twitters was,
With loathly quietists, which eyes did lacke,
And creeping sought way in the weedy gras:
Her filthy parbreake all the place defiled has.*

Craig Owens points out that the definition of allegory as *a symbol introduced in continuous series, the temporal extension of metaphor*, when cast into structuralist terms, maps onto Roman Jakobson’s definition of the poetic function as “the projection of the metaphoric, or static, axis of language onto its metonymic, or temporal, dimension” – that is, the projection of the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection or metaphor into the axis of contiguity or metonymy. The poet, by using the principle that informs the vertical axis of language – that is, the principle of equivalence that makes the substitution of one word for another possible – to structure the horizontal axis of language – the placing of words next to one another in the syntagmatic chain – arrives at the repetitions and patterns – formal and syntactical and grammatical and thematic – of poetry. As St Paul de Man reminds us, “allegory is sequential and narrative”: in allegory, metaphor is *temporalized*. Strictly speaking, Allegory doesn’t produce an

emblem or an image, but an *activity* and a *process*. Allegorical forms are neither pictures nor diagrams: as literary devices they generate *procedures*, not static objects: "Tropes are transformational systems, not grids."

Interlude 4:

*There is a female creature who hides in her womb unborn children,
and although the infants are voiceless they cry out across the waves of the sea
and over the whole earth to whomever they wish
and people who are not present and even deaf people can hear them.*

The female creature is a letter

and the infants she carries are the letters of the alphabet:

*although voiceless they can speak to those far away,
to whomever they wish, whereas if someone happens to be
standing right next to the reader he will not hear.*

(from Antiphanes, *Comicorum Atticorum Fragmenta*, 4th century BC;
trans. Anne Carson)

Already in ancient times Allegory was associated with the Alphabet, and hence with written as opposed to oral literature: there is no allegory in Homer, so the story goes, but later Hellenistic scholars used allegoresis to interpret the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Hoary and venerable, no literary trope more readily invokes the dust of the archive or the dour St Kenneths of literary production. Conceptualism is the art of the heart of the scribe.

A common conceit in the critical literature concerning Allegory is that somehow social, political, and cultural circumstances account for a given historical period's proclivity for (or its allergy to) the trope; the scholar uses the absence or presence of Allegory as a kind of critical thermometer for determining the pitch of the fever, so to speak, of the cultural moment. This is already central to Benjamin's idea of allegory as the "armature" of particular period aesthetics like the Baroque, as well as to Jameson's notion of the Westin Bonaventure Hotel as an architectural "analogon" for the postmodern subject's inability to navigate decentred global political environments. According to Deborah Madsen, allegory is "conceived as a way of registering the fact of crisis." Echoing an older modernist formulation, she writes that allegory "registers a dissociation of sensibility," appearing, for instance, "as the individual genius valued by Romanticism gives way to the culturally constituted discursive subject prized by poststructuralism."

Critics thus often strike a moralizing note, construing history as a tragic narrative of ongoing loss while mourning the passing of a mythic time when language supposedly had more "power." Maureen Quilligan writes that "allegory

as a form responds to the linguistic conditions of a culture": due, she says, to the "context of a renewed concern for language and its special potencies, we have regained not only our ability to read allegory, but an ability to write it," and she goes on to declare that allegory "will flourish in a culture that grants to language its previous potency to construct reality." But was language previously – or for that matter *ever* – more "potent"? And did "we" at some point really *lose our ability* to read and write allegorically? At this late date, there is something quaint about the idea that language "constructs" reality, or that it has levels of "potency" that change from one historical period to another – or that a literary trope could have much to do with such momentous circumstances. Sayre Greenfield goes so far as to claim that "allegory, as one of the most complex and indirect forms of reading, reveals the limits of how we think."

This last statement raises many questions. What exactly are the "limits of my thinking"? How would I know when I reached them? What if there are no limits to thinking? Why should there be? Do all people in every culture fall into allegorizing at the limits of their thinking? How could we know? As it turns out, no one has proven that different languages "limit" thinking in different ways, or for that matter that they limit it whatsoever; or that language in any meaningful way constructs reality; or that particular languages have anything to do with particular cultures – that indeed language has anything *at all* to do with culture – or that specific languages carry specific politics or "world views" or "epistemologies." The vast bulk of theoretical and experimental work done in linguistics over the past half-century suggests otherwise. Language, it turns out, is finally not destiny: Swahili is just as elastic and dynamic as are German or Maori or Chinese – and vice versa. No world view is built into the grammar of Hopi. A speaker of Ebonics neither is incapable of saying or thinking things that a speaker of standard English might say or think, nor can she say or think things that a native speaker of Nahuatl can't say or think. To hold otherwise is not only to ignore decades of scientific research, but to entertain a discredited linguistic essentialism every bit as pernicious as the old racial and cultural essentialisms that everyone in the academy has worked so hard over the last half-century to discredit and disavow.

The notion that allegory only crops up during periods of cultural crisis is equally untenable – what hard evidence do we have for this? One should finally probably not extrapolate from the formal structure of a literary trope to the sociopolitical circumstances of a given historical period; this might be the biggest myth of all in the modernist postbag (see, e.g., Ezra Pound on the thickness of line in painting as an "analogon" of a culture's tolerance of usury), as well as in the postmodernist post office (is there finally any real difference between Pound's "hormonal" analysis and Jameson's fable about his uneasiness in an

edgy new hotel lobby?). Homology itself is grounded on the flimsiest of logical pretences, the constructing of analogies: it's no wonder that Surrealism and Allegory are the tiki's guarding the Structuralist longhouse. One comes away from the literature on allegory distressed by the sheer insouciance with which untested and untestable pronouncements about cognition, language, history, and culture get made.

Beginning in the 1960s, allegory begins washing on the shores of America like a plague of (rafts of) Medusae, and in translations of works like Benjamin's *Illuminations* in 1968, and then in de Man's work from 1969 on, *the art machine hits the beach running*. Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* appears in English in 1977; Maureen Quilligan and Stephen Barney both publish books on allegory in 1979, and de Man's *Allegories of Reading* appears; 1981 sees Morton Bloomfield's *Allegory, Myth, and Symbol*, which includes essays by Murray Krieger, Quilligan, and J. Hillis Miller, and the same year sees Stephen Greenblatt's *Allegory and Representation*, another collection of important articles. Todorov's *Theories of the Symbol* is translated in 1982, the same year that Paul Smith's article "The Will to Allegory in Postmodernism" appears, and Carolyn Van Dyke publishes *The Fiction of Truth: Structures of Meaning and Narrative in Dramatic Allegory*, a study that examines deconstructive angles of the isle, in 1985.

"allegory": allos, other + agoreuei, to speak: Allegory is "other-speech": hence to read like St Paul, through a glass darkly: Roman reading Greek reading Hebrew. Hamlet holds his Mirror up to Nature; Yorick's skull grins back. Blake tells us that Satan is the Limit of Opacity: *le Vampire*: Baudelaire's "Infamous bitch to whom I'm bound / Like the convict to his chain" – or Shelley's anti-Promethean tyrant, Jupiter, the great Mime:

Who wrought his lips in truth-entangling lines
Which smiled the lie his tongue disdained to speak;
Who, with firm sneer, trod out in his own heart
The sparks of love and hope till there remained
Those bitter ashes, a soul self-consumed,
And the wretch crept a vampire among men,
Infecting all with his own hideous ill ...

Truth-entangling links: Craig Owens's essays "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism, Parts 1 and 2" are published in issues 12 and 13, respectively, of *October* in 1980, and Joel Fineman publishes "The Structure of Allegorical Desire," also in issue 12. Allegory quickly moves onto the fast track to becoming what Fineman called the "trope of tropes": he claims

the trope is “representative of the figurality of all language, of the distance between signifier and signified, and correlatively, the response to allegory becomes representative of critical activity per se.” Allegory comes to be understood as a fundamental trope underlying everything from critical interpretation to reading itself, which is seen at its most basic level as an act of allegoresis (Northrop Frye had already said as much in the late 1950s). The famous melancholy of the allegorist, described by Benjamin as a consequence of contemplating the ineluctable unhinging of the sign from its referent, is considered the primary fact of the postmodern condition itself. Throughout the nineties, work on Allegory continues to appear – N.A. Halmi’s essay “From Hierarchy to Opposition: Allegory and the Sublime,” in 1992; Deborah Madsen’s book *Rereading Allegory*, in 1994; Gordon Teskey’s *Allegory and Violence*, 1996; Sayre Greenfield’s *The Ends of Allegory*, 1998 – and continues to do so on into the twenty-first century – Bill Brown publishes his essay “The Dark Wood of Postmodernity (Space, Faith, Allegory),” in 2005, and it comes round full circle to Angus Fletcher, whose essay “Allegory without Ideas” is published in *boundary 2* in 2006. Bibliographic masonry showing through Golgothan hill of rubble: the premier allegorical object is the human skull, with its double-aught or emptied eye sockets and its shit-eating grin. Fitterman and Place:

5c. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin identified the skull as the supreme allegorical image because it “gives rise to not only the enigmatic question of the nature of human existence as such, but also of the biographical historicity of the individual. This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing ...”

The skull is the heart.

The skull is the heart, that is, of the *eye* – of “the allegorical way of seeing.” The subject peers through an Eye that is a Heart that is a Skull, hence through the latter’s toothy grin. Adorno: “As through the crenels of a parapet, the subject gazes upon a black sky in which the star of the idea, or of Being, is said to rise.” Conceptualism is the shit-eating Grin on the Skull of Art.

Bök: Conceptual writing is about the screw, not the driver.

Testimonicles

1. *Allegory and Violence*: Gordon Teskey reads Jupiter’s rape of Leda as the archetypal allegorical event: the violent imposition of homological order on

recalcitrant materials: *Leda the mother of Helen the whore of Babylon the Dragon in the Sun*: Spenser's foul dragon Errour is the mother of inky imps.

2. *The Allegory of Plato's Balls*: "As historical genre, allegory may be likened to the tale of Cronos, who overthrew his father, Ouranos (the sky), by castrating him and throwing the testicles – the Platonic forms – into the sea, whence the goddess Aphrodite was born. The tremulous undulations in the veil of allegory are the turbulence that remains after the work's violent creations." (Teskey)

3. *Allegory eats shit*: Teskey again: "For the world that is devoured by Man escapes him as waste, as that which he has failed to convert into himself, and this waste is the substance of history, of a past that the analogy of microcosm and macrocosm cannot absorb. The material remains of the past are the evidence of our failure, which is already inevitable, to coincide with the world. As the microcosm increases in size, however, this evidence is squeezed into the narrowing space between the limits of the body and the limits of the real, until the evidence is brought around in front of our mouths."

4. *Allegory and Conceptionalism*: the Alphabet as Dragon Mother, hiding in her womb unborn children: writing as the birthing of l(ink)s: the text as *Ventous* [OF *ventose*, a cupping glass]: an apparatus used to assist in the delivery – or is it the abortion? – of a voiceless baby, consisting of a cup which is attached to the fetal letter by suction, and a chain by which traction can be exerted in order to draw it out.

Many grand claims, as I said, were made during the past forty years about Allegory: the trope eventually took on transcendental dimensions, becoming a catch-all for explaining everything from the dynamics of money to the structure of language and the nature of consciousness itself: in effect, allegory became allegorical for the postmodern condition altogether. In other words, allegory's fate at the end of the century was to end up a principal keyword in the catalogue of the pieties of Postmodernism, which has become its own weird old arcade, dusty shops full of the twentieth century's intellectual kewpie dolls and the dented helmets and fedoras of the war before the culture war before last, all of it awaiting the demolition team from the latest boulevards project. But one is less interested in what is true or false regarding theories of allegory and language than in the ways that the critical fictions of a period enable, compel, or reflect a shift in poetic sensibilities. No serious person today believes that the dialect of the rural lower classes is nearer to "the language of the heart" and therefore a more fit medium for expressing human sentiments than are the dialects of

urban middle or upper classes – but we know that this bad idea made possible a branch of Romantic poetry founded on just this premise. Likewise, the myths of linguistic determinism or the hundred Eskimo words for snow or the homological structure of human societies or the mirror stage of child development at one point made possible – and to some extent still do – certain developments in American poetry and poetics. As Clark Coolidge puts it, “The great misunderstandings. Yes. That’s a whole history of art, isn’t it?”

Conceptual writing is about the paper, not the toilet.

Benjamin’s Allegory: the armature of Modernism: Surrealist dreaming

Jameson’s Allegory: the sign of Postmodernism: Surrealism without the

Unconscious: Surrealist writing

Fitterman & Place’s Allegory: the signature of Conceptualism: Allegory without

Melancholy: Postmodernism without Surrealism: Surrealist sighning

In the city of Lost Angles, along Van Ness, a place close to the ocean, the Medusa turns her readers into stone.

Untimely Models

“You might say, too,” remarked Goethe, laughing, “that you would feel like a horse, who, on raising his head in the stable, sees other horses running wild upon an extensive plain. He scents the delights and freedom of fresh Nature, but cannot partake of them. Let Eckermann alone; he is as he is, you cannot alter him.”

Goethe, *Conversations with Eckermann*

In June of 1823 a young writer, having sent a book of poems in advance and received an encouraging reply, arrived in Weimar to pay his respects to the seventy-four-year-old luminary of German literature, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. With Goethe’s Olympian glance now finally fastening upon his features, Johann Peter Eckermann could tell the meeting was going well: “We bade each other an affectionate farewell; I felt that he liked me.”¹ Indeed Goethe, before parting, proposed another meeting, at which he assigned Eckermann an editing job (browsing through early critical writings of Goethe’s and deciding which to include in the collected works), and rescheduled Eckermann’s travel plans, encouraging the lad to remain close by in Jena – just ten miles away – for the entire summer. As the warm months passed, there were fewer discussions of what might happen next in Eckermann’s career. Gradually conversation seemed to turn away entirely from the topic of the young writer leaving. Upon Goethe’s death in 1832, it was as if Eckermann hadn’t even looked up and taken stock of his new situation, so busy had he been transcribing words pronounced by the now octogenarian genius. Or was Eckermann too selecting, framing, and composing? Was he, himself, also writing?

In his book *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* Friedrich Kittler reproduces a 1916 Salomo Friedlaender story, “Goethe Speaks into the Phonograph,” that involves a Professor Pschorr’s attempt to record Goethe’s voice on a wax cylinder by constructing a precise model of the writer’s larynx, which is then taken to his chamber in Weimar.

Pschorr placed his model on a tripod, ensuring that the mouth occupied the same position as Goethe's had when he was sitting. Then Pschorr pulled a kind of rubber air cushion out of his pocket and closed the nose and mouth of the model with one of its ends. He unfolded the cushion and spread it like a blanket over a small table ... He now carefully wrapped the blanket around [his miniature] phonograph ...

When I, as it were, let the nasopharyngeal cavity exhale as it does during speech, Pschorr lectured, this specifically Goethean larynx functions like a sieve that only lets through the acoustic vibrations of Goethe's voice ...²

The experimental mechanism now set up, Pschorr turns it on: "The buzz of the recording phonograph could be heard inside the rubber cushion, 'As I have said, my dear Eckermann, this Newton was blind with his seeing eyes.'" Goethe of course elaborates quite sonorously on Newton's limitations, prompting Pschorr's friend Pomke to exclaim: "Oh, God! If only I could listen forever! How much Eckermann withheld from us!" (67).

In Friedlaender's story, then, an unexpected new Goethe "archive" emerges (allowing us both to check Eckermann's accuracy and to improve upon his repressions, out-takes, unexplained absences from the dictation station) through a near infinity of still rebounding sound waves that need only be filtered out from the other sedimentary acoustic events that have echoed through the master's chamber. Anatomical models and new recording devices allow the historian to tune in to a wavelength of spoken classic literature lurking amid a background of chatter and quotidian clangs. Pschorr's device would add a new, more explicitly durational element to the emergent nineteenth-century genre of "table talk." And yet a real-time Goethe FM does not emerge in the story, since Pschorr, processing the terrifying implications of his breakthrough, hurls his device in front of an oncoming train.³

The Golden Age Microbrewery is, in a sense, an inversion of Pschorr's device. Rather than cut out the background noise to hone in on the utterances of a single heroic writer, this model *restores* the multi-voiced atmosphere of the seventeenth-century pub, the durational environment of the genre scene, which tends to sit just below literature. Against an ambient soundtrack of Jacob Cats's homey quotidian poetry – the kind of poetry that was in fact read in such pubs – two Chadwicks restage the speculative events that led to the brawls, French exits, sprawled figures, and the copious arrays of mugs, tankards, and pewter dishes that so consistently litter the foreground of golden-age Dutch paintings.⁴ "The prosody of noise," Lisa Robertson claims, "returns discordance to time."⁵

In labouring over such models, reconstructions of the family's originals, Blachly and I have become Eckermanns of the ongoing environment. Eckermanns

of the mundane surround. In particular, it has been the low-level dramas of recalcitrant matter that have activated our inner Eckermanns.

Like landscape painting, genre scenes – merry companies, card game confrontations, sleeping boors – might seem to announce themselves as distant art history. But time pools up and spills out in them in a way that keeps touching down now: a new time, historically, not of the instant or the decisive, didactic now. We've come to savour this time, echoing and amplifying it by lavishing hours (months!) of mimetic attention on models and dioramas of landscape and genre scenes – *The Golden Age Microbrewery* (2008), *The Genretron* (2008), and *High Seas Over* (a collision of a merry company and a model of the 1651 collapse of the St Antonis Dyke near Amsterdam) (2011).⁶ All of these are untimely constructs that, like the painting from which they emerge, stretch and extend art's dominant present, the cut-like now of history painting. But do not imagine that this is simply an "art historical reference." New modes of manipulative timeliness of course persist in the now of art practice; more to the point, the very logic of timeliness constitutes an attempt to dominate that present by constructing whichever timely art it puts forward as the only authentic response to the inherent demands of a particular moment.

It was a coercive timelines, too, that gave rise, negatively, to the non-monumental temporalities of the New American Poets and their immediate successors – to that array of newly framed times under the radar of the American Century. Larry Eigner, Frank O'Hara, and Robert Creeley were all, in different ways, genre poets. Not in unthinking celebration. Not in a lack of seriousness or ambition – but in anatomizing, and stretching, the supposedly spontaneous instant of insight that would be poetry's authenticating claim to presence and to timeliness – a normative now that was only a smaller version of a larger, increasingly administered temporality.

One line of our research has taken us to the earliest versions of this temporal struggle, where the unfolding surround was used to undermine the decisive causal cut that had been art's highest occasion. Tony Smith's first turnpike was on Holland's rutted paths. Our path, then, has been to model these, and the humming interiors to which they lead. We have sought to trap time in these swampy amplifiers.

But models and displays do not yield time so easily. Instrumental timeliness in fact usually dominates them too. And yet their very substance – their extension in real space – can tend to undo it. As apprentice model builders, we have become connoisseurs of that other time that lurks, strange and extended, inside the literalist desire to three-dimensionalize a scene, to make it available as a spatial reality, to lavish mimetic attention on its surfaces – to decide, everywhere, what it must actually be in its bodying forth.⁷

We've come to see model building as a practice of helping displays and dioramas liberate themselves from the narrow roles they're forced to perform in museums, where we find them huffing quietly in the low light of neglected corners, weighed down with the task of illustrating human virtues at work producing decisive events for nations, families, genius figures. And yet this physicalization of the event is the riskiest form of magical domination. To contain and own the event is also to unleash the endless possibility of its materialization. A gentle nudge is enough. We know from working for the Chadwicks how much messier and stranger history usually is. Dislodged slightly, the machinery of physicalization can come to project other, more complex, narratives certainly closer to experience. "The status of fiction," Robert Smithson complains, "has vanished into the myth of the fact." This emerges because "fiction is not believed to be a part of the world."⁸

Physicalization can be sonic too. The Jacob Cats poem performed in the microbrewery exists neither as a Dutch original nor as a simple English translation, but as a homophonic collision between the languages. This drawing out of the poem's latent sonic materials allows it to evoke a multi-voiced atmosphere – an atmosphere of sonic bleed, overheard and partial conversations at different volume levels – of the pub interior.

Often when poetry enters art history it is imagined as a release from time – a step away from the rigours of history into the transcendent domain of eternal bliss, into the magical realm of "the poetic" – that metaphysical shorthand for illusive meanings and mysterious presences always coming at one from beyond. But if the more compelling poetry of the last century has imploded lyric claims to timeless presence, disjunction, the main means of this implosion, now often sounds itself like ambient backdrop. It says: "You've tuned into the experimental poetry channel." And programming hasn't changed much on the channel since the 1970s. Enter appropriation, with its longer – often uninterrupted – units of discourse.⁹ This is one way that conceptualism has become a resource for recent poetry.

But the legacy of conceptualism I would call upon doesn't end there. Whatever *else* it says, a poetry after conceptualism also says something compelling about where it finds itself, the situation from which it begins – the occasion and context of its utterance – or what Smithson called "exploring the apparatus I'm being threaded through" (*Collected Writings* 262). This links it, in one way, to the histories of institutional critique and site specificity. As those modes of working become less tied to straight versions of sociology and documentary, a new space between writing and conceptual art emerges. At present this stretches from the Museum of Jurassic Technology and the Center

for Land Use Interpretation, on the one side, to the Office for Soft Architecture on the other.

Part of accepting a writing practice as post-conceptual may in the end have to do with how that writing frames itself: how it examines the apparatus it's being threaded through, how it offers a new description of that apparatus that is in itself an intervention. But for such writing there is also no unified, contained, autonomous "field" of poetry or art history any longer. The very claim to a "post-conceptual writing" already involves a tilting and combining of the two fields – art and poetry.

However, when we consider the poetry side of our context, we are confronted by the following positions: The field is comprised 'of' timeless lyric, timed-out disjunction, and would-be timely appropriation. This drives us to the untimely, both the extended temporality I spoke of before, and, in the context of writing, toward that earlier challenge to the timeless lyric – other genres: aphorism, epic, manifesto, irate letter, scholarly pamphlet, song, yarn, occasional verse, historical disquisition, closet drama, wall plaque, biography, family history. We are perhaps at a strange historical junction in which the turn to genre becomes more and more "conceptual." This is because what genres can do is insist upon a range of specifically coded contexts of address and reception. Genres site writing. Or rather, they sketch something of a phantom "context" that the work then elaborates, extends, or perhaps undermines.

Notes

- 1 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Conversations with Eckermann*, trans. John Oxenford (San Francisco: North Point, 1984), 2.
- 2 Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 64.
- 3 For Anne-Lise François, "the open secret as a gesture of self-cancelling revelation permits a release from the ethical imperative to *act* upon knowledge" (*Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008], 3).
- 4 The film of this is *At the Family Manor, The Chadwicks Demonstrate the Golden-Age Microbrewery with a Rendition of Jacob Cats*, which has been included in the *Postscript* exhibition.
- 5 *Nilling: Prose Essays on Noise, Pornography, The Codex, Melancholy, Lucretius, Folds, Cities and Related Aporias* (Toronto: Book Thug, 2012), 61.
- 6 The Microbrewery was first exhibited at the Chicago Art Fair during the spring of 2008; the film of it was then exhibited that fall at Winkleman Gallery in New York in the exhibition "The Genretron" (which was centred around the object of that name, a 12.5-foot occupiable diorama of seventeenth-century landscape painting).

High Seas Over was exhibited during the fall of 2011 at Kunsthal Amersfoort in the Netherlands. For documentation of *High Seas Over*, see Robbert Roos, *Märklinworld* (Amersfoort: Kunsthal KAdE, 2011).

- 7 Though we are in no way qualified as model builders, odd elements of our educations and job histories did point us, somewhat, in this direction: Blachly's day job is as a conservator; I studied architecture before I became a writer.
- 8 *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 84.
- 9 Less so, however, when procedure itself – say, appropriation – is meant to convey timeliness. The 11 interviews in *Printed Project 14: The Conceptual North Pole* take this up (Dublin: Visual Arts Ireland, 2010).

PAUL ELLIMAN

INDIFFERENT VOICES

On 9 January 1972, Howard Hughes took part in a telephone conference with seven journalists. The journalists' end of the conversation was televised and I watched it. Hughes said that he was still living in the Bahamas and that he had never met me, which was true. At the time I claimed that his voice was probably a fake.

The press conference.

Some forty minutes, in a house of bad repute called Continental Hotel, closeted in a room which by-the-by I took for the night.

The winter dusk was gathering like a hostile mob. Footsteps crossed a distant floor and then a cherished voice ...

"So, what about it?"

After an icy silence, the intercom hissed again ... There was a long pause before the connection was made, another before anyone answered ... A disgruntled but incisive male voice replied.

"Five in the goddamn morning! Sunday morning!"

And directly they came together he began to talk with the kind of intention of burying the awkwardness (...) under a heap of words ... wrapped himself in a mist of words.

"It's a chromo," said he, – "a chromo-litholeo-margarine fake! What possessed him to do it? And yet how thoroughly he has caught the note that catches a public who think with their boots and read with their elbows! The cold-blooded insolence of the work almost saves it; You know these people here have no sense of proportion. It's windy diet for a colt."

Addressing himself to nobody, or rather the voice within him said of its own accord, and quite independent of himself, as if it were possessed by a gruff spirit:

"This continuing invasion of my private life is absolutely intolerable! I'm simply not prepared to go on living in a state of perpetual harassment."

"Leave me alone."

(E)very pause seemed disturbing because of the acoustic flatness caused by the satellite equipment switching the circuits to more profitable use. It was as if the line had gone dead, yet the moment he spoke again the connection instantly resumed. The quality of silence was evidently meaningless in electronic terms.

A burst of incomprehensible verbiage followed.

"D'you know I sit all day long at home doing nothing ... I don't have any unnecessary words, but I put 'em down quick when they talk to me. No; it's quite nice these days. I lock my door, and they can only call me names through the keyhole, and I sit inside, just like a lady, mending socks ... You don't think much o' me, do you? I could be invisible."

When it had pursued its train of argument to this point, the voice stopped, and rested.

It then proceeded very slowly: "I'm an invisible man." ... and whistled. You don't believe in it anymore, you don't care! You're sneering at me!"

(T)he sense of every syllable he dispatched was fiercely distinct; I had never heard the voice, as I had never seen the face, but it affected me in the same strange way. Again, in a moment, there arose before my mind innumerable pictures of myself.

"The wealth and precision of detail will carry conviction to the great mass of the public," advanced the Assistant Commissioner gently.

"Robert! You ought to take all this seriously!"

"I do ..."

His voice took on a warning note.

"You're in a trance!"

I think he was swearing but am not certain;

(I)n a deep, deferential bass of an oratorical quality, so utterly different from the tone in which he had spoken before that his interlocutor remained profoundly surprised.

HIS WORDS HE SEEMED TO BE DRAGGING OUT LIKE WORDS IN AN ANTHEM;

He himself was not without dishonesty, and the truth of his belief was altered because he was guilty of vanity, of several meannesses. Small things in his past which his enemies would never know, might rise in his own mind to clog his tongue.

"Rotten weather," he growled, savagely. "Some of these people generate the most unusual garbage."

He seemed to be going to say something else, and then to change his mind. Ashe looked worried, not offended, and Keiver as inscrutable as before.

"Voice won't do. We have no use for your voice. We don't want a voice. We want facts ..."

"Nonsense," said the Voice. (H)is defence was his own tongue.

Ashe coloured and said, "If that's the —"

"Don't interrupt," ... "just damn well wait till I've finished, do you mind?"

His voice had taken the peculiar flatness of the blind.

"Stop!" Avery shouted suddenly. "Stop for God's sake! If anything matters, if anything is real, we've got to hear him now! For the sake of ..."

But in truth there is a sort of lucidity proper to extravagant language, and the great man was not offended. A slight jerky movement of the big body (...) lost in the gloom of the green silk shades, of the big head leaning on the big hand, accompanied an intermittent stifled but powerful sound. The great man had laughed.

Later that same day.

The flat was very clean. Curtains and carpets were flowered, the polished surfaces protected with lace. Everything was protected; vases, lamps, ashtray, all were carefully guarded. The furniture was heavy, pseudo-antique. In the centre of the room was a table with two carved chairs. The table was covered with a rust-coloured counterpane more like a carpet; on it before each chair was a pad of paper and a pencil. On a sideboard there was whisky and soda.

I laid the newspaper flat on the table and read the same page over and over again ...

The report in the morning paper had been reprinted. "This extraordinary story probably a fabrication." Too good not to print — cum grano!

"WELL," SAID SYME, "I CAN UNDERSTAND YOU PUTTING ON HIS DIRTY OLD BEARD FOR A NIGHT'S PRACTICAL JOKE, BUT I DON'T UNDERSTAND YOUR NEVER TAKING IT OFF AGAIN."

THEN HE SAID IN A LOW VOICE — "CAN YOU PLAY THE PIANO?"

"You are what we call a Sensitive ... We would gladly help you train those powers. Presently you are like a wireless set without a proper tuner. We can teach you to get the BBC, Radio Luxembourg, Radio Paris, Australia, you name it. At will."

It was too much for me, that notion. I wanted it gone, not trained. Not stronger.

I doubt if you 'do' them as much as I! Their affairs, their appointments and arrangements, their little games and secrets and vices – those things all pass before me.

In a common situation, I suppose, we all behave much alike and use the same words.

What they have in common is that they're not here. By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell therefore you are.

"Ouf!" said he. "That's heavenly! Well?"

I haven't made a full confession ... I gave Castle the wrong notes by accident. I'd made one lot to show him and one to draw on for my reports and I confused them. It's true there's nothing very secret. I wouldn't have put anything very secret on paper over here – but there were some indiscreet phrases.

There's a third possibility. Give me a Swiss passport and some money and let me run. I can look after myself.

"You had my wire? You've caught on here. People like your work immensely. I don't know why but they do ... they say you have insight. You're wanted by half-a-dozen papers. They seem to think the money sunk in you is a good investment. Good Lord! Who can account for the fathomless folly of the public?"

They're a remarkably sensible people. Have another whisky.

When he opened the cocktail cabinet it played a brief tune on a music box.

"We don't believe that story, do we, you and I?" he said with a kind of complicity. Of course not, but millions of people have. They must have thought it reasonable ... "People don't demand that a thing be reasonable if their emotions are touched. Lovers aren't reasonable, are they?"

I was afraid of what he'd say next: of the unbearable burdens he was laying on my conscience.

I don't know what you mean, I said.

"It has to stop sometime. We are good friends."

He stopped, bit his lip, and abruptly left me.

That was to be my escape line. But he missed his cue, and I'm still here, and the door has closed again ...

Outside the trees dragged their leaves like nets through the depths of the air; the sound of water was in the room, and through the waves came the voices of birds singing.

The telephone rang from the table by the sofa. Is that you, Cynthia? But it wasn't. Heard the connection break. Put the receiver down.

There were no dark corners in the room, no shelter from the softbenevolentlight ... and suddenly the words come as though from the air:

"Keep your nerve," said the Voice. "I'm an Invisible Man."

The Secret Agent, Joseph Conrad
Dead Lagoon, Michael Dibden
The Light That Failed, Rudyard Kipling

Dombey and Son, Charles Dickens
The Looking Glass War, John Le Carré
The Invisible Man, HG Wells
In the Cage, Henry James
Bleak House, Charles Dickens
High Rise, JG Ballard
THE MAN WHO WAS THURSDAY, GK CHESTERTON
Stamboul Train, Graham Greene
The Spy Who Came in from the Cold, John Le Carré
The End of the Affair, Graham Greene
Mother London, Michael Moorcock
The Handmaid's Tale, Margaret Atwood
Jane Eyre, Charlotte Bronte
The Human Factor, Graham Greene
Mrs Dalloway, Virginia Woolf

A Week of Blogs for the Poetry Foundation

... i had always had mixed feelings
about being considered a poet "if robert lowell is a
poet i dont want to be a poet if robert frost was a
poet i dont want to be a poet if socrates was a poet
ill consider it"

David Antin

Conceptual Poetics

A poet finds a grammar book from the late nineteenth century and, inspired by Gertrude Stein's confession, "I really do not know that anything has ever been more exciting than diagramming sentences," proceeds to parse the entire 185-page book – every word and letter, from the table of contents to the index – by its own system of analysis.

Another poet teams up with a scientist to create an example of living poetry by infusing a chemical alphabet into a sequence of DNA, which is then implanted into a bacterium. Thousand of research dollars later, they are in the process of creating an organism embedded with this poem, strong enough to survive a nuclear holocaust, thereby creating a poem which will outlast humanity and perhaps even the lifespan of the planet Earth.

Yet another poet decides to retype an entire edition of a day's copy of the *New York Times*. Everywhere there is a letter or numeral, it is transcribed onto a page. Like a medieval scribe, the poet sequesters himself for over a year until he is finished. The resulting text is published as a 900-page book.

Sounds like something out of a Borgesian fantasy? No. These works are key examples of conceptual poetry, a broad movement that has been receiving a fair amount of attention lately. Conceptual writing or uncreative writing is

a poetics of the moment, fusing the avant-garde impulses of the last century with the technologies of the present, one that proposes an expanded field for twenty-first-century poetry. Not satisfied to exclusively be bound between the pages of a book, this new writing continually morphs from the printed page to the webpage, from the gallery space to the science lab, from the social space of the poetry reading to social space of the blog. It's a poetics of flux, one that celebrates instability and uncertainty. And although its practitioners often come from disciplines outside of literature, the work is framed through the discourse and economy of poetry: these works are received by, written about, and studied by readers of poetry. Freed from the market constraints of the art world or the commercial constraints of the computing and science worlds, the non-economics of poetry create a perfectly valueless space in which these valueless works can flourish.

Conceptual writing's concerns are generally two-pronged, as manifested in the tensions between materiality and concept. On the materiality side, traditional notions of a poem's meaning, emotion, metaphor, image, and song are subservient to the raw physicality of language. On the conceptual side, what matters is the machine that drives the poem's construction. The conceptual writer assumes that the mere trace of any language in a work – be it morphemes, words, or sentences – will carry enough semantic and emotional weight on its own without any further subjective meddling from the poet, known as a *non-interventionalist* tactic. To work with a machine that is preset is one way of avoiding subjectivity. It obviates the necessity of designing each work in turn; thus, it is the plan that designs the work.

In his introduction to the *UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, Craig Dworkin posits:

What would a non-expressive poetry look like? A poetry of intellect rather than emotion? One in which the substitutions at the heart of metaphor and image were replaced by the direct presentation of language itself, with "spontaneous overflow" supplanted by meticulous procedure and exhaustively logical process? In which the self-regard of the poet's ego were turned back onto the self-reflexive language of the poem itself? So that the test of poetry were no longer whether it could have been done better (the question of the workshop), but whether it could conceivably have been done otherwise."¹

If it all sounds familiar, it is. Conceptual writing obstinately makes no claims on originality. On the contrary, it employs intentionally self- and ego-effacing tactics using uncreativity, unoriginality, illegibility, appropriation, plagiarism, fraud, theft, and falsification as its precepts; information management, word

processing, databasing, and extreme process as its methodologies; and boredom, valuelessness, and nutritionlessness as its ethos. Language as material, language as process, language as something to be shovelled into a machine and spread across pages, only to be discarded and recycled once again.

Language as junk, language as detritus. Nutritionless language, meaningless language, unloved language, *entartete sprache*, everyday speech, illegibility, unreadability, machinistic repetition. Obsessive archiving and cataloguing, the debased language of media and advertising; language more concerned with quantity than quality. How much did you say that paragraph weighed?

Conceptual writing's primary influences are Gertrude Stein's densely unreadable texts, John Cage and Jackson Mac Low's procedural compositions, and Andy Warhol's epically unwatchable films. Conceptual writing adds a twenty-first-century prong to a constellation of certain twentieth-century avant-garde movements that were concerned with the materiality of language and sound: Mallarmé's spatialist concerns, the Futurist page, Zaum's invented languages, concrete and sound poetry, musique concrète, plunderphonics, sampling, and rap. On the conceptual side, it claims allegiance to the works of pataphysics, Marcel Duchamp, James Joyce, process and conceptual art, as well as aspects of 1980s consumerist-based appropriation in the fine arts.

In their self-reflexive use of appropriated language, conceptual writers embrace the inherent and inherited politics of the borrowed words: far be it from conceptual writers to morally or politically dictate words that aren't theirs. The choice or machine that makes the poem sets the political agenda in motion, which is often times morally or politically reprehensible to the author (in retyping every word of a day's copy of the *New York Times*, am I to exclude an unsavory editorial?). While John Cage claimed that any sound could be music, his moral filter was on too high to accept certain sounds of pop music, agitation, politics, or violence. To Cage, not all sounds were music. Andy Warhol, by contrast, was a model of permeability, transparency, and sliver reflectivity; everything was fodder for Warhol's art, regardless of its often unsavoury content. Our world turned out to be Andy's world. Conceptual writing celebrates this circumstance.

With the rise of appropriation-based literary practices, the familiar or quotidian is made unfamiliar or strange when left semantically intact. No need to blast apart syntax. The New Sentence? The Old Sentence, reframed, is enough.² How to proceed after the deconstruction and pulverization of language that is the twentieth century's legacy? Should we continue to pound language into ever smaller bits or should we take some other approach? The need to view language again as a whole – as syntactically and grammatically intact – but to acknowledge the cracks in the surface of the reconstructed linguistic vessel.

Therefore, in order to proceed, we need to employ a strategy of opposites: un-boring boring, uncreative writing, valueless speech – any method of disorientation used in order to reimagine our normative relationship to language.

David Antin's sentiments in the epigraph are correct: conceptual writing is more interested in a *thinkership* than in a readership. Readability is the last thing on this poetry's mind. Conceptual writing is good only when the idea is good; often, the idea is much more interesting than the resultant texts.

And yet ... there are moments of unanticipated beauty, sometimes grammatical, some structural, many philosophical: the wonderful rhythms of repetition, the spectacle of the mundane reframed as literature, a reorientation to the poetics of time, and fresh perspectives on readerliness, to name but a few. For an ethos claiming so much valuelessness, there's a shocking amount of beauty and experience to be siphoned from these texts.

Uncreative Writing

I teach a class at the University of Pennsylvania called "Uncreative Writing," which is a pedagogical extension of my own poetics. In it, students are penalized for showing any shred of originality and creativity. Instead, they are rewarded for plagiarism, identity theft, repurposing papers, patchwriting, sampling, plundering, and stealing. Not surprisingly, they thrive. Suddenly, what they've surreptitiously become expert at is brought out into the open and explored in a safe environment, reframed in terms of responsibility instead of recklessness.

Well, you might ask, what's wrong with creativity? "I mean, we can always use more creativity."³ "The world needs to become a more creative place."⁴ "If only individuals could express themselves creatively, they'd be freer, happier."⁵ "I'm a strong believer in the therapeutic value of creative pursuits."⁶ "To be creative, relax and let your mind go to work, otherwise the result is either a copy of something you did before or reads like an army manual."⁷ "I don't follow any system. All the laws you can lay down are only so many props to be cast aside when the hour of creation arrives."⁸ "An original writer is not one who imitates nobody, but one whom nobody can imitate."⁹

When our notions of what is considered creative became this hackneyed, this scripted, this sentimental, this debased, this romanticized ... this *uncreative*, it's time to run in the opposite direction. Do we really need another "creative" poem about the way the sunlight is hitting your writing table? No. Or another "creative" work of fiction that tracks the magnificent rise and the even more spectacular fall? Absolutely not.

One exercise I do with my students is to give them the simple instructions to retype five pages of their choice. Their responses are varied and full of revelations: some find it enlightening to become a machine (without ever having known Warhol's famous dictum "I want to be a machine"). Others say that it was the most intense *reading* experience they ever had, with many actually embodying the characters they were retyping. Several students become aware that the act of typing or writing is actually an act of performance, involving their whole body in a physically durational act (even down to noticing the cramps in their hands). Some of the students become intensely aware of the text's formal properties and for the first time in their lives began to think of texts not only as transparent, but as opaque objects to be moved around a white space. Others find the task zen-like and amnesia-inducing (without ever having known Satie's "Memoirs of an Amnesiac" or Duchamp's desire to live without memory), alternately having the text lose and then regain meaning.

In the act of retyping, what differentiates each student is their choice of *what* to retype. One student retyped a story about a man's inability to complete the sexual act, finding the perfect metaphor for this assignment. Another student retyped her favorite high school short story, only to discover during the act of retyping it, just how poorly written it was. Yet another was a waitress who took it upon herself to retype her restaurant's menu in order to learn it better for work. She ended up hating the task and even hating her job more. The spell was broken when purposefulness and goal-orientation entered into the process.

The trick in uncreative writing is airtight accountability. If you can defend your choices from every angle, then the writing is a success. On the other hand, if your methodology and justification is sloppy, the work is doomed to fail. You can no longer have a workshop where people worry about adjusting a comma here or a word there. You must insist that the procedure was well articulated and accurately executed.

We proceed through a rigorous examination of the circumstances that are normally considered outside the scope of writing but, in fact, have everything to do with writing. Questions arise, among them:

What kind of paper did you use? Why is it on generic white computer paper when the original edition was on thick, yellowed, pulpy stock? What does it say about you: your aesthetic, economic, social, and political circumstances?

Do you reproduce exactly the original text's layout page by page or do you simply flow the words from one page to another, the way your word processing program does? Will the text be received differently if it is in Times Roman or Verdana?

For a task so seemingly simple, the questions never end.

A few years ago I was lecturing to a class at Princeton. After the class, a small group of students came up to me to tell me about a workshop that they were taking with one of the most well-known fiction writers in America. They were complaining about her lack of imagination. For example, she had them pick their favourite writer and come in next week with an “original” work in the style of that author. I asked one of the students which author they chose. She answered Jack Kerouac. She then added that the assignment felt meaningless to her because the night before she tried to “get into Kerouac’s head” and scribbled a piece in “his style” to fulfill the assignment. It occurred to me that for this student to actually write in the style of Kerouac, she would have been better off taking a road trip across the country in a ‘48 Buick with the convertible roof down, gulping Benzedrine by the fistful, washing ‘em down with bourbon, all the while typing furiously away on a manual typewriter, going 85 miles per hour down a ribbon of desert highway. And even then, it would’ve been a completely different experience, not to mention a very different piece of writing, than Kerouac’s.

Instead, my mind drifted to those aspiring painters who fill up the Metropolitan Museum of Art every day, spending hours learning by copying the Old Masters. If it’s good enough for them, why isn’t it good enough for us? I would think that should this student have retyped a chunk – or if she was ambitious, the entirety – of *On The Road*, wouldn’t she have really understood Kerouac’s style in a profound way that was bound to stick with her? I think she would have learned something had she retyped Kerouac. But no. She had to bring in an “original” piece of writing.

At the start of each semester, I ask my students to simply suspend their disbelief for the duration of the class and to fully buy into uncreative writing. I tell them that one good thing that can come out of the class is that they completely reject this way of working. At least their own conservative positions become fortified and accountable; they are able to claim that they have spent time with these attitudes for a prolonged period of time and, quite frankly, they’ve found them to be a load of crap. Another fine result is that the uncreative writing exercises become yet another tool in their writing toolbox, from which they will draw for the rest of their careers. Of course, the very best result – and the unlikeliest one – is that they dedicate their life to uncreative writing.

Information Management

I am a word processor. I sympathize with the protagonist of a cartoon claiming to have transferred x amount of megabytes, physically exhausted after a day of downloading. The simple act of moving information from one place to another

today constitutes a significant cultural act in and of itself. I think it's fair to say that most of us spend hours each day shifting content into different containers. Some of us call this writing.

In 1969, the conceptual artist Douglas Huebler wrote, "The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more."¹⁰ I've come to embrace Huebler's ideas, though it might be retooled as: "The world is full of texts, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more." It seems an appropriate response to a new condition in writing today: faced with an unprecedented amount of available text, the problem is not needing to write more of it; instead, we must learn to negotiate the vast quantity that exists.

Contemporary writing requires the expertise of a secretary crossed with the attitude of a pirate: replicating, organizing, mirroring, archiving, and reprinting, along with a more clandestine proclivity for bootlegging, plundering, hoarding, and file-sharing. We've needed to acquire a whole new skill set: we've become master typists, exacting cut-and-pasters, and OCR demons. There's nothing we love more than transcription; we find few things more satisfying than collation.

There is no museum or bookstore in the world better than our local Staples.

The writer's solitary lair is transformed into a networked alchemical laboratory, dedicated to the brute physicality of textual transference. The sensuality of copying gigabytes from one drive to another: the whirr of the drive, intellectual matter manifested as sound. The carnal excitement from supercomputing heat generated in the service of poetry.

The weight of holding a book's worth of language in the clipboard waiting to be dumped: the magic is in the suspension.

The grind of the scanner as it peels language off the page, thawing it, liberating it. The endless cycle of textual fluidity: from imprisonment to emancipation, back to imprisonment, then freed once more. The balance between dormant text warehoused locally and active text in play on the Web. Language in play. Language out of play. Language frozen. Language melted.

The text of a newspaper is released from its paper prison of fonts and columns, its thousands of designs, its corporate and political decisions – all now flattened into a non-hierarchical expanse of sheer potentiality as a generic text document begging to be repurposed, dumped into a reconditioning machine and cast into a new form.

A radio broadcast is captured and materialized, rendered into text. The ephemeral made permanent; every utterance made by the broadcaster – every um and uh – goes onto the ever-increasing textual record. The gradual accumulation of words; a blizzard of the evanescent.

Cruising the Web for new language. The sexiness of the cursor as it sucks up words from anonymous Web pages, like a stealth encounter. The dumping of those words, sticky with residual junk, back into the local environment;

scrubbed with text soap, returned to their virginal state, filed away, ready to be re-employed.

Sculpting with text.

Data mining.

Sucking on words.

Our task is to simply mind the machines.

Andy Warhol: I think everybody should be a machine. I think everybody should like everybody.

Interviewer: Is that what Pop Art is all about?

Warhol: Yes. It's liking things.

Interviewer: And liking things is like being a machine?

Warhol: Yes, because you do the same thing every time. You do it over and over again.

Interviewer: And you approve of that?

Warhol: Yes, because it's all fantasy.¹¹

Writing is finally catching up to Warhol. And it's just the beginning. Soon we will not have to be bothered minding the machines for they will mind themselves. As poet Christian Bök states:

We are probably the first generation of poets who can reasonably expect to write literature for a machinic audience of artificially intellectual peers. Is it not already evident by our presence at conferences on digital poetics that the poets of tomorrow are likely to resemble programmers, exalted, not because they can write great poems, but because they can build a small drone out of words to write great poems for us? If poetry already lacks any meaningful readership among our own anthropoid population, what have we to lose by writing poetry for a robotic culture that must inevitably succeed our own? If we want to commit an act of poetic innovation in an era of formal exhaustion, we may have to consider this heretofore unimagined, but nevertheless prohibited, option: writing poetry for inhuman readers, who do not yet exist, because such aliens, clones, or robots have not yet evolved to read it.¹²

Boredom

I am the most boring writer that has ever lived. If there were an Olympic sport for extreme boredom, I would get a gold medal. My books are impossible to

read straight through. In fact, every time I have to proofread them before sending them off to the publisher, I fall asleep repeatedly. You really don't need to read my books to get the idea of what they're like; you just need to know the general concept.

Over the past ten years, my practice today has boiled down to simply retyping existing texts. I've thought about my practice in relation to Borges's Pierre Menard, but even Menard was more original than I am: he, independent of any knowledge of *Don Quixote*, reinvented Cervantes's masterpiece word for word.¹³ By contrast, I don't invent anything. I just keep rewriting the same book.

John Cage said, "If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all."¹⁴ He's right: there's a certain kind of unboring boredom that's fascinating, engrossing, transcendent, and downright sexy. And then there's the other kind of boring: let's call it boring boring. *Boring boring* is a client meeting; *boring boring* is having to endure someone's self-indulgent poetry reading; *boring boring* is watching a toddler for an afternoon; *boring boring* is the seder at Aunt Fanny's. *Boring boring* is being somewhere we don't want to be; *boring boring* is doing something we don't want to do. Unboring boring is a voluntary state; boring boring is a forced one. Unboring boring is the sort of boredom that we surrender ourselves to when, say, we go to hear a piece of minimalist music. I recall once having seen a restaging of an early Robert Wilson piece from the 1970s. It took four hours for two people to cross the stage; when they met in the middle, one of them raised their arm and stabbed the other. The actual stabbing itself took a good hour to complete. Because I volunteered to be bored, it was the most exciting thing I've ever seen.

The twentieth-century avant-garde liked to embrace boredom as a way of getting around what it considered to be the vapid "excitement" of popular culture. A powerful way to combat such crap was to do the opposite of it, to be purposely boring. By the sixties and seventies this type of boredom – boring boring – was often the norm in art circles. I'm glad I wasn't around to have to sit through all that stuff. Boredom, it seems, became a forced condition, be it in theatre, music, art, or literature. It's no wonder people bailed out of boredom in the late seventies and early eighties to go into punk rock or expressionistic painting. After a while, boredom got boring. And then, a few decades later, things changed again: excitement became dull and boring started to look good again. So here we are, ready to be bored once more. But this time, boredom has changed. We've embraced unboring boring, modified boredom, boredom with all the boring parts cut out of it. Reality TV, for example, is a new kind of boredom. *An American Family*, broadcast in the early seventies – strutting its ennui – was the old boredom; *The Osbournes* – action-packed boredom – is the new.

There's no one more tedious than Ozzy Osbourne, but his television presence is the most engagingly constructed tedium that has ever existed. We can't take our eyes off the guy, stumbling through the dullness of his own life. Our taste for the unboring boring won't last forever. I assume that someday soon it'll go back to boring boring once again, though for reasons and conditions I can't predict at this time.

I don't expect you to even read my books cover to cover. It's for that reason I like the idea that you can know each of my books in one sentence. For instance, there's the book of every word I spoke for a week unedited. Or the book of every move my body made over the course of a day, a process so dry and tedious that I had to get drunk halfway through the day in order to make it to the end. Or a book in which I retyped a day's copy of the *New York Times* and published it as a 900-page book. I've transcribed a year's worth of weather reports and a 24-hour cycle of one-minute traffic reports as broadcast every ten minutes, resulting in textual gridlock.

Now you know what I do without ever having to have read a word of it.

I think that there were a handful of artists in the twentieth century who intentionally made boring work, but didn't expect their audiences to fully engage with it in a durational sense. It's these artists, I feel, who predicted the sort of unboring boredom that we're so fond of today. Andy Warhol, for instance, said of his films that the real action wasn't on the screen. He's right. Nothing happened in the early Warhol films: a static image of the Empire State Building for eight hours, a man sleeping for six. It is nearly impossible to watch them straight through. Warhol often claimed that his films were better thought about than seen. He also said that the films were catalysts for other types of actions: conversation that took place in the theatre during the screening, the audience walking in and out, and thoughts that happened in the heads of the moviegoers. Warhol conceived of his films as a staging for a performance, in which the audience members were the superstars, not the actors or objects on the screen. Gertrude Stein, too, often set up a situation of skimming, knowing that few were going to be reading her epic works straight through (how many people have linearly read every word of *The Making of Americans*?). The scholar Ulla Dydo, in her magnificent compilation of the writings of Gertrude Stein, remarked that much of Stein's work was never meant to be read closely at all; rather she was deploying visual means of reading. What appeared to be densely unreadable and repetitive was, in fact, designed to be skimmed, and to delight the eye (in a visual sense) while the reader holds the book.¹⁵ Stein, as usual, was prescient in predicting our reading habits. John Cage proved to be the avant-garde's Evelyn Wood, boiling down dense modernist works into deconstructed, remixed Cliff Notes; in his *Writing for the Second Time Through Finnegans Wake* he reduced a

628-page tome to a slim 39 pages, and in *Writing Through the Cantos* he reduced Ezra Pound's 824-page life's work to a mere handful of words.

At a reading I gave recently, the other reader came up to me and said incredulously, "You didn't write a word of what you read." I thought for a moment and, sure, in one sense – the traditional sense – he was right; but in the expanded field of appropriation, uncreativity, sampling, and language management which we all inhabit today, he couldn't have been more wrong. Each and every word was "written" by me: sometimes mediated by a machine, sometimes transcribed, and sometimes copied; but without my intervention, slight as it may be, these works would never have found their way into the world. When retyping a book, I often stop and ask myself if what I am doing is really writing. As I sit there, in front of the computer screen, punching keys, the answer is invariably yes.

Notes

- 1 Craig Dworkin, "Introduction," *The UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, www.ubu.com/concept.
- 2 See Ron Silliman, *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof Books, 1987).
- 3 Marc Chagall.
- 4 Philip Yeo.
- 5 Richard Florida.
- 6 D. Wayne Dwyer.
- 7 Kimon Nicolliades.
- 8 Raoul Dufy.
- 9 Gail Sheehy.
- 10 Douglas Huebler, Artist's statement for the gallery publication accompanying *January 5 – 31* (Seth Segelaub Gallery, New York, 1969).
- 11 G.R. Swenson, "What Is Pop Art? Answers from 8 Painters, Part I," *ARTnews* 62.7 (November 1963): 26.
- 12 Christian Bök, "The Piecemeal Bard Is Deconstructed: Notes toward a Potential Robopoetics," in *Object 10: Cyber Poetics*, ed. Kenneth Goldsmith (2001), http://www.ubu.com/papers/object/03_bok.pdf.
- 13 See Jorge Louis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1999), 88–95.
- 14 John Cage, "Four Statements on the Dance," in *Silence* (Middletown, PA: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 93.
- 15 Ulla E. Dydo, *A Stein Reader* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 480.

Give Them What They Want: Populist Rhetoric in Conceptual Art and Writing

In “The Fate of Echo” – his preface to *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (2011) – Craig Dworkin describes the book’s contents as literature that “does not seek to express unique, coherent, or consistent individual psychologies and that, moreover, refuses familiar strategies of authorial control in favor of automatism, reticence, obliquity, and modes of noninterference.”¹ By refusing “some of the presumed hallmarks of poetry” – “the use of metaphor and imagery, a soigné edited craft, the sincere emotional expression of especially sensitive individuals” – conceptual writing declares itself to be “a venue for intellect rather than sentiment” (xliii). Its authors, Dworkin goes on to explain, typically avoid the “self-regard of narcissistic confession” by appropriating and redacting pre-existing texts: “Through the repurposing or *détournement* of language that is not their own (whatever that might mean), the writers ... allow arbitrary rules to determine the chance and unpredictable disposition of that language; they let artificial systems trump organic forms; and they replace making with choosing, fabrication with arrangement, and production with transcription” (xliii–xliv).

This account of conceptual writing by one of its foremost practitioners is persuasive in many respects. It can help orient novice readers when they first encounter such provocative works as Caroline Bergvall’s *Shorter Chaucer Tales* (2011), Dan Farrell’s *The Inkblot Record* (2000), Noah Eli Gordon’s *Inbox* (2006), Tan Lin’s *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* (2010), Simon Morris’s *Getting Inside Jack Kerouac’s Head* (2010), Vanessa Place’s *Statement of Facts* (2009), and Dworkin’s own *Parse* (2008). These exemplars of conceptual writing contain scads of recycled language with few or no accompanying authorial instructions on how to interpret or otherwise respond to these seeming acts of plagiarism. Dworkin advises approaching the writing in such books as “more graphic than semantic, more a physically material event than a disembodied or transparent medium for referential communication”; “these works present writing as their subject

rather than imagining writing to be the means to a referential end" (xliii). He hopes that, guided by such principles, readers will come to appreciate that conceptual writing asks them to reconsider how, when, and why they encounter particular kinds of language.

Described in this way, conceptual writing begins to sound like an updated version of Brechtian theatre.² That is, its goal is to make newly strange an everyday activity – reading – in order to prod audiences into reflecting dispassionately on the many social, political, and aesthetic assumptions that, while generally remaining un- or subconscious, nonetheless thoroughly inform its course and character. Significantly, for Dworkin the particular target of conceptual writing's alienation effect is the "ideologies of expression" that limit in advance what literature can be or do (xliii). Although he does not push the argument too far in this direction, his use of the word *ideologies* here and his more global suspicion of overvalorizing "individual psychologies" suggest that he subscribes to a leftist posthuman politics. More specifically, he echoes many contemporary denunciations of economic neoliberalism, especially critiques of the "neoliberal subject" who "cultivate[s]" a mythified, heroic "notion of the self" as a consequence of so "internaliz[ing] market values" that he or she can no longer conceive of selfhood as a dialectical product of "reciprocal and collective" ties.³

Not every work of conceptual writing, however, shares Dworkin's aim of "laying bare the potential for linguistic self-reflexiveness," let alone bases its politics in an appeal to its readers' intellect (xliii). Kenneth Goldsmith, for instance, might have co-edited *Against Expression* with Dworkin, but his own independent publications frequently convey a less cerebral tone. *Head Citations* (2002), for example, begins:

1. This is the dawning of the age of malaria.
2. Another one fights the dust.
3. Eyeing little girls with padded pants.
4. Teenage spacemen we're all spacemen.
5. A gay pair of guys put up a parking lot.
- 5.1. It tastes very nice, food of the parking lot.
6. One thing I can tell you is you got to eat cheese.⁴

"This is the dawning": what adult pop-culture-literate American can read those four words without also hearing The Fifth Dimension launch into "Aquarius/Let the Sunshine In" (1969)? Of course, a few words later, the expected "Aquarius" is replaced by "malaria." Next on the playlist is Queen's "Another One Bites the Dust" (1980), albeit with "bites" dropped in favour of "fights." Then in rapid sequence we get mangled lyrics from Jethro Tull's "Aqualung" (1971) and The

Who's "Baba O'Riley" (1971); two variants on the most famous line from Joni Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi" (1970) ("They paved paradise and put a parking lot"); and finally a ludicrous take on The Beatles's "Come Together" (1969) ("got to eat cheese" instead of "got to be free"). The cumulative effect of these bloopers is disorientation, yes, but also broad humour.

Head Citations certainly qualifies as conceptual writing. Goldsmith composed it by transcribing 800 examples of *mondegreens* (misheard song lyrics) from the website Kissthisguy.com.⁵ No authorial or editorial apparatus indicates what a reader is supposed to do with this collection of one-liners. Does *Head Citations*, though, function in a Brechtian manner? Instead of lineated original verse by an inspired author-genius, one will discover a kind of anonymous collective voice, and its gallery of other people's blunders can prompt one to think about what it means to swap the search for "the best words in the best order" – Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous description of what it means to write a poem – for the less glamorous quotidian activities of web searching and data entry.⁶ And yet when first encountering a line such as "Doughnuts make my brown eyes blue" a reader is more apt to chortle than cogitate.⁷ After all, while one could plausibly mishear the "Don't It" in the chorus from Crystal Gale's "Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue" (1977) as "Doughnuts," it is preposterous to imagine Gale, with her floor-length hair and luminous icy eyes, singing a broken-hearted ballad about a deep-fried snack.

Goldsmith's rhetoric, this essay will maintain, is here recognizably populist. Instead of pursuing a modernist politics of estrangement and demystification, he casts himself as a maverick, a notable poet whose reputation derives from levelling gestures directed at a self-important literary establishment. This essay will also show that like certain other conceptual writers – and like such disparate precursors as Andy Warhol and Hans Haacke – he simultaneously performs populism and asks his audience to consider populism's value in the restricted space of the literary and visual arts and in the wider public sphere.

I

The word *conceptual* suggests a turning away from the body (and the bawdy) in favour of the mental, immaterial, and dispassionate. Dworkin's "The Fate of Echo" reinforces one's initial impression that any body of writing labelled *conceptual* must be pronouncedly philosophical insofar as it analyses at length the "congruencies and discrepancies" between the "conceptual literature" contained in the anthology *Against Expression* and the 1960s and 1970s "foundational works of conceptual art" (xxiv). And conceptual art, as he presents it, is

distinguished by its stand-offish relationship between audience and artwork: “Eschewing the visual emphasis of illusionistic or referential imagery – with its call for aesthetic appreciation, narrative engagement, or psychological response – conceptual art equally abandoned the compositional bids for phenomenological experience or emotional intensities that abstract art elicited” (xxvii). What is left, after so many refusals? Above all, “conceptual art offered information. Abstraction, to be sure, had pioneered a mode of art that did not refer to something outside itself, but conceptual art substituted factual documentary – information about information – in place of the optical apprehension of composition, gesture, and the material facture of traditional media” (xvii).

This version of conceptual art is wholly orthodox, traceable back to Lucy Lippard’s *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (1973). Its spiritual forefather is Marcel Duchamp, whose readymades and assemblages, Dworkin states, decisively “privilege[d] the intellectual over the visual” (xxvii), and its marquee names include Dan Graham, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, Lawrence Weiner, and the Art & Language group. Its dominant tones are a “deadpan literalism” and “documentary clarity” (xxvii). One can, however, construct other, differently inflected historical narratives that still include both conceptual writing and conceptual art. Furthermore, they do not necessarily emphasize *dematerialization* or the reduction of art to *information about information*.

During an overview of twentieth-century visual art and belles lettres in “Why Conceptual Writing? Why Now?” – which serves as Goldsmith’s alternative or rival preface to *Against Expression* – the author acknowledges the importance of conceptual art, but then relates it squarely to the career of a single individual: “The 1960s brought the advent of conceptual art and saw the emergence of Andy Warhol, perhaps the single most important figure in ... conceptual writing. Warhol’s entire oeuvre was based on the idea of uncreativity: the effortless production of mechanical paintings and unwatchable films in which literally nothing happens.”⁸ Significantly, Goldsmith’s enthusiasm for Warhol does not seem to be shared by Dworkin, who only once discusses him at any length, as a target of one of Elaine Sturtevant’s acts of painterly plagiarism.⁹ What explains the two poets’ difference in emphasis? Goldsmith casts Warhol as part of a tag-team spanning the last hundred years: “Nearly a century ago, the art world put to rest conventional notions of originality and replication with the gestures of Marcel Duchamp. Since then, a parade of blue-chip artists from Andy Warhol to Jeff Koons have taken Duchamp’s ideas to new levels, which have become part and parcel of the mainstream art world discourse.”¹⁰ This descent line has no place in “The Fate of Echo.” A sculpture such as Koons’s *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (1988), a gold-leaf-plated porcelain statue of the King

of Pop and his pet chimpanzee, is hardly deadpan or matter-of-fact. Indeed, its luxurious materials invite a wandering eye and a caressing hand, and its subject matter is oddly insurgent, an eruption of bad teenage taste into the museum's white cube.

Duchamp-Warhol-Koons: as an alternative set of precursors for today's conceptual writing, they preserve the centrality of appropriation, but the stress now falls less on language games and the abstract purity of information than on the violation of prevailing artistic and social norms. When exhibiting a snow shovel as a sculpture, for instance, Duchamp might have been making what a philosophically minded critic such as Thierry de Duve would call a nominalist argument ("Anything I designate as art is art").¹¹ He was also, though, demonstrating that anyone could be an artist, that the gallery's walls and vitrines were no longer off-limits to the hoi polloi. Warhol later employed the quintessentially Duchampian gestures of selection and reframing to challenge the conventional modernist separation between high and low art. Soup cans, movie and sports stars, amateur snapshots of flowers, all deserved their spot in the sun, whether the artist him- or herself was responsible for painting them. Finally, Koons introduced mass cultural imagery into elite cultural spaces with such joy and verve that it can be disconcertingly difficult to determine if he is being arch or ironic. Can a world-famous artist really, truly like balloon animals, top-forty music, swimsuit calendars, and Tweetie Bird? A book such as *Head Citations* fits readily into this artistic company. It, too, disregards expertise in craft and thumbs its nose at the connoisseur. Instead of a "message in a bottle" to be decoded by self-aware readers, it hawks a "Massage in a brothel" and "Knickers in a parcel."¹²

If one is hoping for the abolition of the existing order, a Duchamp-Warhol-Koons lineage is probably not a good place to start. But radical social transformation is hardly the only political goal that an individual, party, or movement might choose to pursue. Robert R. Barr's "Populists, Outsiders, and Anti-Establishment Politics" usefully distinguishes between two different kinds of political rhetoric, namely, *anti-systemic* and *anti-establishment*. According to Barr, "anti-system actors" wholly oppose the status quo and advocate its replacement by a completely new set of social relations. Present-day institutions cannot be modified or reformed; they must be utterly destroyed to make way for the emergence of a more just alternative. In contrast, "anti-establishment" figures do not direct their ire against the system *in toto*. They attack an "entrenched power elite." They seek to promote "an 'us versus them' understanding of social conflict" in which "'the people' ... are pitted against the power elite." The end goal is less total revolution than an overhaul of the system-as-it-now-stands.¹³

Barr would identify the specific kind of anti-establishment rhetoric operative in the case of Warhol and Koons as *populist*. According to him, populism

is characterized by three traits. First, populists are neither insiders nor outsiders to the system that they seek to change. They are typically *mavericks*, that is, individuals who rise to prominence within a system but then style themselves as vocal opponents to its current governing or managerial class. "Such unconventional or even rebellious behavior is notable ... because it provides some basis for [them] to make the same claims as outsiders often make" (34). Second, a populist program frequently boils down to advocating "a change of personnel" (37). The existing elites are to be removed from power and replaced by the populists themselves and their supporters. What guarantees that a change of who's in charge will alter the status quo for the better? The third distinguishing feature of populism is its promise to make new leaders more accountable to "the people" and to increase "citizen participation" in a system's functioning (37).

Who, however, makes up *the people*, who counts as a *citizen*, and what constitutes *participation*? Populists generally claim to speak on behalf of everyone currently excluded from power, but the boundaries that dictate who is "us" and who "them" often prove porous and malleable. Moreover, although populists appear to believe in "direct democracy," they usually favour symbolic over substantive opportunities for a population to express its collective will. They particularly prefer plebiscites, opinion polls, and (scripted) mass demonstrations (36). As another political scientist, Carlos de la Torre, explains, citizens are "reduced to following the lines of a drama that has assigned them a central though subordinate role. They are expected to delegate power to a politician who claims to be the embodiment of their redemption."¹⁴

Barr and de la Torre are, it must be remembered, describing the politics of contemporary nation states. They are not talking about museums and artists, and one must keep this difference in mind. Nevertheless, as political scientists, they have much to teach scholars of formally innovative art and literature who are seeking to understand twenty-first-century developments. Critics such as Branden Joseph have argued that post-Second World War neo-avant-garde artists cannot meaningfully reprise the radical politics of negation that characterized the first wave of avant-gardism in the 1910s and 1920s. There no longer exists, he contends, a position to ground and legitimate such an agenda; we reside in "a world everywhere totalized such that capitalism has effectively liquidated any stable or autonomous realm of the outside."¹⁵ Johanna Drucker maintains that, as a consequence, "a new critical vocabulary" is necessary to discuss art after modernism that does not inevitably aim for ideology critique or exult in "radical negativity." Otherwise we risk overlooking or misconstruing the "enthusiasms" and "critical suppositions" that define the arts of our era.¹⁶

This essay proposes that, with the role of the complete outsider foreclosed, the figure of the populist quite naturally gains attraction as another location,

one not wholly identified with the existing political establishment, from which to speak out publicly on controversial topics. American artists, too, have an especially rich gallery of populist movements in their history to draw on, including Teddy Roosevelt's Progressive Party of 1912, Bob LaFollete's Progressive Party of 1924, Huey Long's Share Our Wealth movement, George Wallace's 1968 presidential campaign, Ross Perot's Reform Party, Sarah Palin's 2008 vice-presidential bid, and Donald Trump's 2016 campaign. Moreover, in the post-Second World War United States, whereas socialists and communists have been demonized and largely excluded from national electoral politics, it remains possible, down to the present day, to take up the populist mantle on both the right (the Tea Party) and the left (Occupy Wall Street) and claim to speak out on behalf of a silenced and ignored citizenry. If artists such as Warhol and Koons cannot plausibly lead a Trotskyite uprising – they remain much too caught up in the art world and the art market – they can at least experiment with different less marginalized self-presentations as “mavericks” attacking the art establishment and, by implication, also undermining values espoused by America's governing elites.

Of course, the question does remain open whether artists such as Warhol and Koons are wholly sincere in their populism. Do the former's *Turquoise Marilyn Monroe* (1964) and the latter's *Triple Hulk Elvis I* (2007) genuinely affirm what they depict? Or, just perhaps, are these artists only pretending to embrace it, leaving a sliver of critical distance, just enough for us to recognize that they have in fact held up populism for our scrutiny? In other words, does Koons intend for a viewer to interpret *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* as a populist statement, or as a statement about populism? Is Goldsmith laughing at or with readers who enjoy *Head Citations*?

II

To help answer this question, let's turn to Robert Fitterman's “Indian Mound Mall” (2010), another example of the populist strain in conceptual writing. This mall is an actual place – Google places it in Heath, Ohio – and the piece appears to be collage-based throughout. Its first section, “Welcome to Indian Mound Mall,” orients a reader spatially and temporally. The shopping centre's name, we learn, derives from nearby Cahokia, the largest archaeological site related to the Mississippian culture, which flourished from roughly 800 to 1500 CE:

When you come to Indian Mound Mall, you've come to history! Located directly to the east of the Mall (to your right facing the main entrance), is one of

the great mysteries of the Native American Indian. A thousand years ago along the banks of the Mississippi River, in what is currently southwest Illinois, there was a city that now mystifies both archeologists and anthropologists.¹⁷

Next comes a section called “Directory,” which names the mall’s stores and facilities, broken down according to their location (Levels 1–3, the Atrium, and the Food Court). The bulk of the piece then consists of store names (along with an alphanumeric code presumably directing readers to a map of the mall) followed by one or more anonymous evaluative reports about those stores, the sort of reviews typically posted on sites such as Yelp and Citysearch:

Macy’s N104

I bought an incredible amount of clothes for next to nothing – well, not really, I blew a ton of money, but for what I bought and the quantity of things bought, I did extremely well. You can always find the basics. If fashion companies can’t make consumers hungry for their products, they’re in trouble. The merchandise lacks pizzazz. Good customer service. Great selection. Colorful, preppy and classy. These are must-haves. (30)

As in *Head Citations*, one discovers a choral rather than singular voice. The resulting mashup is prone to repetition and occasional self-contradiction (“The merchandise lacks pizzazz ... Great selection”). Moreover, the prose is full of misspellings, bad punctuation, and solecisms. An experienced copy editor would probably recoil in horror after a few pages.

What qualifies “Indian Mound Mall” as populist? It does not adopt a morally superior attitude toward its subject matter, nor does it seek to estrange the language of commerce. Fitterman simply passes along the words of anonymous Midwesterners. These individuals are responding immediately to their lived environment, and while sometimes they buy into advertising hype and lifestyle magazine clichés, at other times they prove quite self-aware regarding globalization and its local consequences, as well as their own gendered and classed position within that larger set of dynamics:

Ann Taylor Loft N354

Personally, I hate the store. The attendants are like gum to your shoe in that they don’t let you breathe for one second without selling you this must have \$500 shirt (that was probably made in a Chinese sweatshop & cost them \$6 to make). For some reason that I still fail to grasp, my wife likes shopping here but she buys the clothes with her own money so I’m fine with it ... but I’d sooner eat a cockroach than shop here. I went in there once & was dressed pretty well

& was still treated like a 2nd class citizen. Maybe because I wasn't blonde & really thin, & WASPY. (49; ellipses in the original)

These men and women do not need an intermediary to explain to them hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion, nor do they need to be told about disparities between rich and poor, both within the United States and across nations ("probably made in a Chinese sweatshop"). The superfluousness of the chattering classes is made most evident in a final section titled "Cineplex 12," in which movies titles are followed by long passages of evaluative criticism, as practised not by credentialed reviewers but by fans intent on soliciting each other's input:

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

Am I alone when I say I felt sorry for Crabbe when he died?? Sorry thats probably too random but I have to admit it ... I was surprised at myself! Anyone else feel sorry for him? No, I did not really feel too sad. But then again, I did not get to choked up when doobby died either. I just don't get why everyone said that they were really in tears when he died. There was nothing really emotional about. From what I have read on the boards about doobby. People couldn't stand him. & were highly annoyed by him. (72; all ellipses and errors in the original)

Little could be a greater departure from the elegant, elliptical, and erudite "hybrid" style shared by such award-winning contemporary American poets as Rae Armantrout, Frank Bidart, Jorie Graham, Terrance Hayes, and D.A. Powell.¹⁸

Does Fitterman also aspire to a "change of personnel," that is, his own ascent to prominence at the expense of such an elite company of writers?¹⁹ Perhaps not in the same sense as, say, Hugo Chávez, the Venezuelan populist who consolidated his and his protégés' authority during the Bolivarian Revolution of 1999. Nevertheless, as a conceptual writer, he has certainly enjoyed a degree of exposure that many other contemporary American writers of the same age have not. For instance, an earlier version of the "Directory" section of "Indian Mound Mall" appeared in a special feature on conceptual writing in the July/August 2009 issue of *Poetry*, the same journal that launched Ezra Pound's imagist movement a century earlier. It is far too early to make any predictions, but Fitterman's strategic adoption of populist rhetoric could very well facilitate his eventual acceptance into the American literary canon, much as similar strategies paved the way for Warhol's and Koons's ascent to stardom.

One obvious difference, though, between Fitterman and Warhol is their choice of medium. Warhol's silk screens are instantly recognizable visual artworks whose mass cultural subject matter remains susceptible to diametrically

opposed readings. A Marxist-trained critic such as Benjamin Buchloh, for instance, will insist that the “lasting fascination” of Warhol’s “images of Marilyn Monroe, Liz Taylor, [and] Elvis” does not originate in their celebration of these figures’ “glamour,” but in their exposure of the formal means of perpetuating the “collective compulsion” that lies at the heart of the “culture of spectacle.”²⁰ Other critics are more comfortable with presenting Warhol as a star-struck fan. “Andy Warhol might have contributed more to the Marilyn Monroe myth than Hollywood and the glossy magazines put together,” pronounces Klaus Honnef.²¹ By relying so heavily in his art on the manipulation of iconic imagery Warhol thins the distance between avant-garde artist and advertiser until both the presence and absence of a critique are equally plausible.

Fitterman’s “Indian Mound Mall” contains no photographs or other images. Its layout is as predictable and monotonous as possible. The focus throughout is squarely on text. One cannot take its presentation of commodity culture all at once, in the manner of a portrait. A reader has to move in a sustained manner through sixty-eight pages of prose that lack analogues to the framing field and the arresting coloration in a painting such as *Gold Marilyn Monroe* (1965). That is, there is no centre of attention to draw readers in and no cues to organize their experience of the work except for a table of contents page. Denied an immediate sensuous reward, a reader contemplates American commodity culture at a tangent, that is, via a relatively slow pace and via anecdotes, expostulations, and vague praise.

Moreover, the scenes of reception are poles apart. A viewer has to travel to a museum or gallery to see a Warhol silk screen. True, one can look at reproductions instead, but in comparison they are likely to come off as derivative substitutes. Moreover, familiarity with them probably only increases the thrill when securing an opportunity to see “the real thing.” In contrast, “Indian Mound Mall” can be photocopied, reprinted, or put online as a PDF without making a reader feel that the “work itself” has somehow been adulterated.

In short, even if Fitterman never intervenes *propria persona* to inform readers what his own opinion is regarding the voices that he ventriloquizes, his choice of medium modifies his stance toward American consumers. He deflates a bit of the excitement surrounding retail sales, avoids images’ visceral impact, and enforces a slower encounter with his subject matter. He might not provoke the kind of critical distance toward which Brechtian theatre aspires. None of the material in “Indian Mound Mall” is unfamiliar or alienating. From beginning to end its contents are banal, exactly what one might anticipate finding in comment threads discussing chain stores in a small Midwestern town. Still, compared to the passionate identification that a Warhol can evoke, Fitterman’s trip to a mall is cooler in tone. What explains this difference?

Conceptual writers such as Fitterman and Goldsmith, however much their populism might hark back to pop art, make use of that rhetoric and self-positioning in the wake of, as mediated by, 1960s and 1970s conceptual art. They not only share but exaggerate the bias toward language and against images that characterizes much of the work associated with the earlier movement. "Indian Mound Mall," for instance, borrows text from Web pages but ignores any photos, clip art, advertisements, or other visually rich content that might appear on the same pages. Why would a writer or artist interested in populism swear off or minimize visual means of communication, given the ability of images to evoke and direct powerful emotions?

It has to do with the problems of expertise and aesthetic judgment, which underwent a profound reassessment during the later 1960s. In *The Intangibilities of Form* (2007) John Roberts identifies *deskilling*, "a relative loss of handicraft," as a fundamental aspect of conceptual art. Conceptual artists, he hastens to add, were not making a "value judgment about what is or what is not skilful according to normative criteria about art as painterly or sculptural craft" That is, they were not seeking to overturn old hierarchies concerning what styles, attributes, and accomplishments are to be judged aesthetically superior. Instead, they believed that the increasingly easy, technologically abetted "reproducibility" of all past art had rendered irrelevant guilds, academies, and other means of training young artists in past techniques. All that a would-be artist now needed to master is "copying" itself, that is, the selection, reproduction, and artful rearrangement of pre-existing materials, including words. Pointing a camera, pointing a finger, ripping a page from a book, and even standing still were all potentially valid acts of art making: "Deskilling in art is the name given to the equalization of artistic skill after art enters the realm of general social technique ... The expressive unity of hand and eye is overridden by the conditions of social and technological reproducibility."²²

For some conceptual artists, such as the Art & Language collective, deskilling facilitated a "reconstitution" of artistic labour such that the emphasis falls not on the production of commodities but on a "'research model' of collaboration" between "artist-thinkers" (128). In other cases, deskilling had the effect of narrowing the gap between artist and audience. Perhaps the best example is Hans Haacke's *MoMA-Poll*, which debuted in MoMA's famous Information exhibition (1970). Haacke waited to finish installing his piece until the night before the show's opening, reportedly to pre-empt any objections by the museum:

The *MoMA-Poll*, located at the exhibition's entrance, posed a question about Nelson Rockefeller's refusal to denounce Richard Nixon's Indochina policy, with the ballots cast by museum visitors visible in two clear acrylic boxes

equipped with counters that provided an automatic tally. Rockefeller was at the time running for reelection as governor of New York State, and he was a member of MoMA's board of trustees as well as a past president and chair.²³

Why call *MoMA-Poll* populist? It again takes the form of a rebellious statement made by a maverick, that is, a professional artist who had recently begun using his art in a forthrightly oppositional manner. It targets for criticism a member of the cultural elite, that is, a former governor and current MoMA trustee. It also invites audience participation, but it does so by means of a poll, more specifically a poll that a person must choose to take, that collects no data about the person, and that lets everyone see, before voting, what the current totals are.

From a statistician's point of view, such a poll is almost worthless, since the population who takes it is not random but skewed in unreconstructable and uncorrectable ways. From the point of view of a liberal democrat, such a poll is outright dangerous, since it allows people to see who votes how as well as how the vote is trending. From a populist's point of view, however, such a setup is perfect. The agitator (Haacke) receives credit for "smuggling" a burning public issue into the supposedly neutral space of the museum. Haacke knows that his audience – mostly Manhattan artworld insiders and aficionados – leans leftward and is likely to sympathize with the anti-war movement. In other words, he pretty much rigs the poll to turn out the way he wishes, in effect hoping to use a relatively small, hardly representative population to stand in for New York State as a whole. In addition, he positions his two Plexiglas boxes so that anti-Vietnam War votes appear quite literally on the left. Anyone who dares to take a stand on behalf of the war must "move to the right" in the full view of a room of other people who probably do not share that opinion. Finally, *MoMA-Poll* was Haacke's breakthrough work. Earlier pieces such as *Condensation Cube* (1963), *Ice Stick* (1966), *Skyline* (1967), and *Grass Grows* (1969), while executed in a minimalist idiom, failed to attract attention from critics or historians, and Haacke has never been included in the minimalist canon.²⁴ With *MoMA-Poll*, he added controversial political content to his art and created an emotionally powerful drama. He invites his audience to join with him against elites who abuse their power and position. He gives his audience an opportunity to congratulate itself on its political savvy and upright morals.

Is this perhaps overstating the case for Haacke's populism? Sianne Ngai has argued that conceptual art's proclivity for "inventory, classification, and documentation" is at base ironic, a "depressing reflection" of the omnipresence of "bureaucracy" in the period and of the tendency for "knowledge work" to pile up reams of paper that instead of bringing one closer to "truth" instead separated one from it ever further.²⁵ *MoMA-Poll* could on some level be parodying

contemporary political culture, especially politicians' readiness to provide numbers that obfuscate instead of reveal truths about the war in Southeast Asia. Who could forget, for instance, Robert McNamara (US Secretary of Defense, 1961–8) standing in front of maps and diagrams, "spewing out statistics to demonstrate progress," and "exud[ing] a sense of confidence that seemed to ensure ultimate success whatever the difficulties of the moment"?²⁶

If one wishes to try to read *MoMA-Poll* as ironic, the best evidence is the wording of the question it posed to museum-goers: "Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon's Indochina policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November?"²⁷ The double negative here is peculiar, just slightly off. It could be serving the ends of estrangement, an invitation to Haacke's viewers to reflect critically on the entire *mis-en-scène*, perhaps learning that activism can drive otherwise well-intentioned people to betray democratic principles such as the right to a secret ballot. This argument, though, is not persuasive. Haacke's syntax might be unusual, but the denotative content nevertheless remains clear. He calls attention to two kinds of inaction. He warns that a governor's tacit support for the Vietnam War could lead citizens to oppose him ("not to vote for him") or to become so disenchanting that they might opt out of electoral politics altogether ("not to vote" full stop). In contrast to "do nothing" Rockefeller, Haacke himself is taking action. He's the one who "denounc[es]." Whereas the governor turns off potential voters, the artist calls for them to join him in his putsch, his breaking of Rockefeller's silence in the governor's own domain, that is, within the walls of an institution that he helps to oversee.

The genius of *MoMA-Poll* is to stage a movingly populist gesture in a uniquely memorable manner, introducing it last minute into a space that would normally be off limits to such a topical political statement. Yes, museum officials could have ordered the removal of *MoMA-Poll* after the opening of the Information exhibition, but the artist knew what he was doing. When, a year later, the Guggenheim cancelled a solo show by Haacke because one of his pieces – *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* – was going to expose "the business dealings of a New York real estate company with strong ties to several art institutions," that act of silencing did not harm his reputation.²⁸ Indeed, it increased his credibility among critics and artists. He proved himself to be a potentially "dangerous" nonconformist, whereas his sworn enemies, the cultural elites, displayed their moral bankruptcy for all to see by "censoring" him.

Fitterman's "Indian Mound Mall" might reprise a populist impulse discernable in Warhol, but he, like Haacke, concentrates his and his audience's attention not on iconic images but on language's rhetorical impact. Moreover, he,

too, shares the opinions of an anonymous public regarding pressing social issues (in Fitterman's case, the homogenization of our lifeworld brought about by mega-corporations). Haacke and Fitterman make "deskilled" populist art – but they also dramatize the "new skills" that make their art effective, for Haacke a director's sense of timing and setting and for Fitterman a mastery of and ingenuity in using Internet search engines. As John Roberts would put it, they showcase their command of "reproducibility" – how, when, and why texts are reproduced and circulate.²⁹

III

Vanessa Place has explained why, in her opinion, academic literary critics have tended to misunderstand conceptual writing. Influenced by the Western Marxist tradition, they have been guilty of a faulty chain of reasoning:

(valid) art is about opposition; opposition is about critique; (valid) politics is about critique; thus (valid) poetics is about (valid) politics; critique is about apartness; conceptualism is sameness; thus conceptualism is not critique; thus conceptualism is neither valid politics nor valid poetics. However, each semi-colon should serve as question mark, for each point betrays its own faulty presumption.³⁰

Head Citations and "Indian Mound Mall" can help one make sense of Place's rather telegraphic argument. Goldsmith and Fitterman do not "critique" or "oppose" the material that they find online. They avoid any commentary or frame that would create distance, or "apartness," between them as authors, the words they recycle, and the denotative and connotative meaning of those words. What they pass along is virtually the "same" as the original texts on which they draw. As a consequence, they do not pursue a "politics" that would strike avid readers of Adorno and Walter Benjamin as "valid," which in turn implies that their compositional method, their "poetics," must also be illegitimate.

As this essay has shown, another kind of politics – and hence a differently valid kind of poetics – is possible. Goldsmith and Fitterman position themselves as mavericks and mark their work as populist. They are, as far as one can tell, sincere in their use of populist rhetoric. Sincerity, though, is not quite the correct word here. Perhaps these conceptual writers do, deep down, dislike or fear populist political movements and the demagogic politicians who direct them. Audiences, though, have no basis for reaching such a conclusion. Whether their motivation is sincere or insincere, the art does not suggest or

enforce a critical distance between its performance of populism and that undertaken by others.

As with any political statement, readers are then free to become exhilarated, respond in a lukewarm manner, or feel revulsion. One could say, in fact, that works such as *Head Citations* and “Indian Mound Mall” put a sustained spotlight on a viable contemporary form of dissent and in the process goad readers into making up their minds regarding the phenomenon. The political scientist Kurt Weyland has argued that, after the late-twentieth-century collapse of Soviet-style socialism and after the ensuing neoliberal assault on European social democracy, populism, whatever its limitations and drawbacks, remains one of the few ideologies capable of energizing large numbers of people to demand political reform.³¹ Consider, for instance, the 2011 success of the Occupy Wall Street and other spin-off Occupy movements, who adopted the slogan “We are the 99%,” or the spectacular ripple effects of Ron Paul’s scheduling a fundraiser on the anniversary of the Boston Tea Party, which then inspired innumerable copy-cat “Tea Party” protests in 2009 and 2010. In an era when Sarah Palin can become famous overnight, can any aspiring neo-avant-garde poet ignore the power of populist rhetoric?

Notes

- 1 Craig Dworkin, “The Fate of Echo,” in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, ed. Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), xliii–xliv.
- 2 For an overview of Brecht’s concept of epic theatre and the role that audience distanciation plays in it, see Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theater: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. John Willett (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 22–3, esp. 22 (“Epic theater ... appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator’s reason. Instead of sharing an experience the spectator must come to grips with things”); 91–9 and 136–47, esp. 136 (“The aim of this technique, the alienation effect, was to make the spectator adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism”).
- 3 Anne McNevin, *Contesting Citizenship: Irregular Migrants and the New Frontiers of the Political* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 128–9.
- 4 Kenneth Goldsmith, *Head Citations* (Great Barrington, MA: The Figures, 2002), 7.
- 5 Kenneth Goldsmith, interview by Delaina Haslam, *New Linear Perspectives*, <https://newlinearperspectives.wordpress.com/interviews/interview-kenneth-goldsmith/>.
- 6 See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge’s Table Talk* (London: Gay and Bird, 1899), 46.
- 7 Goldsmith, *Head Citations*, 9.
- 8 Kenneth Goldsmith, “Why Conceptual Writing? Why Now?” in *Against Expression*, ed. Goldsmith and Dworkin, xxi.
- 9 Dworkin, “The Fate of Echo,” xxxvii–xxxviii.
- 10 Goldsmith, “Why Conceptual Writing?” xx.

- 11 See Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), esp. chapter 1 (“Art Was a Proper Name”).
- 12 See Goldsmith, *Head Citations*, 45. “Message in a Bottle” is a 1979 single by the British band The Police.
- 13 Robert R Barr, “Populists, Outsiders, and Anti-Establishment Politics,” *Party Politics* 15.1 (January 2009): 32.
- 14 Carlos de la Torre, *Populist Seduction in Latin America*, 2nd ed. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 19.
- 15 Brandon Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 17.
- 16 Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), xi.
- 17 Robert Fitterman, *Sprawl: Metropolis 30A* (Los Angeles: Make Now, 2010), 13.
- 18 For an overview of hybrid poetry’s origins and defining traits, see Brian Reed, *Nobody’s Business: Twenty-First Century Avant-Garde Poetics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 134–44.
- 19 Barr, “Populists,” 37.
- 20 Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 503.
- 21 Klaus Honnef, *Pop Art* (Cologne: Taschen, 2004), 84.
- 22 John Robert, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade* (London: Verso, 2007), 98.
- 23 Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 167.
- 24 Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry*, 216.
- 25 Sianne Ngai, “Merely Interesting,” *Critical Inquiry* 34.4 (Summer 2008): 792–3.
- 26 George C. Herring, “The Strange ‘Dissent’ of Robert McNamara,” in *The Vietnam War: American and Vietnamese Perspectives*, ed. Jayne S. Werner and Luu Doan Huynh (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 1993), 140.
- 27 Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry*, 219.
- 28 John R.W. Speller, *Bourdieu and Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book, 2011), 144.
- 29 Robert, *The Intangibilities of Form*, 98.
- 30 Vanessa Place, “Poetry Is Dead, I Killed It,” *Poetryfoundation.org*, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2012/04/poetry-is-dead-i-killed-it/>.
- 31 Kurt Weyland, “Populism and Social Policy in Latin America,” Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Weyland.pdf>.

To Teach and Delight – A Few Precedents for an Art of Instruction

In 1970, Jack Burnham mocked Conceptual artists for their frequent – bound to fail – attempts to use logic to vacate the object, joking, “Conceptual art’s ideal medium is telepathy.”¹ But in the late 1960s, artists were offered so many opportunities to submit statements to catalogues, respond to magazine questionnaires, and articulate their theoretical positions at panel discussions that one could argue the movement’s common field of action was not mind reading but the symposium.² For those artists whose work was site specific, the costs to bring the artist to the exhibition location could, then as now, be leveraged against installation and educational expenses: the artist was expected to carry out both on arrival. In the extraordinary opportunities offered to Conceptual artists who wished to articulate their positions on art, we might recognize a precedent for the reading rooms, platforms, PowerPoints, and working groups so associated with relational aesthetics but which accompany or constitute the practice of more diverse contemporary artists working with text in a politically explicit fashion, recalling the contemporaneous nature of art conferences and political action groups in the 1960s. As the art academy has accelerated and expanded in the last decade, granting higher – and higher – degrees to unprecedented numbers of student artists, artist-run schools, which have existed for more than a century, proliferated. Many of these are free and self-directed, ranging from the groundbreaking Copenhagen Free University (2001–7), to 16 Beaver Group, New York; Free University of Warsaw; and the acephalic Public School initiated by the Telic Arts Exchange (with branches in cities from Brussels to San Juan) to name just a few.³ These projects have operated with varying degrees of political radicalism to challenge private and public academic institutions and the governments that support them; they have been held up as some of the most engaged art practices today, examples of concrete action derived from institutional critique.

As a counterpoint to these more formal programs, it may also be helpful to cite just one example of an artwork in recent years that resembled an artist-led

educational program: Thomas Hirschhorn's *24h Foucault* (2004) at the Palais de Tokyo, in Paris. The daylong series of auditorium presentations was accompanied by a documentation centre and library dedicated to the French philosopher. It was made, according to Hirschhorn, "to produce urgency, listening, confrontation, reflection, resistance, and friendship."⁴ Hirschhorn is just the best known of many artists in the past decade or so offering access to information resources (often text-based) using the language of street protest signs and spontaneous memorials.⁵ His *Kiosks* and *Monuments* (to Gilles Deleuze and Georges Bataille, for example) have been theorized in relationship to the archive, but critiqued for Hirschhorn's apparent desire to play the role of a teacher to his audiences, a charge Hirschhorn has resisted, arguing that the situations he creates are more about self-transgression and homage than instruction.⁶ He has stated, "I am not a Schoolmaster – I am not even teaching Art – I am an artist!"⁷ Despite the strength of artist-organized interventions in academia, it is still undesirable to appear sincerely professorial in individual practice. This push/pull of pedagogy has forked roots in historic Conceptual art, legacies that have directly informed contemporary art.

Polemics and Philosophy: Art & Language

One finds enumeration, diagrams, data sheets, and manifestos in the work of many Conceptual artists of the 1960s and 1970s. The precedent for these was set by such early position-statements as Sol LeWitt's *Sentences on Conceptual Art* (1968).⁸ This text was a list of permissions, rather than rules, as was Lawrence Weiner's catalogue of possibilities from 1968: "1. The artist may construct the work. 2. The work may be fabricated. 3. The work need not be built. Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership."⁹ Ian Wilson, with his *Oral Communication* project (1968–72) and later his *Discussions* (ongoing, begun in 1972), has used a Socratic method of questioning to draw participants into discussions about the possibility of knowledge.¹⁰ His questions guide listeners to their own conclusions.

Alongside these more quietly instructive works, the artists most associated with direct pedagogy as well as polemics in the late 1960s were those belonging to the British Art & Language group, with its core of art faculty and students from Coventry, England. Their battles with the administration of Lanchester Polytechnic (now Coventry University) over the place of theory in post-studio practice had been widely covered in the British art press. The professorial tone of Art & Language should not, therefore, have been surprising,

nor should the educational mission of works like the philosophical study centre, *Information Room (The Third Investigation)* (1969) by the group's American editor Joseph Kosuth.

However, at a 1973 Brussels conference on the topic "Art and Its Cultural Context," Lawrence Weiner flatly stated, "I personally think that Art [&] Language is a fascist authoritarian movement that doesn't relate to the concept of art."¹¹ Weiner's blunt assessment followed extensive disagreements between him and the conference representatives of the Art & Language group, Philip Pilkington and David Rushton. His critique echoed that of Daniel Buren, whose manifesto *Beware!* (1970) derided the "pseudo-cultural references" and "bluffing games" by which "certain artists attempt to explain what conceptual art would be, could be or should be – thus making a conceptual work."¹² Buren's criticism seemed an unmistakable retort to a suggestion in the 1969 inaugural issue of the journal *Art – Language*: "This editorial, in itself an attempt to evince some outlines as to what 'conceptual art' is, is held out as 'conceptual art' work."¹³

What seemed to frustrate Weiner and Buren was less this hypothesis than the prescriptiveness and the relative insularity of the logic of Art & Language in their study of the "language-use of the art society." In those years, the members of Art & Language applied the analytical philosophy of writers such as A. J. Ayer and Ludwig Wittgenstein, who followed the precedent of Bertrand Russell in arguing that questions of philosophical meaning could be solved using scientific methods. Russell approached philosophical problems by parsing all the possible implications, and assumptions behind the terms being employed.¹⁴ The members of Art & Language were taken by such rigorous logic and linguistic analysis, applying it to their own propositions and positions on art.

Writing in 1969, Joseph Kosuth had deemed all aesthetic philosophy a failure in its attempts to position Art as a category, and reasoned that what made art "Art" was not its appearance, but its concepts. All aesthetic, or "retinal" visual art displayed a concern with appearance instead of solely with concepts, and was therefore in danger of becoming decorative. Whereas art-for-art's-sake aestheticism had conjoined an interest *in* and enjoyment *of* art to art's autonomy, Kosuth cleaved the two in what Thierry de Duve has called an "absurd triumph of modernism over formalism."¹⁵ This transformed, as Kosuth described it, "the nature of art from a question of morphology to a question of function."¹⁶ It wasn't what art looked like that mattered, but how it functioned. And – as he would go on to argue – art's function needed to be analysis. Therefore, Kosuth was not content to posit that texts were *permissible* as art: he only approved propositions that examined art's ontology.

Of the artists who chafed at this turn in Conceptual art, and its insistence on a new form of autonomy, a number made artworks that seemed to respond directly.¹⁷ John Baldessari used humour to critique the situation. His painting *Tips for Artists Who Want to Sell* (1966–72) laid the groundwork for outright parodies such as his 1972 video *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet*. In the latter, Baldessari held a succession of alphabet cards up to a small houseplant. While the most obvious referent for this work might seem to be Joseph Beuys's 1965 performance *Wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt* (How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare), the context for Baldessari's failure to teach was different in the 1970s than it had been for Beuys in 1965. As Baldessari later commented, "I thought conceptual art at that time was too pedantic. There were many ways artists used language, so why not try some other way?" Connecting conceptual artists' use of logical positivism with popular 1960s pseudo-science, he also remarked, "There were books about how to communicate with your plants. I thought, okay, I guess I'll start with the alphabet and then we'll talk."¹⁸ Baldessari was often withering in his humour, but he performed his instruction with an American "gee whizz" deadpan.

Similarly, Dennis Oppenheim enacted his *Reading Position for a Second Degree Burn* (1970) in which the sun branded the outline of a text on military tactics into his skin. He followed this with *Color Application for Chandra* (1971), a work that began with an audio recording of him teaching his two-and-a-half-year-old daughter the names of the seven basic colours. He projected them while saying their names, which she repeated. In the resulting artwork, Oppenheim played the recording in a room with a parrot for twenty-four hours, ostensibly until the bird itself also learned to repeat, if not comprehend, the names by rote.¹⁹ In the video *Spelling Lesson* (1973–4), William Wegman corrected a test he had purportedly administered to his dog, calmly explaining "mistakes" to the seemingly contrite Weimaraner using the academy's collective "we": "You spelled it B-E-E-C-H which is like ... well, there's a gum called Beech-nut, but we meant 'beach' like the sand." In such works, the beneficiary of the artist's instruction has been taken down a few pegs – from the learned reader versed in A.J. Ayer to children, animals, and houseplants.

Education as Function: Marcel Broodthaers

Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers (1924–76) was well aware of the academic tone used by some artists participating in group exhibitions where his work was also on view, such as *Documenta 5* (Kassel, Germany, 1972) and *Projekt '74*

(Cologne, Germany, 1974). And he, too, made a significant number of works that responded to this climate. The context for the work of Art & Language (and even Baldessari, who made *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet* for presentation to one of his classes at Cal Arts) was tied to the artists' own positions as educators. These were artists directly engaging how value – for example, that of originality – was to be taught in the era of Conceptual art. Such issues preoccupied Broodthaers as well, but he approached them differently. The context of his works about teaching is inseparable from his upbringing in Belgium. This background and these works merit close attention both in relation to conceptualism's debates about the nature of the movement, and Broodthaers's significant influence on contemporary artists' use of language.

Belgium has three official languages: French, Flemish, and German. It is not, however, a trilingual culture, but is divided regionally. The nation is essentially inseparable from the problems these divisions create. Historically, speakers of the dominant tongue maintained political power by a de facto exclusion from government services of those who could not speak it. For most of Belgium's history, the French language dominated in Wallonia (the south), and Flemish in Flanders (the north). However, French was spoken by the educated elite, and was the primary language of higher education and the national government. Broodthaers was a child of a Walloon mother and a Flemish father. He grew up in Brussels, which is today officially bilingual, but in practice remains a francophone island within Flanders. His last name was Flemish, and he often said that he had a Flemish spirit, but he received a French education, and indeed he was raised speaking French.²⁰ While he was living in Belgium, language divisions began to create increasing national pressure, and by the 1960s, the country entered a tumultuous era dominated by language politics. In 1962 official "language areas" were established for the first time. These geographic language borders were added to the Belgian constitution in 1970. Each of Belgium's language communities claims the right to answer to government authority and be trained in a school system in its own tongue. In principle, the divisions would safeguard those rights, but it was an extraordinarily complex process, and language borders are fluid in so small a country.

Perhaps unsurprisingly in this context, works that perform concrete manipulations of words and their meanings are common in Broodthaers's practice; these are frequently also connected to language instruction.²¹ For example, a 1974 print edition *Citron–Citroën (Réclame pour la Mer du Nord)* (Advertisement for the North Sea) is a glimpse into childhood in Brussels, where one's ABCs are never entirely straightforward. The edition reproduced a bilingual poster depicting peasants gathering fish on the Belgian coast. The poster instructively identified their "catch," illustrating each (sole, crab, mussel) and providing its

French and Flemish names. A text panel appended by Broodthaers with only two words “Citron–Citroën” pointed to the difference between the French and Flemish word for lemon, which tourists heeding the charm of this advertisement might well use on their oysters. It also punned on the French Citroën car, a modern innovation seemingly incomprehensible to the frozen-in-time world of the advertising poster.²²

An overtly instructional work on a two-sided chalkboard from 1970, *Les Aigle* appears to teach the French plural noun for Eagle, while seeming to parrot Beuys’s performance of teaching at chalkboards.²³ In *Une/un* (ca. 1974), a skull and a watering can are labelled with flash cards indicating their respective genders. The work hypostatizes the intersection between post-structuralist rhetoric and the readymade’s equivalencies. If both items are presented as (a priori) artworks, the difference between even objects with such dissimilar connotations as a watering can and a skull becomes nominal. The edition *Les animaux de la ferme* (The Animals of the Farm, 1974) similarly transformed a pair of instructive posters for farmers into a lesson on the arbitrary character of both naming and branding; Broodthaers replaced the names of thirty visually different cows and steers with those for fifteen different brands of car. The poster itself was headed “Enseignement agricole” (Agricultural Education). As with the other examples cited here, the posters were evidently produced under the sign of Belgium’s complicated linguistic history; they also suggest the way branding is used to both apprehend and control the natural world.²⁴

On the cover of his catalogue for a Berlin solo exhibition in 1975, Broodthaers illustrated one of a small body of his altered painting kit panels called *Modèle didactique* (1974), works that riffed on Andy Warhol’s paint-by-numbers paintings of the early 1960s. Broodthaers did not follow the instructions to fill in the outlines and “complete” the painting, but instead interrupted a printed bowl of flowers with cloud-shaped blobs of paint labelled with the names of colours: “white, blue, grey, green, pink, yellow.”²⁵ He captioned the image: “Didactic model sold in most art stores. 40 x 31 cm. Art is often the story of Monsieur de La Palice.”²⁶ One of Broodthaers’s preferred references during this period, Jacques de la Palice (1470–1525) was a French nobleman and military officer. After his death in the battle of Pavia, his epitaph observed that were he not dead he would still be envied, a sincere sentiment that was popularly misinterpreted for comedic effect as “Were he not dead, he would still be living.”²⁷ This gave rise to satire, and, by the eighteenth century, to collections of such truisms. Broodthaers liked to remember the original *lapalissade* as “Cinq minutes avant sa mort, il vivait encore” (Five minutes before his death, he was still alive).²⁸

With this publication, Broodthaers reminded readers that such an aid for instruction in the making of a literal copy would result in a purely decorative

art – evidently putting even his own work in the position of stating utterly obvious facts for ridiculous effect. Such painting kits, which promised to make every man a Rembrandt, were touted for their educational value; completing one was not an idle waste of time, but an edifying, productive hobby.²⁹ The lesson in Broodthaers's "didactic model" should be considered in light of Joseph Kosuth's influential argument: "A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist's intention, that is, he is saying that that particular work of art is art, which means, is a definition of art. Thus, that it is art is true a priori."³⁰ The difference between the two artists' statements is one of inflection and translation; Kosuth's use of tautology could seal his question off from further inquiry, while Broodthaers's cracked it open for wordplay, and parody.

Broodthaers also collected antique picture alphabets, letter blocks, miniature alphabet books, primers, and educational engravings that he included in numerous exhibitions of his work. These seemed to hearken back to an empiricist approach to language far from 1970s post-structural debates. The vitrines in which he displayed these materials included very early engravings associated with the rote education of children, but the preponderance were eighteenth- and nineteenth-century examples that combined alphabets with charming images. The historical popularity of these primers reflected the influence of John Locke's advocacy for educational toys and his belief that teachers should avoid bluntly forcing children to learn, lest they grow to hate their own education.³¹ Alongside these historic objects, Broodthaers displayed those he had made or altered, such as image block puzzles supplemented by painted letters.

The pedagogical tone that unites these works, as well as a good deal of the discourse of Conceptual art, can be seen as responses to or manifestations of the sincere desire to explain, clarify, and refine art making and art criticism. They bear more than a passing resemblance to the didactic text – one designed, as Juanita Feros Ruys described in her history of the genre, to "teach, instruct, advise, edify, inculcate morals, or modify and regulate behavior."³² Edifying literature and poetry stem from the search for elegance in the delivery of instruction; as such they can be seen as forms of ornamentation.³³ Because of this, such writing has played a central role in the perennial battle between those who believe art should be about art itself and those who believe it must perform a greater purpose. This was a paradox in the program of artists such as Kosuth and Art & Language: their art, immersed in a modernist self-critique, which worked to surpass even art for art's sake, had almost necessarily also undertaken the ongoing instruction of its makers and the public. It is difficult to overstate the extent to which references to didactic texts fundamentally departed from a central tenet of most twentieth-century avant gardes: a renunciation of the responsibility to instruct.

Broodthaers seemed bent on parodying this apparent contradiction. His arrangements of patently instructional yet compellingly ambiguous objects, artworks, and phrases joined pedagogy with poetic speech, generating deeply relevant but also humorous work by evoking the most ancient role of poetry – its responsibility described in French as “*plaire et instruire*,” a descendent of Horace’s edict: “to teach and delight.”³⁴ This principle was omnipresent in the French tradition in which Broodthaers was educated. The fabulist closest to his heart, La Fontaine, embodied its ethos: “A naked moral is boring,” he wrote. “The story has to bring its precept with it. These kinds of shams must instruct and please, and telling to tell is of little importance.”³⁵

La Fontaine’s position descended from a long tradition. Virgil penned “how-to” poems on bee keeping, and Horace delivered advice of a practical nature to poets.³⁶ Teaching was central to poetry not only in the Latin tradition, but also in Hindu philosophy with the Upanishads, in Buddhism with epic poems like the Ramayana; Christian poetry, of course, was almost entirely didactic.³⁷ With John Dryden (1631–1700), Alexander Pope (1688–1744), Jonathan Swift (1667–1745), and Samuel Johnson (1709–84), instructional verse reigned. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French poets conjoined reasoned and spirited writing, fully embodying the tradition. William Wordsworth wrote in 1808: “Every great poet is a teacher: I wish either to be considered as a teacher, or as nothing.”³⁸ Yet, however much pleasure and use have remained connected throughout poetry’s history, the pendulum has swung widely in one direction or the other depending on larger cultural trends. Conservative cultures eventually generate a backlash against their own regulations. It wasn’t until the early nineteenth century that “Victorian” came to be synonymous with moralizing; by then, Percy Bysshe Shelley would write in his preface to *Prometheus Unbound* that “didactic poetry is my abhorrence,”³⁹ and Edgar Allan Poe’s attack on didacticism’s “heresy” would strongly influence French symbolists seeking to escape moralizing art.⁴⁰

While Broodthaers may have alluded to the early didactic poets, he made works in direct conversation with writers like Poe and the symbolists who followed. For such poets who rejected didacticism, like Stéphane Mallarmé, “symbols” were created not through the logic of signs, which twentieth-century linguists worried over, but in the poetic object, haunted by associations and history. Broodthaers’s works using the language of instruction may be positioned across two related and also seemingly contradictory registers. On the one hand, the works posited that in order to operate in the art world of the 1970s one had to begin not with the clean slate of a child’s mind valorized by the Romantics, but with an adult’s criticality of received knowledge so acute that it nonetheless forced a return to *degré zéro*, and a reconsideration of the most basic lessons:

one's ABCs. The curators for one of Broodthaers's exhibitions in 1975 argued for this interpretation. In their catalogue essay they stated that Broodthaers's mission with the show was an instructional one: to teach viewers "that we can only handle the complicated truth once we are able again to see and recognize the absolute, the elementary. . . once we start to have a critical view on things again and once we doubt anew our own perceptions – at the risk of repealing them."⁴¹

Yet Broodthaers's works using the language and aesthetics of teaching also served a different purpose, one that should be understood in relation to the series of exhibitions and room-sized artworks he called *Décors*, a project he began near the end of his life, around 1974. The best known of the *Décors* included palm trees and evoked film sets or screening rooms; two were called *Un jardin d'hiver*, or A Winter Garden. Critically, one of the reasons Broodthaers used the term *Décor* was because an artwork that served as a set or a *décor* was one endowed with a *use* alongside its identity as art. As he explained it in 1975:

This means that unlike with Duchamp, the object is restored to a real function. This means it would normally be used to do something else, to make a movie, to eventually be used for a piece of theatre, at least from the point of view of the basic concept, even if it is not very practicable. Which is to say, restore the object to its real function and not transform an object into a work of art.⁴²

This recalls the pragmatic theory of the sixteenth century and writers like Sir Philip Sidney, who judged art as a "means to an end, an instrument for getting something done."⁴³

Throughout the works I have described, Broodthaers deployed references to and markers of art's erstwhile service to decoration and, importantly, to instruction. With them, he addressed the changed character he had observed in the art world of 1974. His semi-ironic embrace of art's "usefulness" was, at least partially, a retort to Art & Language's lesson/edict that artists should renounce all of art's non-analytic functions. He noted:

Every artistic effort becomes tantamount to the proposition of an order: you must do this, do that, and not anything else. Whereas at the time of Meissonier, we could at the very least still allow ourselves to have divergent ideas and represent other things ... And this freedom has changed meaning. It has become formal ... It's in thinking of all these things that I decided to make a winter garden.⁴⁴

In response to the position statements and "proposition of an order" put forward by artists such as Kosuth, Broodthaers made the oases of his *Décors*.

With his references to old-fashioned methods of rote learning in didactic panels and “flash card” labels for objects, he parodied the rules that attempted to control another garden, and the world of art.

Some peers whom Broodthaers admired tackled the issue of art’s usefulness more openly, by using their art to engage with contemporary politics. For example, Hans Haacke’s *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*, or David Lamelas’s *Office of Information about the Vietnam War*, at the 1968 Venice Biennale, were radical and politically resistant statements that took the form of dry, data-laden instruction. Broodthaers’s lighter touch was perhaps informed by his concern that when works perform a desirable use, they risk being marshalled for other purposes. As he phrased it in 1974: “There can be no direct connection between art and message, especially if the message is political, without running the risk of being burned by the artifice. Foundering.”⁴⁵ Broodthaers’s lessons were almost invariably parodic; he travestied the role of the teacher while preventing instructional tools from serving their original purpose. This prompted a reconsideration of these tools as both aesthetic and poetic – rather than strictly useful – objects.

Instruction in Contemporary Practice

In the twenty-first century, the deadpan lecture-as-art has become a familiar spoke in the ever-widening circuit of performance practice.⁴⁶ In 2005, for example, the Performa festival organized an evening program at The Kitchen, New York, entitled “LISTEN UP! Lectures as Performances” and in 2008 Creative Time organized the performance series *Hey Hey Glossolalia*, which featured an evening of lecture/panels on “The Erotics of Pedagogy.” Liam Gillick’s books and scripted talks on his own critical theory of art and its circulation are the most straightforward of this genre.⁴⁷ In lectures such as *My Neck Is Thinner than a Hair*, Walid Raad instructs his audiences on the research and production of the Atlas Group’s documentation on the recent history of Lebanon; everything from the timing of his PowerPoint slides to his technical difficulties is identical in each presentation. Once recorded, similar metafictional objects can become less transient art objects, as in Mark Leckey’s *Cinema in the Round*, a video lecture by the tuxedo-clad artist compiling his own talks on relationships between objects, images, and technology (2006–8). Jayson Musson’s character of Hennessy Youngman pretends to tutor aspiring artists in his “Art Thoughtz” video monologues on race, culture, and assimilation. Such performances incorporate fictional alter egos, stilted reading or other apparent tropes of classroom instruction

to maintain a distance from any sincerely instructional guise. When artists act out the role of “teacher” in a way that ironizes that persona, the topic at hand (which can range from the status of the artwork to motivational speaking to the economics of paint) invariably also becomes the instructive function of art itself.

Mark Lombardi turned his own obsessive card catalogues into sublimely instructive diagrams on “the uses and abuses of power,”⁴⁸ while Angela Bulloch, with her *Rules Series* (1992–) has accumulated and displaced codes of conduct (for strippers, members of British Parliament, bungee jumpers, etc.) from their original domains; they enumerate the powers we cede in exchange for access to countless spheres of modern life.⁴⁹ Raad’s “parafictional”⁵⁰ lectures and archives exist on a spectrum with artists such as Filip Noterdaeme, who as director of the Homeless Museum of Art offered counsel in the form of one-on-one conversations with passers-by in public settings that took place without prior arrangement.⁵¹ The artist collective Slavs and Tatars began as a reading group, and self-education and exchange have remained central to their lectures, installations, publications, and performances. Their excavations of historical radicalism and analysis of contemporary political agency in the Caucasus, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Poland use humour and wordplay as central tools. In the plaque *Dig the Booty of Monoglots, but Marry, My Child, a Polyglot* (2009), the aphoristic imperative is transliterated across Latin, Cyrillic, and Farsi, a game of telephone that breaks down the text’s original meaning while honouring the schizophrenia generated by attempts to communicate through analogues.⁵² The work of Slavs and Tatars and the other artists mentioned exemplify political art that avoids “foundering” through diligent attention to the histories of language.

When Thomas Hirschhorn declared that, despite his overtly educational artworks, he was not a teacher – “I am not a Schoolmaster” – he was most likely also referencing Jacques Rancière’s influential essays on the problems of pedagogy in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, wherein Rancière opposed the stultifying lessons of the professor to the emancipatory actions of artists. It is *because* of the arbitrary nature of language, he argued, that we have found such diverse ways to search for communication: “Each one of us is an artist to the extent that he carries out a double process ... He is not content to feel something but tries to impart it to others.”⁵³

In his many instructional *jeux d’esprit* Broodthaers answered those who would seek to impose rules and order on art and artists, and he did it with self-deprecating humour. As he wrote in a 1974 text, “It’s necessary to know, reader, that the artist is more interested in the exterior world than in art itself, and even less in the contents of exhibitions and museums. Certainly, he pretends. The artist is uneducated. His role is to pretend.”⁵⁴ After a century in which most avant-garde artists set aside the task of educating their audiences, others nonetheless

crafted lessons that appeal to the times. Broodthaers's work suggests a precedent for artists who work to provide an experience of art in which part of the delight is in learning to read across registers of difference.

Notes

- 1 Jack Burnham, "Alice's Head: Reflections on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* 8.6 (February 1970): 37–43; repr. in *Conceptual Art: a Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA, London: MIT Press, 1999), 216.
- 2 See for example, *July/August Exhibition = Juillet/Août Exposition* (London: Studio International in association with S. Siegelau, 1970); *Documenta 5: Befragung der Realität Bildwelten Heut* (Kassel: documenta GmbH: Verlagsgruppe Bertelsmann GmbH, 1972); *Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, Sol Lewitt, Robert Morris, Lawrence Weiner (The Xerox Book)*, 1st ed. (New York: Siegelau / Wendler, 1968); *Information* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970); and *Projekt '74-Kunst bleibt Kunst: Aspekte internationaler Kunst am Anfang der 70er Jahre*. (Cologne: Kunsthalle, 1974).
- 3 This list could continue for many pages. The trend was extensively discussed at the conference *Deschooling Society*, at the Hayward Gallery, London, in 2010.
- 4 In an interview conducted by Craig Garrett, "Thomas Hirschhorn: Philosophical Battery," *Flash Art*, October 2004: 90–3.
- 5 Another example can be found in the work of Sharon Hayes.
- 6 For Hirschhorn and the archive, see Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* 1.110 (2004): 3–22; Mark Godfrey, "The Artist as Historian," *October* 1.120 (2007): 140–72; and the exhibiton and catalogue: Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (New York, Göttingen: International Center of Photography; Steidl Publishers, 2008).
- 7 Ross Birrell, "The Headless Artist: An Interview with Thomas Hirschhorn on the Friendship between Art and Philosophy, Precarious Theatre and the Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival," *Art & Research* 3.1 (Winter 2009): <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v3n1/hirschhorn2.html>. See also Garrett, "Thomas Hirschhorn."
- 8 See also the use of diagrams by artists such as Mel Bochner, as discussed in Tom Holert, "'A Fine Flair for the Diagram.' Wissensorganisation und Diagramm-Form in Der Kunst der 1960er Jahre: Mel Bochner, Robert Smithson, Arakawa," in *Materialität Der Diagramme: Kunst und Theorie*, ed. Susanne Leeb (Berlin: PoLYpeN, 2012), 135–78.
- 9 Lawrence Weiner, "Statement of Intent," 1968. First published in January 1969, exhibition catalogue (New York: Seth Siegelau, 1969), unpaginated.
- 10 Wilson directed these conversations using the dialogue's fundamental precept that teaching is impossible; whatever is learned from discourse has been found within the debater through the process of refutation. See *Kenneth Seeskin, Dialogue and Discovery: A Study in Socratic Method* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).
- 11 This took place on the second of the three-day Congress of Brussels in La Cambre (1–3 July 1973). A transcript of the first day of the conference was published in the

- March/April 2011 issue of *De Witte Raaf*, available online at www.dewitteraaf.be/artikel/detail/nl/3617.
- 12 Buren's essay was published in French as "Mise en garde!" and in an English translation by Charles Harrison and Peter Townsend in *Konzeption-Conception* (Cologne; Opladen: Westdeutscher Verl., 1969). It was revised and reprinted in Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art*, 1st ed. (New York: Dutton, 1972).
 - 13 Art & Language, "Introduction," *Art – Language* 1.1 (May 1969).
 - 14 See, for example, Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), 834.
 - 15 Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).
 - 16 Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy," first published in *Studio International*, October and November 1969; repr. in Joseph Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966–1990* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 18.
 - 17 The criticism that Conceptualism is overly didactic inspired the exhibition curated by Jörg Heiser, *Funky Lessons* (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, Archiv für Aktuelle Kunst, 2005).
 - 18 Jessica Morgan and John Baldessari, "Somebody to Talk To," *Tate Etc.* 17 (Autumn 2009): 74–85.
 - 19 On this work, see *Thomas McEvilley, Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, illustrated edition (New York: Allworth Press, 1999).
 - 20 Interview with Maria Gilissen, 4 October 2009, Brussels.
 - 21 In a ca. 1961 text he entreated, "May the Flemish lion, the Wallonian cock, and the tutelary angels watch over my pen for the good and the comfort of all." ("Que le lion de Flandre, le coq wallon et les anges tutélaires veillent sur ma plume pour le bien et le confort de tous.") Marcel Broodthaers, "Au pays de bon sens (c. 1961)," in *L'art en Belgique: Flandre et Wallonie au XXe siècle. Un point de vue* (Paris, Brussels: Paris-Musées/S.A.M.A.M.; Lebeer-Hossmann, 1990), 343. Unless otherwise noted all translations are those of the author.
 - 22 This work evokes the story of Joseph Jacotot (1770–1840). As recounted by Jacques Rancière, the francophone professor was charged with teaching French to a group of Flemish schoolchildren. Despite their lack of a common language, he found that the students nonetheless were able to learn when they were provided with tools, but more so when they felt empowered to find meaning and figure things out for themselves. See *Jacques Rancière, The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, 1st ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 64. Originally published as *Le maître ignorant: Cinq leçons sur l'émancipation intellectuelle* (Paris: Fayard, 1987).
 - 23 The correct spelling would be "Les Aigles." Beuys's relationship with education has been well described elsewhere. See, for example, Kristina Lee Podesva, "A Pedagogical Turn: Brief Notes on Education as Art," *Filip* 6 (Summer 2007) and Alain Borer, "A Lament for Joseph Beuys," in *The Essential Joseph Beuys*, ed. Lothar Schirmer (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 14.
 - 24 All these examples were also Broodthaers's own variants on the "object-based" instruction found in Magritte's *La trahison des images* (1928–9), the lessons that undergird illustrated dictionaries descended from Paul Bert's books such as his

- narrative *Lectures et leçons de choses* (Paris: Picard et Kaan, 1887). Molly Nesbit has referred to such instructions, in which “knowledge seemed to be held together in the object,” as producing the “euphoria of certitude.” See *Their Common Sense* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000), 56. It was this certitude that both Magritte’s and Broodthaers’s work undermined.
- 25 “blanc, bleu, gris, vert, rose, jaune.” He also hand wrote the names of colours in ink on the black-and-white image.
- 26 “Modèle didactique vendu dans la plupart des magasins d’Art. 40 x 31 cm. L’art est souvent l’histoire de Monsieur de La Palice.” *Marcel Broodthaers, Invitation pour une exposition bourgeoise* (Berlin: Nationalgalerie Berlin, 1975).
- 27 The epitaph read: “Ci gît Monsieur de La Palice: Si il n’était pas mort, il ferait encore envie.” The French *envié* (envied) and *en vie* (alive) appear similar enough.
- 28 The Monsieur was, Broodthaers wrote, “one of my customers. A lover of novelty, who makes others laugh, he uses my alphabet as an excuse to laugh himself. My alphabet is paint. All this is obscure.” Marcel Broodthaers, “To be a straight thinker or not to be. To be blind,” in *Le privilège de l’art* (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1975). This text was published in English in the Oxford catalogue; however, this citation is taken from a more accurate later translation of the French original: Marcel Broodthaers, “To Be ‘Bien Pensant’ ... or Not to Be. To Be Blind,” trans. Paul Schmidt, *October* 42 (Autumn 1987): 35.
- 29 See William L Bird, *Paint by Number* (Washington, DC, New York City: Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History; Princeton Architectural Press, 2001).
- 30 Kosuth, “Art after Philosophy,” in Alberro and Stimson, eds, *Conceptual Art*.
- 31 See a discussion of this in Lydia Kokkola, “‘Instruction with Delight’: The Narrator’s Voice in John Newbery’s Early English Children’s Books,” in *Instructional Writing in English: Studies in Honour of Risto Hiltunen* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2009), 161–85, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10318231>. See also Roni Natov, *The Poetics of Childhood* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
- 32 Juanita Feros Ruys, *What Nature Does Not Teach: Didactic Literature in the Medieval and Early-Modern Periods* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008).
- 33 This was Hegel’s argument. Enlightening prose is on the same spectrum with the edifying material so often used to justify spectacle. Examples include nearly any fairground display of scientific specimens, whose apparently instructive presentations of medical conditions lent an educational tone to titillating anatomical models and morbid abnormalities. See Kathryn Hoffmann, “Sleeping Beauties in the Fairground: The Spitzner, Pedley, and Chemisé Exhibits,” *Early Popular Visual Culture* 4.2 (July 2006): 139–59.
- 34 Horace as phrased by Philip Sidney in 1595.
- 35 “Une Morale nue apporte de l’ennui; Le conte fait passer le précepte avec lui. En ces sortes de feinte il faut instruire et plaire, Et conter pour conter me semble peu d’affaire.” Jean de La Fontaine, “Le pâtre et le lion,” in *Fables*, ed. Edmond Pilon and Fernand Dauphin (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1960), sec. 6, 1.
- 36 This discussion is indebted to the skilled summary of the history of didactic poetry presented in the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton,

- NJ Princeton University Press, 1993), 292–5. See also Annette Harder, *Calliope's Classroom: Studies in Didactic Poetry from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Paris; Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2007).
- 37 Indeed, Daniel T. Kline argues that “to separate the didactic from the artistic, the historical from the literary – courtesy books from Chaucerian tales – is fundamentally to misunderstand the literature of the Middle Ages.” “Medieval Children’s Literature: Problems, Possibilities, Parameters,” in *Medieval Literature for Children* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 10.
- 38 February 1808 letter to Sir George Beaumont. Cited in Stephen Charles Gill, *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- 39 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound, a Lyrical Drama in Four Acts with Other Poems* (London: C. and J. Ollier, 1820).
- 40 Edgar Allan Poe, “The Poetic Principle,” *Home Journal*, 31 August 1850, 1; repr. in Edgar Allan Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings: Poems, Tales, Essays, and Reviews* (London, New York: Penguin, 2003), 454.
- 41 “Es lehrt uns, daß wir nur dann die komplizierte Wirklichkeit bewältigen können ... und unsere eigenen Erkenntnisse – auf die Gefahr des Widerrufs hin – und stets aufs neue bezweifeln.” Karl Ruhrberg and Wieland Schmied, “Reflexion über Marcel Broodthaers,” in *Invitation pour une exposition bourgeoise* (Berlin: Nationalgalerie Berlin, 1975), u.p. Trans. Jana Kafka.
- 42 “C’est à dire que l’objet au contraire de chez Duchamp est restituer à une fonction réelle. C’est à dire devoir me servir normalement à autre chose, à faire un film, à jouer éventuellement une pièce du théâtre, du moins au point de vue de notion base, n’est ce pas, même si ce n’est pas très praticable. C’est à dire restituer l’objet à sa fonction réelle et ne pas transformer un objet en œuvre d’art.” Marcel Broodthaers, “Apprenticeship & Filiation, CD, undated interview, late 1975, vol. 3, *Avant-Garde in Belgium 1917–1978* (Sub Rosa, 2009).
- 43 According to M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 15.
- 44 “Chaque tentative artistique devient plus la proposition d’un ordre. Il faut faire ceci, il faut faire cela et pas autre chose. Tandis qu’on pouvait même se permettre au temps de Meissonier, d’avoir un avis différent ... et bien cette liberté d’expression a changé de sens. Il n’est pas le même. Il est devenu formel ... C’est en pensant à tous ces choses que j’ai décidé de faire un jardin d’hiver.” Marcel Broodthaers interviewed by Freddy de Vree, Brussels, 1974, CD, Tinaia 9 Box (Cologne, 1994).
- 45 Marcel Broodthaers and Irmeline Lebeer, “Ten Thousand Francs Reward,” trans. Paul Schmidt, *October* 42 (Autumn 1987): 42.
- 46 These carry legacies of Brecht’s early Fluxus scores, and Maciunas’s diagrams, as well as Beuys’s performance lectures.
- 47 See, for example, Liam Gillick’s lecture “Maybe it would be better if we worked in groups of three,” Hermes Lecture, Hermes Business Network & the Research Group of Visual Art, AKV St Joost, Avans University, 2008.
- 48 Karen Rosenberg, “NineteenEightyFour,’ All Eyes, at Austrian Forum,” *New York Times*, 19 August 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/20/arts/design/20nineteen.html>.

- 49 For more on related works, see Astrit Schmidt-Burkhardt, "'Plötzlich Diese Übersicht.' Kunst Unter Dem Diagrammatischen Imperativ," in *Materialität Der Diagramme: Kunst und Theorie*, ed. Susanne Leeb (Berlin: PoLYpeN, 2012), 61–96.
- 50 As described in Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make Believe: Socially-Engaged Art and the Aesthetics of the Plausible," in *New Language for Socially Engaged Art* (Chicago: Green Lantern, 2008).
- 51 Noterdaeme also earns his living as an educator.
- 52 Slavs and Tatars have described their projects as examples of the work of "substitution," not only an intellectual action, based in research, and communicated through their public lectures, publications, and installations, but also a metaphysical political act: "Substitution requires us to ... tell one tale through another, to adopt the inner-most thoughts, experiences, beliefs, and sensations of others as one's own, in an effort to challenge the very notion of distance." Correspondence with the author, 2012.
- 53 Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 70.
- 54 "Il faut savoir, lecteur, que l'artiste s'intéresse d'avantage au monde extérieur qu'à l'art lui-même et encore moins au contenu des expositions et des musées. Certes, il fait semblant. L'artiste est inutile, son rôle est de faire semblant." Marcel Broodthaers, "Berlin. Tout ou l'Oeil de la Tempête. Feuilleton (1974)," in *Marcel Broodthaers*, ed. Evelyn Weiss (Cologne: Museum Ludwig, 1980), 12.

Semantic Analysis: The Art of Parsing Found Text

In computer science and linguistics, parsing, or, more formally, syntactic analysis, is the process of analyzing a text, made of a sequence of tokens (for example, words), to determine its grammatical structure with respect to a given (more or less) formal grammar ... Human sentences are not easily parsed by computer programs, as there is substantial ambiguity in the structure of human language, whose usage is to convey meaning amongst a potentially unlimited range of possibilities but only some of which are germane to the particular case ... Semantic parsing is working out the implications of the expression just validated and taking the appropriate action.¹

Tim Etchells's work *Emergency Phone* (2006), like Germaine Koh's work *Call* (also 2006) exists predominantly in the form of a written instruction: "Lift receiver." In Etchells's work the instruction is engraved on a standard wall plaque, red with white lettering, under the words EMERGENCY PHONE. In Koh's the instruction appears on a small LED screen inset in the dial of the telephone. In Etchells's work the phone (on a shelf, with the sign above it) is located in a gallery, somewhere that interaction or physical touching of artworks is not always encouraged. In Koh's work the phone is sited in public space, perhaps on a table in the café of the museum or gallery, where it appears somewhat out of place and simultaneously ordinary – without signage, it doesn't necessarily look like art. The comparison between these two works is not that they are both readymades in their appropriation of the medium of a slightly nostalgic desk rotary dial telephone, it is that the artist has deliberately left a significant component of the artwork unscripted – what the viewer does when they follow the instruction to lift the receiver (the appropriate action). In the case of Etchells's work, when the phone is picked up there are no instructions for the user to follow, contrary to the information presented on the sign. Rather there is the pleasing sound of birdsong (an untranslatable voice from another species that

may or may not be instructing anything with its vocalization). Etchells writes, "The sign itself is a quotation/repetition or an invocation of a particular institutional voice (signage) ... and [...] the recording of birdsong is a substitution of one voice for another – a 'meaningless' one instead of an authoritative one, a song (decorative, playful, without utility) instead of a 'meaningful'/utilitarian one."² In Koh's case, lifting the handset connects the phone to one from a mobile network of "answerers." The other thing that connects these two works is the role of the technology – the phone – in the manifestation of the work. What determines whether you lift the handset or not, and how long you stay on the line is equally up to the machine (in Etchells's case, the tape recorder) as it is up to you. By participating in the work you have subjected yourself to becoming a routine element in a program or piece of code, which functions on the basis of a logic of instruction and response.

I'm using this slightly clunky analogy of code-logic here because I am seeking in this essay to find examples of, and thus perhaps classify, new forms of art which use text and might be nearer to software or computer programming for understanding the mediated world of information we currently live in, as evidenced in the use of deliberate editing constraints and rules within those works of art.³ I would like to bring some experiential understandings of new media to these works to better grasp what is meant, aesthetically or semantically, by rules, protocols, and, latterly, data visualization. In art, all choices of what to represent and what not are significant, and in the case of these new text-based artworks sometimes those choices are automated, or parcelled off to machines to make.

To that end we should start by putting ourselves on the same page as far as what we mean by new media. New media includes all elements of our technologized existences – including the lines of code that make up the software which run the applications we use to interact with the world through our technological devices. This code and software may be visible or hidden. We might know how it works or not. Often it is the case that a change to the source code changes the nature, pace, or result of our interaction. The work *Grey Editor* (2012) is a piece of software by the artist Julien Maire. *Grey Editor* is a text-based writing application which you can load on to your operating system like any other text editor. It synchronizes with your computer's clock and notes the time you opened the file and the time you began writing. It then begins to time-stamp the text – the characters appear black at first but become more faint and more transparent the longer they sit on screen. Printing out the document provides a visualization of your thought process – indicating the length of time you struggled over a sentence by the density of the ink. All the words, phrases, and punctuation marks you deleted are printed also, but stacked up in a heap at the bottom of the page.

Grey Editor, as a piece of software, is thus an example of both new media and art. New media art or digital art can take many forms and be manifest in a variety of physical or virtual experiences – from conceptual experiments to installations using live data (for a gallery exhibition Maire exhibited *Grey Editor* on a desktop computer for visitors to try out, as well as making available USB sticks to take away with the software application loaded onto them). New media artworks which use software and data sets to visualize or simulate other forms of lived experience might be a particular kind of digital art, but disregarding their technical and mechanical substrates, they are not that different from any other form of art which attempts to present a picture of the world. Often it is how a work is manifest in a space such as a gallery (how it “behaves” rather than what it is made from) and what it asks of the viewer in return (participation or interaction in some cases), which distinguishes new media art from more static forms such as sculpture.

An important example in the history of new media and digital art is the participatory and responsive work of Canadian artist David Rokeby, who has been creating interactive sound and video installations with computers since 1982. Rokeby’s work *The Giver of Names* (1991) invites viewers to select from a heap of plastic toys placed on the floor and position their chosen object on a pedestal in front of a computer-connected camera. The computer powering the installation then attempts to isolate and identify the objects “seen” via the camera lens using artificial-intelligence software Rokeby has been continually developing since the mid-1990s. The computer attempts both perceptual interpretation (colour and shapes) and articulation (the connection between those things), drawing from its database of language to express its internal “state of mind” in relation to what it “sees.” Thus, Rokeby’s software does not simply try to accurately catalogue and describe the objects but uses natural-language rules to create inspired-machine poetry (“... a brownish-yellow bath toy, on the left side of the one lake water-green inlet, will burn down all cresson houses ...”). The more people who participate, the more combinations and arrangements of objects *The Giver of Names* sees, the more the software is influenced by previous associations between objects. (The machine doesn’t store this knowledge; its artificial intelligence is programmed towards impression / expression rather than curiosity / learning).

Which brings us to the question of Conceptual writing within new media art. Is there such a thing, and if so, how will we recognize it? *The Giver of Names* is certainly a contender for the category of new media Conceptual writer. Yet, is it not the case that all new media art is itself Conceptual art, as Jeffrey Shaw has argued?⁴ Therefore, is Conceptual writing in new media any different than it is manifest in other non-technologized forms of art? Is it just software code, or

the artificial-intelligence program, as in the case of Rokeby's work? In that case, is it to be found in the protocols inherent within the code (if this, then that), or within the "behaviour" of the work of art? Perhaps if it is in protocols, it is simply in the form of the instructions, and, as in the examples above, who (or what) is issuing them and who is acting upon them.

A quote from Kenneth Goldsmith might help to situate us here:

Conceptual writing treats words as material objects, not simply carriers of meaning. For us, words are both material and carriers of meaning; it's language and you [can't] get rid of meaning no matter how hard you try. This is made manifest by the digital environment where, since the dawn of media, we've had more on our plates than we could ever consume, but something has radically changed: never before has language had so much materiality – fluidity, plasticity, malleability – begging to be actively managed by the writer. Before digital language, words were almost always found imprisoned on a page. How different today when digitized language can be poured into any conceivable container: text typed into a Microsoft Word document can be parsed into a database, visually morphed in Photoshop, animated in Flash, pumped into online text-mangling engines, spammed to thousands of email addresses and imported into a sound editing program and spit out as music; the possibilities are endless.⁵

An example of one way of handling the glut of information we are faced with in the digital age is the collective activity of the International Necronautical Society (INS) – an artist group based in London – which counts author Tom McCarthy among their key founding members (he is their general secretary).⁶ Their works are known for "pouring" text into "any conceivable container" and their Twitter feed (@necronauts, managed by their chief of propaganda, Anthony Auerback) defaults to the text of the novel *Moby Dick*, 140 characters at a time, when it is not in use for announcements about INS activities.

The work of the INS, which has included events in which humans together with machines engage in translating, broadcasting, publishing, and otherwise issuing sometimes philosophical and always seemingly coded missives, suggest that there are other ways of thinking about how new media artists use words, and use texts. In the way that filmmakers have long remixed others' clips, and reshot (or made reference to) other films by way of their editing style, contemporary artists might be inclined to agree that all text can be classed under the rubric of "found footage," and in that case, what you do with it, or where you put it, might be the important thing.

If an artist's medium is found-footage in the form of text, does that mean that there is no writing involved? Is it merely collage, juxtaposing different

texts and performing them in some fashion? Leaving aside the many connections to William Burroughs, Samuel Beckett, and the cut-up (which no doubt has influenced many media artists including the INS), if the text is static, is “collage” a better means to describe the process involved than “remixing,” in the style of a DJ?

Consider the work of Claude Closky – an artist based in Paris who has long worked online and with the detritus of analogue and digital media – and his playful work *Michael Jackson* (2009) as a possible illustration of this potential distinction between static collage and remixing. On the screen in your web browser appears an alphabetical list of sounds written as words, from “Aaah” to “Yeayea.” With the volume on the computer turned up one can hear a common disco beat. Clicking on the words yields an audio clip from a Michael Jackson or Jackson 5 song, parsed to that sound alone. The speed of one’s clicking is about the only control one has over the new “song” one is making, as the audioclips repeat ad infinitum. Closky has translated from found sound into text into instruction for the viewer to create the work.

While this example clearly allows both the viewer and the “machine” or the code to unite in the creation of the new work (the “song”), there are a good number of examples of other artists whose work consists of mediated representations of found text – treating the text as data, another material available for reuse (as distinct from this musically imbued idea of remixing). As media theorist Geert Lovink has noted, we are all now “info junkies”: “Information is drifting through space and there are new tools for reading and writing, which each time combine the multimedia mix in a different way.”⁷ The question is whether that “information” is chosen deliberately or not, or whether it plays an arbitrary or distinctly, recognizably important role in the creation of the work, and whether it is just the machine, or us the viewer, or a collaboration between the two, which enacts the mediation process.

For instance, there are numerous works of art made using spam, the ultimate of all found texts. Indeed the term net.art, used to describe the early phase of Internet-based art, was named (supposedly) after the only legible line in a garbled email sent from Alexei Shulgin to Vuk Cosic (both now considered pioneers in the field of net.art), which Cosic nearly disregarded entirely as spam. Michelle Gay’s work *SpamPoet* (2009) is based on a piece of software (“Poemitron” – what she calls “artware”) developed by the artist and Colin Gay, and is its first manifestation. She writes, “The Poemitron custom artware works with hundreds of pieces of collected spam to create a unique poem every few minutes. Poemitron can work on a given phrase for any given length of time.”⁸ Other manifestations have unleashed the Poemitron onto the lyrics of Beatles songs and the script of presidential speeches, and are often presented by the

artist in the form of non-responsive projection-based installations, which she calls a “word-by-word animation.”

These garbled found texts are seductive to artists who enjoy collage and the chance results of seeming random juxtaposition. But could there be more to it than that, perhaps when the art of recontextualization is applied to suggest deliberate political and social manipulation? Or involves audiences and others in the process. Here one might consider a number of artists who have taken found text and used it as a script for many kinds of outcomes ranging from performance, to filming, to direct action.

A number of examples of works that begin from a script can be found in the performance-based art practice of activist and artist Joseph DeLappe. DeLappe’s work *Quake Friends* (2002) takes place live on a stage with seven participants who are gamers (web-based video game players), each taking on the role of a character from the widely syndicated television show *Friends*. Logging in to an online multiplayer environment, the game *Quake III Arena*, they both play the game, and recite – by calling out live to an audience in the auditorium, as well as typing their lines into the chat window in the game itself – the script from a particular episode. Here the script becomes the code – for the performance of the episode as well as its subsequent re-enactment and remediation into another kind of media space. In his work *The Great Debates* (2004) DeLappe rewrites US presidential debates into the text fields of the online game spaces “Battlefield Vietnam,” “Starwars Jedi Knight II,” and “The Sims Online.”

DeLappe’s work has since moved away from literal (spoken word) scripts appropriated from other media sources towards a different kind of restating of found texts, and a more direct engagement with an unsuspecting audience. In his project *dead-in-iraq* (2006–2011) he logged in to the online US Army recruiting game, “America’s Army,” in order to manually type the name, age, service branch, and date of death of each service person who has died to date in Iraq, creating an online memorial of those military personnel who have been killed in the ongoing conflict. DeLappe explains,

I enter the game using as my login name, “dead-in-iraq” and proceed to type the names using the game’s text messaging system. As is my usual practice when creating such an intervention, I am a neutral visitor as I do not participate in the prescribed mayhem. Rather, I stand in position and type until I am killed. After death, I hover over my dead avatar’s body and continue to type. Upon being re-incarnated in the next round, I continue the cycle.⁹

The “container” into which DeLappe has poured this text is by no means neutral, and the chat logs documenting the response of other online players of

the game, who happen upon his political action, make for interesting reading. Of course, not all “found footage” texts are “spoken” by the artist in this way. Found texts might be found and then extracted or re-presented – broadcast. As wide as the range of texts available to choose from, so too are the variety of means of artistic re-presentation. Each artist might parse found text into a different eventual “container” – be it a database subject to continual update or revision, or a printed publication, arrested in its modification at a certain moment in time. Different texts might demand different kinds of broadcasting, different kinds of appropriate action.

A powerful example is Ashok Sukumaran’s work *Wharfage* (2009), which exposes the mechanics of cross-border trade, pirates, and the interests of multinationals.¹⁰ A complicated project, it is best described in the words of the Mumbai-based artist:

The project consists of two parallel pieces: *Wharfage*, a book containing two years of port records related to the Somali trade; and *Radio Meena*, four evenings of radio transmissions from the port in Sharjah, which broadcast in a 5+ kilometre radius songs, commentary, phone and ship radio conversations with ships in Salaya, in Bossaso and enroute, accounts from Gujarati sailors, loaders from Dera Gazi Khan and NWFP in Pakistan, Sikh truckers, Iranian shopkeepers, Somali trading agents (all of whom spoke hindustani or hindi+urdu as a common language of the port).

The book itself can be read merely as a list of lists, with the port records painstakingly transcribed from the small and messy room filled with binders of manifests of dhows (a kind of Arabian trade ship), detailing the contents of each shipment: cooking oil; handbags; nails. Read through the lens of news reports about the activities of Somali pirates, it seems that the lists could be as much about what is not recorded on them as what is. Each page of the book lists a different shipment. Included are the details of the date of either arrival or departure, the vessel name, the flag the boat was travelling under, where it was headed to, how long it was docked at Sharjah Creek for, and what docking charges and customs fees were levied. As the introduction to the book details,

A port is “free” when customs and local jurisdiction on trade is waived. That is, when import and “transshipment” duties are not applied, and traders can operate from the port as if it did not exist in any country ... It is in “Somalia” that the Free Port acquires its most powerful dimension. Mogadishu, Kismayo and Bossaso are free ports not because of the WTO, but because of various

configurations of partial states and private enterprise, not particularly inclined to implement a customs regime.¹¹

The lists don't quite make those protocols explicit, but they do suggest that in the case of what travels to and from the Sharjah Creek on the dhows, it is more a case of "very cheap" rather than "free" port activity. Everything is listed with its weight in tonnes and its value in AED (United Arab Emirates Dirham). Eight hundred and ninety cartons of plastic slippers are worth the same as a Nissan cargo van.

But combined with the radio broadcast, the work takes on a different dimension.¹² What might be considered just meticulous transcription in the 140 pages of lists becomes a complex network of participants, instigators, and actors, their stories spun out into the ether – things said aloud but not written down. The introduction to *Wharfage* tells us that frequency licensing is still difficult in India, and that as a result radio is understood as information distribution, not community-oriented, multi-party communication. Furthermore, in places such as Sharjah Creek where the Internet is not a commonly used tool, how information circulates, and the protocol of its circulation, is something to consider more closely in all its social-political dimensions. The work takes information and relocates it – from being a message transmitted by one to one, to one to many, to many to many, changing its import. The acknowledgment and use of these networks "in which sender and addressee are simultaneously masked and multiplied"¹³ are what gives this project its resonance.

Wharfage seems the ultimate artist book in terms of the activity of parsing text – both on the side of the transcriber (the artist) and the reader (you). It is a reminder of how our encounters with text (and the "found footage" of texts as they circulate online) might be the result of a parsing done manually or through the protocols of software. It is not just transposition, but by making a database and a broadcast, Sukumaran has made information accessible, has rewritten it for our information age.

Moving information from one container to another is something that new media does well, and sometimes the parsing is itself the artwork. In his piece *The Language of Diplomacy* (2011), Ben Rubin took the diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks in 2010 and extracted the named people, places, corporations, agencies, and publications and presented them chronologically (1968–2010), in flashing LED lights. It takes twelve hours to get through the 4200 colour-coded six-letter words. Presented on a wall more than twenty-five feet long, with the letters nearly five feet high, one has to get some distance from the light installation to make the words out – it is tiring and mesmerizing viewing. In his earlier

collaboration with Mark Hansen, *Dark Source* (2005), Rubin found online, accidentally after a security failure, the full text of the software that runs the American touch-screen voting machines, a famously trademarked and secretive piece of code. He represented the 49,609 lines of C++ on a dead format for reading – over 1000 microfiche sheets – but redacted, and thus illegible, for legal reasons. Both of these gallery-based installations are aesthetically overpowering to their viewer – it is not the quantity of information which overwhelms, but one’s intellectual response; the deliberately chosen interface means that it is hard not to feel helplessness in relation to the content of the work and how to get access to the many layers of information that it presents. Both works seek to expose the mechanics of the political and media industries that surround us.

The parsing which Rubin undertook in *The Language of Diplomacy* was certainly aided by a natural-language analysis program of a computer, which suggests another category within media art, of instruction-based work which is based on algorithms, or in which a machine enacts or automates a process on the text or data provided to it. This brings the discussion closer to a question of the aesthetics of data and the visualization of complex ideas that is permitted when computers can process information and output it in new forms. Many works of data visualization draw on news feeds (RSS feeds) or freely available texts such as Twitter streams, often tying them together with geographic data (where the tweets come from). As the technology changes, this extraction and representation gets easier, though the visualization systems that allow viewer participation or feedback are still rare.

For instance, Warren Sack’s project *Agonistics: A Language Game* (2004) seeks to reveal the connections between the nodes of networked databases and expose them. Its initial manifestation, the project *The Conversation Map* (1997–2000) consisted of a piece of software, a browser, built to visualize the discussions taking place on a mailing list or in a given news group, showing the hot topics as well as the most vocal contributors.¹⁴ *Agonistics: A Language Game* takes the form of a visualization or graphical representation of the linked relational database built from the online conversations, one that allows and exhibits agency. By subscribing to the news group and posting messages to it, you are positing yourself in the field and can play a competitive game with the other subscribers to see who might make their way to the “centre” of the field. “Players score points if they are in dialogue: if they mutually respond to or cite the messages of other players. To win the game, one needs to establish a dialogue with as many other players as possible.”¹⁵ The power relations usually hidden in any discursive forum, such as online forums and social-media chat rooms, are what Sack’s project seeks to uncover.

Sack's project points out how the language of networked communication is one of protocols. Software code has different grammars. Social networks permit different kinds of connections and conversations (on Facebook you could "like" posts but only after 10 years was the button changed to allow other responses). But the text of the code, hidden or not, is also instruction; written out, it acts and enacts. The serious analysis and parsing of language found in Sack's work finds its counterpoint in the cheeky work of French artist-group Les Liens Invisibles and their 2010 work *Repetitionr*:

1. Create your petition: just write down your petition title and statement.
2. Choose the number of signatures you want (from 1,000 to 1,000,000) and from which countries they should come. Don't be afraid, exaggerate the potential.
3. During the following days, *Repetitionr*'s automatic services will feed your petition with the signatures.
4. Meanwhile, promote your campaign through other media (TV, online / offline newspaper ...).
5. Within the next thirty days your campaign will reach its goal. This will be the moment to announce to the world that thousands and thousands of people can't be wrong!"¹⁶

The idea that "a smart artist lets the machine do the work"¹⁷ is clear here in Les Liens Invisibles's project, which both uses and critiques the idea of "one-click democracy" so prevalent in the current age of social networking. The software lets its user gather as many signatures as required, "in no time at all," showing just how easily digital information can be manipulated.

It would seem that as artists continue to critique the networked technologies which connect us, their artworks move beyond being merely aggregations of information or data-visualizations to become new forms of text-based art nearer to software tools for understanding the world of text we live in. A clear evidence for this is in the number of artists' works that use the "found footage" of text, but then apply deliberate editing constraints and rules.

Tim Etchells's work *City Changes* is a clear piece of Conceptual writing with a protocol enacted on it.¹⁸ As he writes,

City Changes consists of twenty text works, starting with a description of a city in which nothing ever changes. This initial text has been rewritten 19 times to produce a sequence of increasingly preposterous variations, mutations and exaggerations of this imaginary place. The versions of the text – presented as framed inkjet prints – alternate between invocations of the urban environment as a place of order and routine, and descriptions of it as a site of perpetual

change and multiplicity. The process of continuous alteration in the text itself, switching back and forth from city-of-stability to city-in-chaos, is mirrored in the visual economy of the prints as changes introduced in each successive version are presented in a new colour.¹⁹

In an exercise which would make Italo Calvino or William Burroughs smile, *City Changes* is different from the other media artworks discussed thus far in that it starts from a singly authored text by the artist. (Many of Tim Etchells's other works, in collaboration with the performance group Forced Entertainment, work from existing texts or formats, such as scripts for plays but equally, in his words, "the kinds of things that are done on stages – this includes theatre, but also cabaret, vaudeville, stand-up, dancing on cruise ships, mediumship, magic, pantomime as well as chat-shows, press conferences, show trials.") Furthermore, the rules of how the text is modified are known to the artist but not made public. In fact, it was a personal game of improvisation, of reversing meaning. Thus, the rules enacted on the text are idiosyncratic rather than debugged repeatable tried and tested code. It is a visualization of a seeming multi-party "tracked changes" edit session in the software Word, but enacted manually by a single author/editor. Etchells argues that he understands "writing or text as a procedure / task / rule operation or game as well as, of course, understanding it as a creative / expressive act ... Writing within rules both restricts possibility and in a certain way [permits] inventiveness."

Etchells also admits his "big interest in quotation – in found voices, found fragments, especially in colliding them or subverting them, or in bringing them to new uses ... I've always been suspicious of the idea of the authentic – preferring to see writing as echoing, assembling or finding or channeling than as creative self-expressing."²⁰ A similar sentiment can be seen in the work of the UK-based artist duo Thomson & Craighead, who for over twenty years have been making work with media and computer technologies. Their video, sound, and electronic networked projects exist in real space, public space, online, and in gallery installations. Much of it draws on long-standing artistic traditions of appropriation and manipulation while exploring the many ways in which new technologies and electronic global communications networks are changing the way we perceive the world around us. Their *Template Cinema* series recombines video, audio, and text from the Web to create new short films. The initial genre piece, *Short Films about Flying*, matched footage from a webcam from Logan Airport in Boston with a random audio selection from a database of over 150 soundtracks (which were all directly sourced from Internet radio feeds) and random selections from a database of over 200 intertitles (sourced from online message boards). Thus the template for each low-tech mini-movie

remained constant while the actual two-minute film itself was never replicated, or had infinite possible varieties due to the algorithm running the code. In making the work the artists did make aesthetic decisions (such as their choice of the old-style film leader, the length of the shots between intertitle edits), but the software is what enacts their rule-based instructions.

Thomson & Craighead's series of "desktop documentaries" (starting with *Flat Earth* in 2007, *A short film about war* in 2009/10, and concluding with *Belief* in 2012) draw material from online sources such as YouTube or the photo-sharing website Flickr and create complex narratives, with scripts found online (such as published letters and blog posts) voiced by actors. Each installation of these films, importantly, has two screens, one on which the "documentary" film plays, and one which details all the information pertaining to where the source material was drawn from, "the provenance of images, blog fragments and GPS locations ... so that the same information is simultaneously communicated to the viewer in two parallel formats – on one hand as a dramatised reportage and on the other hand as a text log" or, more recently, with *Belief*, a Google Earth-inspired compass-map interface.²¹ Here, while the artists may correspond with the "contributors" whose texts they are reusing, again it is the artists together with the software who are enacting the rules which govern the "authoring" of the work from "found footage."²²

Artists who work with texts found floating around our mediascape might not be so concerned with the text itself as with how they can create art experiences through establishing "rules in the context of the technological limits of devices/platforms/formal setups"²³ – from books, to screenings, to immersive installations. What is apparent is that although access to raw data is made easier through digital technologies, its reframing from found text into art heightens its social and political impact.

Notes

- 1 Wikipedia, entry on "Parsing," 28 August 2012 (since updated).
- 2 From email correspondence with the artist, Tim Etchells, August 2012.
- 3 A more technical analysis of software-coded or programmed art might be found in Nick Montfort's essay in this volume.
- 4 In an interview with Josephine Bosma, February 2000, published online at <http://www.josephinebosma.com/web/node/78>. The exact quote reads: "JB: Do you think what we used to understand as conceptual art is very different from media art? JS: No, it is the same thing. I can't imagine that one can make media art without first taking a very exact conceptual position in relation to whatever one is doing. Every media art work is compelled to incorporate a conceptual strategy because of the idealogical nature of the media."

- 5 "So What Exactly Is Conceptual Writing? An Interview with Kenneth Goldsmith" by Katherine Elaine Sanders, 2 October 2009, at <http://bombsite.powweb.com/?p=4653>.
- 6 For information on the International Necronautical Society see www.necronauts.org.
- 7 Geert Lovink, *I read where I am*. Graphic Design Museum Breda / Valiz, Amsterdam.
- 8 Michelle Gay, see <http://www.art.michellegay.com/collections/view/8>.
- 9 Joseph DeLappe, from his website, www.delappe.net.
- 10 The piece was created in collaboration with Shaina Anand and CAMP, and was part of the Sharjah Biennial 9. See <http://www.sharjahart.org/projects/projects-by-date/2009/wharfage-leaving-sharjah-camp>.
- 11 From the introduction to the book *Wharfage*. Somalia is listed in quotation marks as it is believed to be a collection of semi-state entities.
- 12 The project is ongoing, with video material and annotations from recent trips to the region available online at <http://pad.ma/Vgk4m4q1>.
- 13 From Tom McCarthy, *Transmission and the Individual Remix*, an e-book published in 2012 by Vintage Digital.
- 14 A scientific paper describing in detail how *The Conversation Map* works can be found at <http://web.media.mit.edu/~lieber/IUI/Sack/Sack.html>.
- 15 Warren Sack, from the website for *Agonistics*, see <http://artport.whitney.org/gatepages/artists/sack/>.
- 16 *Les Liens Invisibles, Petitionr*; see <http://www.lesliensinvisibles.org/2010/05/repetition-com-tactical-media-meet-data-hallucination/>.
- 17 The tag line from artist Cornelia Sollfrank's work with net-art generating software, see <http://www.artwarez.org/>
- 18 The first public manifestation of the work – *City Changes 1–4* – featured as a part of *The Sheffield Pavilion*, a Sheffield Contemporary Art Forum publication project for the Venice Biennale (2007), Documenta XII, Skulptur Projekte Münster 07, and Art Basel during June 2007. Also presented at Manifesta 7, 2008.
- 19 From the artist's own website, see www.timetchells.com.
- 20 From correspondence with the artist, Tim Etchells, August 2012.
- 21 From the website of the artists, see www.thomson-craighead.net.
- 22 In other of Thomson & Craighead's works, such as their Twitter-driven work *London Wall* (2011), the viewer also participates in the creation of the work through sending a tweet.
- 23 From correspondence with artist Tim Etchells, August 2012.

Conceptual Computing and Digital Writing

In 1952 computer scientist Christopher Strachey wrote a parodical love-letter generator.¹ This system, the prototype of all computational Conceptual writing – the almost completely secret prototype – was up and running not only before Conceptual writing was formulated but even before Conceptual art had arrived. The program predates the earliest work that is consistently identified as part of the (yet unnamed) Conceptual art movement, Rauschenberg's *Erased De Kooning Drawing*. It was not created by someone who identified or was identified as a writer, or as an artist, and it seems to have been seen as more the server-room equivalent of a parlor game than as a part of the tradition of literary arts. Only recently have programmers and scholars provided versions of the generator that appear in an installation and Web contexts² and discussed in depth the literary aspects of the system.³ All of this makes Strachey's program not only the first in its category but also quite typical of the scattered, marginal, often overlooked projects that have explored the computer's ability to write conceptually over the last sixty years. The computer has certainly not been ignored by Conceptual writers, but those who have discussed the role of computing have often pointed to its place in the writing and reading environment and looked to it as a tool to rip and burn words (uncreatively, of course) rather than to work and play with them. Christian Bök, for instance, identifies some of the important qualities of the networked computer as they pertain to innovation in poetry: "Recent trends in technologies of communication (such as digitized sampling and networked exchange) have already begun to subvert the romantic bastions of 'creativity' and 'authorship,' calling into question the propriety of copyright through strategies of plagiaristic appropriation, computerized replication, and programmatic collaboration."⁴ Bök identifies a powerful relationship between computing and contemporary writing, but his comment focuses on how the computer challenges existing, outmoded concepts and institutions.

He does not celebrate the computer as a machine with a new type of “creativity” (or a poetics), but as a tool for duplicating texts (and, as will be discussed later, collaboration). It is notable that Bök, in writing his univocalic masterwork *Eunoia*, did not use a computer to generate word lists; rather, he read through an unabridged dictionary, in codex form, seven times.

There were systems before the electronic computer that could create combinatorial texts, such as Raymond Lull’s paper machine, the Lullian circle. This device was developed around 1275 and included in copies of Lull’s *Ars Magna*; it was designed to generate all true propositions about God. As important as these predecessor machines are, the late-twentieth-century programs written for the general-purpose electronic computer were not a simple continuation of practices that had been undertaken with dice, with slips of paper in a hat, and with other mechanisms.⁵ The discussion here focuses on electronic text generation from Strachey’s system to the present.

Starting with Strachey’s computer program and the context in which it arose allows for a discussion of computational Conceptual writing that historicizes this thread of practice and acknowledges its innovative qualities and its mostly outsider status – even within the renegade practice of Conceptual writing. This discussion also provides a typology along four axes, characterizing different sorts of systems according to whether they sample or enumerate; whether they use a static or dynamic supply of source texts (or textons); their level of complexity; and their use of text only or multiple media. This formalism is not meant to capture every property of these systems, but to show that systems to write computationally and conceptually have identifiable independent aspects, and that they are very poorly characterized by single terms, such as “multimedia,” used alone.

First Dimension: Exhaustive vs. Sampled Texts

Any given computer text generator defines some set of texts, those texts that it can produce. An exhaustive generator, when it completes execution, will have produced all of them. A generator that samples, by contrast, provides individual instances of text, choosing them from a distribution, a set in which each element is weighted with a probability.⁶ The latter kind of generator is certainly more common, but computer writing systems of both sorts exist.

Consider a simple Python 2 program that generates names that sound like (or in some cases actually are) art movements:

```
first = ['computer','conceptual','net','pop','real']
second = ['art','ism','school']
```

```
for a in first:
    for b in second:
        print a + b
```

The output of this program is a list of 15 phrases – every combination of the five “first parts” and the five “second parts.” The list begins:

```
computer art
computerism
computer school
conceptual art
conceptualism
...
```

This program can be quickly typed into a Python interpreter; the reader is invited to do so. It is an exhaustive writing system. With slight modifications, it can become a sample-based generator:

```
from random import choice
first = ['computer','conceptual','net','pop','real']
second = [' art','ism', ' school']
print choice(first) + choice(second)
```

So changed, the program prints out one of the fifteen possible outputs at random each time it is run. Specifically, because “choice” samples uniformly at random,⁷ each of the five beginnings and each of the three endings are selected equally often, and each of the fifteen outcomes is equiprobable. The program might produce “netism,” for instance, but any of the other fourteen outcomes is equally likely.

Randomness is used in sampling a particular text, but randomness is not the quality that distinguishes a sampling generator from an exhaustive one. An exhaustive generator could shuffle its output texts randomly before printing them and it would still be exhaustive.

Sampling: Loveletters, Stochastic Texts, A House of Dust, about so many things

Loveletters produces a parody document, full of meaningless endearments, by generating an address, five sentences (each of which can be of two different

forms), a salutation, and the signature "M. U. C." (Manchester University Computer). The result, for instance, can be:

MOPPET SWEETHEART

MY DEAR AMBITION EAGERLY IS WEDDED TO YOUR LUST. YOU ARE MY AVID FONDNESS. MY THIRST IS WEDDED TO YOUR FANCY. YOU ARE MY CURIOUS DEVOTION. MY TENDER ENTHUSIASM ARDENTLY SIGHS FOR YOUR SWEET FONDNESS.

YOURS ARDENTLY

M. U. C.

Although Strachey's fame does not rest on his achievements as a writer or artist, he did publish about this project in a literary and art review, *Encounter*, noting "the remarkable simplicity of the plan when compared with the diversity of letters that it produces." He also explained that the vocabulary was drawn from a book much favoured by Conceptual writer Vito Acconci: *Roget's Thesaurus*.⁸ And, importantly, he noted how the point of this exercise was not to see how the program could be improved but to understand, through it, how simple "tricks can lead to quite unexpected and interesting results."⁹ Theo Lutz took a more canonical literary source – Kafka – for his 1959 program to generate bizarre propositions. His *Stochastic Texts*, generated on a Zuse Z22 computer, include such statements as (in English translation from the German) "A CASTLE IS FREE AND EVERY FARMER IS FAR." and "NO COUNT IS QUIET THEREFORE NOT EVERY CHURCH IS ANGRY." His system's operation, and its results, were consonant with Kafka's description of a formally valid social system in which the particular combinations were often meaningless. This system was also described and discussed in an art journal, Max Bense's *Augenblick*.¹⁰

*A House of Dust*¹¹ is another significant early combinatorial text generator. Alison Knowles and James Tenney collaborated on this program, which produced stanzas using one simple template:

A HOUSE OF [material]
[location]
USING [light]
INHABITED BY [people]

For instance, this template and the lists of terms could (and did) generate:

A HOUSE OF DUST
ON OPEN GROUND

USING NATURAL LIGHT
INHABITED BY FRIENDS AND ENEMIES

The system is significant for its use within an art practice and for being situated within an art movement. The stanza shown here inspired the construction of an architectural and sound work by Knowles beginning in 1968. The work was not only part of an artistic process; its output was also presented to readers. A chapbook-like publication of stanzas presented them on twenty sheets of fan-fold computer paper, foregrounding the material nature of computer output.

The stanzas generated by *A House of Dust* are compelling because they are evocative and activate the imagination – one can hardly help but fill in details about how the house is constructed, how exactly it is situated, and who resides there – but also because they balance a diversity of terms with pleasing repetitions that cause the stanzas to cohere and connect. Funkhouser writes that the system’s “flexibility or variation spares the cumulative poem from being monotonous,”¹² which is certainly correct, but it is also important to note how the regularity of form, enforced by the single template, and the occasional recurrence of phrases are both also essential to the success of *A House of Dust*.

In 1974, Canadian artist Norman White created what might be now called an example of “physical computing,” although it did not use a general-purpose computer. His *Four-Letter Word Generator* is a custom circuit with four neon alphanumeric readout tubes. It was engineered to produce pronounceable words which were not all English dictionary words.¹³ The system produces some of the most concise computer-generated texts, simpler, for instance, than Lutz’s terse propositions. A recent project along somewhat similar lines, in that it is a custom electronic device to generate texts combinatorially, is Allison Parrish’s *Autonomous Parapoetic Device*, created in 2008. Parrish’s text generator uses a general-purpose, programable microcontroller and a larger display of 20x4 characters.¹⁴

A combinatorial generator that is remarkable for its simplicity and effectiveness is Nannette Wylde’s *about so many things*, one of her Electronic Flipbooks from 1998. The systems in this series were written in Macromedia Director and used a straightforward template with lists of text options. In “about so many things,” the template is simply:

He [sentence completion]
She [sentence completion]

The READ_ME file for *about so many things* explains: “The activities are drawn from the same pool of possibilities. Any line of text could be applied to either subject. In essence, the work explores the release of societal constraints regarding gender roles.” The sort of texts that result are:

He is a successful entrepreneur
She has a secret

The sentence completions range from being almost gender-neutral to being of quite different valence when applied to people of different genders. They include: “likes chocolate,” “feels stressful,” “is a good parent,” “has a crush on the teacher,” “is wearing makeup,” “is a firefighter.” By simply assigning sentences at random to be about either “He” or “She,” *about so many things* produces interesting texts that expose the reader’s individual and cultural preconceptions related to gender.

All of these examples help to show how the development of text generators is distinct from the typical process of writing texts. A traditional writing practice involves specifying *sequences of words*. For a fiction writer, these will typically form sentences and paragraphs; for a poet, they will be lines and stanzas. The creator of a combinatorial text generator instead defines a *distribution over sequences of words*. The program defines a set of possible texts – as should be clear from the examples above – but also the way each text in the set is weighted. Since this is less evident from the programs discussed, consider the following BASIC program:

```
10 IF RND(1)>.5 PRINT “HEADS”: GOTO 10  
20 PRINT “TAILS”: GOTO 10
```

In it, the words “HEADS” and “TAILS” are selected with equal probability – the selection is done uniformly at random. But if “.5” is changed to “.2”, what was initially a fair coin flip becomes biased. Each time, there will be an 80 per cent chance that “HEADS” is printed. The set of options is the same in both cases, but the distribution is different because the weight on each of the two options changes.

The writer of a sample-based combinatorial text generator is not only defining every possible text that the system can generate; he or she is also assigning weight to each possible outcome. In many cases, a uniform distribution over a compelling set of texts works well. Some text generators of this sort are effective because certain outcomes are more rare and others more common, however.

Exhaustion: Permutation Poems

Brion Gysin’s permutation poems, created in collaboration with Ian Sommerville beginning in 1959, are the output of exhaustive systems.¹⁵ They

consist of phrases which in most cases have been rearranged by computer. The first one, for instance, lists all 120 permutations of "I AM THAT I AM," starting with the lines:

I AM THAT I AM
AM I THAT I AM
I THAT AM I AM
THAT I AM I AM
AM THAT I I AM
...

Because there are only three unique words in the original five-word phrase, the full poem contains many duplicate lines. Gysin read it on BBC Radio in 1960. According to his own statement, it garnered the second-lowest approval rating of any broadcast. (Only W.H. Auden reading to Benjamin Britten's music did worse.) Gysin went on to permute the phrases "JUNK IS NO GOOD BABY," "KICK THAT HABIT MAN," "NO POETS DONT OWN WORDS," and "I DONT WORK YOU DIG." Gysin was one of a few artists and writers, working in different languages, who used a computer to permute phrases.¹⁶

Simple though Gysin's system is, there are exhaustive systems that are even simpler. Jörg Piringer's *Unicode* (2011) is a computer-generated digital video that runs for more than thirty minutes and shows every printable character in a large range of Unicode, a character set that is meant to be universal, at the rate of one character per frame. Enumerating all of the possibilities is like progressing through the alphabet, although in this case every current alphabet, and every current writing system, is included, and the video shows the unusual beauty and surprising extent of a standard method of encoding characters. *Unicode* relates to various poetic presentations of the alphabet by Aram Saroyan, Ian Hamilton Finlay, and others,¹⁷ but because of its computerized means of production and its engagement with a coding scheme for the computer, it also engages with more complex enumerative systems.

Although the exhaustive system is really just presenting the full set of possible texts that the sampling system chooses from one a time, the effect of having everything presented at once is quite different. This is an effect that Gysin and Sommerville's radio listeners no doubt felt very keenly. Whether pleasing or not, the exhaustive system has a different poetics that showcases extent. The reader is not fooled into thinking that the possibilities are infinite, but may be impressed at how many texts result from the application of a single, simple rule.

An excellent example of a graphical exhaustive system, one which operates in time, rather than space, is John Simon's *Every Icon*. This Java applet from 1997

has never completed a run, but if and when it does it will enumerate every possible 32x32 monochrome icon. At current processor speeds, it will take several hundred trillion years to finish.¹⁸

Second Dimension: Static vs. Dynamic Source Texts

Digital Conceptual writing has sped up and expanded since its early decades, working upon ever-larger data sets and exploring new crannies of our now-pervasive computers and networks. While early systems drew on relatively small distributions of data that were often included in the program itself, recent systems have been more open, and dynamic, in a variety of ways. They either invite user input directly or trawl the network for texts.

The examples discussed so far have used static stores of data. A program that uses data collected from the network, but keeps this data in a static store, is *Poemtron*,¹⁹ developed by Michelle Gay and her brother, Colin Gay. The version of this program that is part of *SpamPoet* uses a set of spam messages that have been collected. Although there is no live connection to the network, the language involved could not exist without the network and its commercialization. The set of data that is the basis for this work does not consist of human-authored texts (haiku, love letters), but texts that have been robot-generated for today's Internet.

Systems that use dynamic source texts include Bill Kennedy and Darren Wershler's *The Apostrophe Engine* and *The Status Update*, both of which plunder messages from the Web and from a social network and use them to produce texts directly for the "end reader." These systems have been used to write books,²⁰ but have also done service on the Web,²¹ where they have been invoked directly by readers.

Eric Elshtain and Jon Trowbridge's *Gnoetry*²² is a different sort of system – a tool for authors seeking to statistically transform different source texts, usually prose, into verse. It is one example of a poetry generator that uses conventional statistical text techniques, more sophisticated than simple combination, and is intended for use by (cyborg) authors rather than readers. The typical use of this system has been with Project Gutenberg e-texts. For instance, the chapbook *The Dublin of Doctor Moreau* was created by Eric Elshtain using the system, James Joyce's *Dubliners*, H.G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, and certain formal constraints and indicated preferences.

Neither networked data nor the ability to accept text from the reader is necessary for Conceptual computer writing, but many systems have used more open, dynamic capabilities to good effect. *The Status Update* jams two poets'

Facebook RSS feeds up against Wikipedia's list of dead poets, conflating the transient and contemporary with the canonical and encyclopedic. It would be hard to create the same effect in a closed, stand-alone system with its own list. Nevertheless, there is plenty of evidence that non-networked, non-interactive systems can also work on language in interesting ways. The compelling diversity and repetition of *A House of Dust* is one example; the curated spam selection of the Poemtron-driven *spampoet* is another.

Third Dimension: Simple vs. Elaborate Systems

Systems for writing by computer can be straightforward, easily described, and simple or even trivial to implement. Or, they can be very elaborate, with architectures and subsystems that each warrant explanation. Jim Carpenter's Electronic Text Composition (or ETC Poetry Engine) is on the more elaborate side; Carpenter has presented about the system's architecture and development, backing his discussion with diagrams on PowerPoint slides. The system uses a relational database constructed from the British National Corpus and a great deal of code, only some of which has been released. (Gnoetry, in contrast, is a free software system, with source code that is freely available.) Electronic Text Composition has been used for various hoax purposes. The poems it generated were submitted to literary magazines, for instance, and the resulting rejection letters or acceptances were collected in binders.²³ Also, the system was used to generate *Issue 1*, edited by Stephen McLaughlin and Jim Carpenter, which consisted of 3785 pages of poems, all computer-generated using no special parameters and all attributed to living poets. A riot ensued wrecked the theatre.²⁴

A number of the systems already discussed are quite different from Electronic Text Composition in terms of their complexity. The mechanism that underlies *about so many things* can be easily implemented in two lines of code in many programming languages. The principle underlying Gysin and Somerville's permutation poems is a simple mathematical one that can also be coded up in two lines, for instance, in Python. Although they use a more elaborate template, *Loveletters* and *A House of Dust* are also straightforward in terms of how they function, requiring no architecture diagram and no explanation of subsystems.

An important difference between simple, early projects and recent projects that embrace minimality and simplicity is the context of computing. Early projects showed us the delightful ways that "giant brains," early mainframes and then microcomputers, could work upon language; a simple program was enough to demonstrate this. Contemporary simple systems show us that the computer – networked to social sites and other sources of data, capable of

generating amazing graphics and sound, able to work on massive stores of information – can still do a great deal of interesting conceptual work on language using only a small amount of code. In other words, very simple systems for Conceptual writing once showed us how pleasing and stimulating simple computations could be; now they work to help us not to discover but to recover that sense, which is increasingly lost as we consider the computer to be a networked media player that is important *only* because of the network and the mass of data that exists on it.²⁵

Fourth Dimension: One Medium vs. Multimedia

Many of the examples here are essentially all text, although the exhaustive *Every Icon* is a graphics-only project. One can choose to produce a “monomedium” or “multimedia” project quite apart from where one’s system lies along the three dimensions already described. Talan Memmott’s “Self Portrait(s) [as Other(s)],”²⁶ for instance, is a system that presents images and pseudo-biographies side by side, with both sampled from distributions. Reloading (or clicking “next artist,” which does the same thing) presents another self-portrait and another franken-bio of an artist. So, the system is sampled rather than exhaustive. Although it runs in a browser, it works on its own data set rather than using dynamic data from the network. It is of moderate complexity, more elaborate than *about so many things* or the permutation poems but not as elaborate as Electronic Text Composition. And, of course, it is distinguished from the projects discussed earlier by presenting both combinatorially generated images and combinatorially generated texts.

Other Dimensions of Conceptual Computer-Generated Writing

These four dimensions are only a start, and capture only some of basic ways in which Conceptual computing systems to generate texts relate to one another. An aspect that has not been considered in detail is whether and how existing components of a computer system are being repurposed. Paul Chan’s work to bend fonts into new sorts of writing machines, and to replace letters with phrases, is a prime example of this compelling line of work. If the code in which the system is implemented is meant to be read and understood in relation to the text machine’s function, another dimension is active. This is one seen in Páll Thayer’s series of Perl programs called Microcodes,²⁷ for instance, and in the

practice of obfuscated coding.²⁸ So, this discussion has merely sampled, and not exhausted, the possibilities for computer conceptual writing.

Computer as Collaboration Machine

Computer writing with a Conceptual basis has provided exhaustive permutations (Gysin and Sommerville), has extended to embrace the whole Web (Kennedy and Wershler's *The Apostrophe Engine* and *The Status Update*), has used statistical methods and machine learning techniques (Elshtain and Trowbridge's Gnoetry), and has employed elaborate software architectures for hoax purposes (Jim Carpenter's system, used by editors to produce *Issue 1*). As varied as these writing practices are, they are also very often deeply collaborative – as these four examples show – and often invite collaboration in ways that other Conceptual writing practices are not.

One common configuration for collaboration involves a known artist or writer working with a programmer: for instance, Ian Sommerville on the permutation poems, James Tenney on *A House of Dust*, Colin Gay on Poemotron. Even if the original team is careful to share credit, the programmer's name can fall by the wayside as the work is discussed in the context of other projects by the "first author." But the computer and the network do invite collaboration, not only in the "writer and programmer" mode but in other ways as well. A team of collaborators who are all technically and poetically engaged can use the networked computer to realize a project together even if they are not co-located, for instance.

Is There Non-Conceptual Computer Writing?

Creating computer text generators means mathematically modelling the production of language. It is an activity that seems inherently predisposed to Conceptualism. Nevertheless, certain attitudes and goals can lead writer/programmers to develop systems that are very classically inclined or that even have Romanticist rather than Conceptual leanings. Haiku generators that are built with a traditional mindset, or with the goal of imitating human writing for social science or computer science purposes, can be instructive to look at (because of how many different styles of writing are produced within this form), but ultimately derive more from cliché than from a new and compelling idea that is formulated in terms of computation and the network. The output of such

systems is, like Conceptual writing, writing that does not need to be read – but in this case, it is for all the wrong reasons.

By contrast, there are plenty of projects that employ compelling concepts but don't originate from an artistic or literary practice. On the social news site Reddit, a program called Haikubot detects when someone has posted a message that can be recast as a 5-7-5 syllable haiku; it responds by reframing and reposting the text to make a fresh and often hilarious connection between everyday writing and a classic poetic form. Molière's character Monsieur Jourdain discovers that he has been speaking prose all his life; the posters on Reddit discover, now and then, that they have been posting in verse. Just as Bern Porter found poems in everyday advertisements, forms, and other texts, people today are able to find entire poetry generators that are feral – systems that were fashioned for other purposes but participate in the projects, inquiries, interventions, and hoaxes of Conceptualism.

Notes

- 1 Christopher Strachey, [*Loveletters*], Mark I Autocode program for the Ferranti Mark I.
- 2 The exhibit first went up at ZKM (Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe): David Link, *LoveLetters_1.0. MUC=Resurrection. A Memorial*, ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany, April–August 2009. The Mark I emulator can be found at David Link, *Manchester and Ferranti Mark 1 Emulator*, <http://www.alpha60.de/research/muc/>.
- 3 Noah Wardrip-Fruin, "Digital Media Archaeology: Interpreting Computational Processes," in *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, ed. Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Perikka (Berkeley: University of California Press: 2011) 302–22, <http://games.soe.ucsc.edu/sites/default/files/nwf-BC7-DigitalMediaArchaeology.pdf>.
- 4 Christian Bök, Interview at the Canadian Literature Symposium, Ottawa, Canada, by Brenda Dunn, 2008, <http://www.canlit-symposium.ca/past/2008/interviews/dunn-bok-final.pdf>.
- 5 For more on the connection between pre-digital and digital text-generating machines, see Whitney Trettien, "Computers, Cut-Ups, & Combinatory Volvelles: An Archaeology of Text-Generating Mechanisms," MA thesis (MIT, May 2009), <http://www.whitneyannetrettien.com/thesis/>, which is itself a digital text-generating machine.
- 6 Because I believe it is most important to distinguish exhaustive from sampling generators, I am overlooking some further complexities: how input from the user influences the text produced, for instance, or how the generation of particular texts may be conditioned upon previous outcomes rather than being independent of them. The exhaustive/sampling distinction should help to explain the role of randomness in text generation, to describe how it is not essential to every type of generation, and to lay a foundation for further, deeper consideration of systems involving randomness.

- 7 To be precise, the computer is producing not randomness but “pseudorandomness.” Early implementations of randomness on the computer were complex deterministic functions. Today, the quest to have computers produce true randomness – by whatever definition; there are many – continues. Much more on this point, and its relevance to aesthetic computing, can be found in the “Randomness” chapter of Nick Montfort et al., *10 PRINT CHR\$(205.5+RND(1)); : GOTO 10* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013). Computers today, whatever their defects, are tremendously better at randomization than are people. The distinction between pseudorandomness and randomness has subtle aesthetic implications, but does not significantly complicate any of the discussion here.
- 8 My point here is not to defend *Loveletters* as a legitimate art project, but to show that, even though it was developed in the context of an early computer lab and not apparently intended for art-world viewers or a broad group of literary readers, it has some connection to the art world and even to later Conceptual writing practices.
- 9 Christopher Strachey, “The ‘Thinking’ Machine,” *Encounter*, October 1954: 27.
- 10 Theo Lutz, “Stochastic Texts,” *Augenblick* 4.1 (1959): 3–9; trans. Helen MacCormack (2005); http://www.stuttgarter-schule.de/lutz_schule_en.htm.
- 11 Alison Knowles and James Tenney, *A House of Dust* (Cologne: Verlag Gebrüder Konig, 1968). The chapbook is the output of a Fortran program from 1967.
- 12 C.T. Funkhouser, *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: An Archaeology of Forms, 1959–1995* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 61.
- 13 Norman White, “Norm the Artist, Oughtist, and Ne’er-do-well,” <http://www.normill.ca/artpage.html>.
- 14 Allison Parrish, “Autonomous Parapoetic Device (APxD mkII),” [Decontextualize.net](http://www.decontextualize.com/projects/apxd/), <http://www.decontextualize.com/projects/apxd/>.
- 15 Brion Gysin, *Back in No Time: The Brion Gysin Reader*, ed. Jason Weiss (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 79–94.
- 16 Funkhouser, *Prehistoric Digital Poetry*, 40–2.
- 17 Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith, introduction to “Suicide” by Louis Aragon, in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 50–1.
- 18 John F. Simon, “Every Icon Project Page,” 1997, <http://www.numeral.com/eicon.html>. Matthew Mirapaul, “In John Simon’s Art, Everything Is Possible,” *New York Times*, 17 April 1997, <http://www.numeral.com/articles/041797mirapaul/041797mirapaul.html>.
- 19 See <http://www.art.michellelegay.com/collections/view/8>.
- 20 Bill Kennedy and Darren Wershler-Henry, *Apostrophe* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2006) and Kennedy and Wershler-Henry, *Update* (Montreal: Snare Books, n.d.).
- 21 At <http://apostropheengine.ca> and <http://statusupdate.ca>.
- 22 Publications created using Gnoetry are available at <http://www.beardofbees.com/gnoetry.html>.
- 23 Erica T. Carter, “Erica T. Carter: The Collected Works,” Slought Foundation, 11 June 2004, <http://slought.org/content/11227/>.
- 24 There is no comprehensive write-up of the *Issue 1* controversy, and no room to attempt one here; but see, for instance, Nick Courtright, “Because I Can’t Not Comment: The Issue 1 Controversy,” *Tier 3*, 13 October 2008, <https://tier3.wordpress>

- [.com/2008/10/13/because-i-cant-not-comment-the-issue-1-controversy/](http://nickm.com/2008/10/13/because-i-cant-not-comment-the-issue-1-controversy/) and the pages linked from there.
- 25 My own work in developing very simple Conceptual writing systems includes the *ppg256* series of 256-character Perl poetry generators; and several programs originally created as 1k Python programs (*Taroko Gorge*, *The Two*, and *Through the Park*); and *Concrete Perl*, a set of four 32-character concrete poems in Perl. More elaborate, but still meant to be understandable, is the potentially exhaustive system *Sea and Spar Between* that Stephanie Strickland and I created based on the writing of Melville and Dickinson. These systems are all linked from the main page of my site, <http://nickm.com>.
- 26 Talan Memmott, "Self Portrait(s) [as Other(s)]," *Iowa Review Web*, April 2004, http://iowareview.uiowa.edu/TIRW/TIRW_Archive/tirweb/feature/memmott/index.html. Also available in the *Electronic Literature Collection*, volume 1, at http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/memmott_self_portraits_as_others.html.
- 27 See <http://pallit.lhi.is/microcodes/>.
- 28 Nick Montfort, "Obfuscated Code," in *Software Studies: A Lexicon*, ed. Matthew Fuller (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 193–9.

Poetry without Poets

What if the poetic has left the poem in the same way that Elvis has left the building?

Long after the limo pulled away, the audience was still in the arena, screaming for more. Even after his death, *especially* after his death, Elvis is sighted, replicated, and imitated all the time, but in radically different contexts. If anything, his death was really the beginning of a wild proliferation and circulation of Elvisness beyond the domain of popular music. In that process, though, the form and meaning of Elvisness changed (and continues to change) dramatically, adapting to and eliciting new kinds of interpretive communities that are interested in having conversations about it, even organizing their entire lives around it. And none of this seems to detract much from the ardour of the original Elvis fans, even if the number of people still waiting in the arena continues to dwindle ... and even if the arena itself is in precarious shape.

It's not that the poetic can't still be found in poetry; the vast and varied world of small literary presses, poetry blogs, magazines, zines, readings, and literary festivals attests that poetry qua poetry is still chugging along just fine. It's just that the official channels of poetry are not the first place that most people encounter poetic effects these days ... and probably haven't been, for some time now. Reciprocally, what readers are encountering in the books published by poetry presses like Les Fiches, Roof, BookThug, Coach House, The Figures, Housepress, Make Now, Truck, and so on is, increasingly, language that was previously considered to be unpoetic. Regardless of this reversal, though, the domains of poetic and public discourse remain largely separate from each other.

In blunt, numeric terms, most of what we read and write isn't poetry. Of all of the books sold in Canada in 2010, only 0.12 per cent of total market sales were poetry titles.¹ Nevertheless, the metaphors that poets and their critics have used over the last hundred years to discuss poetry's relationship to media privilege the primacy of poetic discourse, suggesting that ideas flow out from poetry to

culture at large. However, poetic language has always already been outside the poem. The inherently paragrammatic nature of language guarantees that it's always been possible to find poetic effects outside of poetry, and though it's impossible to fully document this phenomenon, there are a wealth of examples. Much of the avant-garde writing and art of the last century occupied itself by specializing in harvesting examples of paragrammatic poetic language from "outside" the normal channels of poetic production and redeploying it as art.

Two things changed over the first decade of the new millennium in terms of how poetic language circulates. First, when contemporary experimental writers appropriate large chunks of text for their own use, they don't necessarily do so because of the location in that text of qualities normally associated with poetry (rhyme, meter, unusual imagery, elegant prosody, etc.). Instead, they do so in order to focus attention on the qualities of the genres that we use to convey that peculiar invention of modernity called "information." This is significant because in order for such genres to convey information, we normally pretend that they have been flensed of all rhetoricity. The result is what Kenneth Goldsmith has called, at various points, boring, uncreative,² or conceptual writing:³ a tendency that makes claims to its importance in the world of poetic discourse precisely through its use of previously nonpoetic language. The second is that this tendency to draw attention to the properties of information genres has also been occurring simultaneously outside of the channels in which poetry circulates, at a speed too rapid to argue that such practices are the result of a dissemination from Conceptual writing and its ilk. Poetry isn't currently a driver of culture but a symptom. What interests me is not so much how to read Conceptual writing – plenty of critics have already figured that out – but how to read the things that are occurring simultaneously with it, and bear a strong family resemblance to it. The question of what to write after the formalization of Conceptual writing also raises its head.

In his essay on the memo and modernity, John Guillory provides a startling reminder that although the modern epistemic order locates literature at one end of its axis and scholarship and science at the other, the great bulk of writing over the last century and a half has been neither literary nor scientific.⁴ Instead, the dark matter of modern textuality is *informational* writing: memos, business letters, status updates, forms, executive summaries, lists, Web pages, reports, RSS feeds, classified ads, indices, catalogues, howto manuals, and countless other hybrid "information genres" that we habitually ignore. Informational writing, especially in its megageneric form, the document, often eludes scrutiny because of its odd combination of ephemerality and permanence: it might be read once or never, but it must always be filed away somewhere, and, at least in theory, accessible.⁵ As both a cause and effect of modernity's invention of the

category of information itself, informational writing aspires to be a mere conduit, to flense itself of all rhetorical flourishes; the more interesting the individual document, the less representative it is of its own genre.⁶ As scholars, we are confronted with the exciting project of describing all of these suddenly visible hybrid genres, especially in terms of their roles and functions in constituting the modern, the postmodern, and the emerging world of the amodern. As writers, though, we are confronted with some genuine questions about how to proceed.

Of course, there is no zero degree of rhetoricity. As Umberto Eco joked many years ago, the best definition of the sign is that it is anything that can be used to tell a lie,⁷ and art has always been a form of lying. I'd argue, in fact, that the long history of the twentieth-century avant gardes consists, for the most part, of artists and writers reasserting the rhetorical value of information genres by appropriating and recontextualizing significant chunks of them. But rather than thinking once again about appropriation as a practice within writing and art, I'd like to consider the implications of the proliferation today of poeticized information outside of the manifold forms and institutions of verse culture.

For most of the last decade, I've been noticing an increasing number of examples of what I initially thought of as "uncreative writing in the wild" or "conceptualism in the wild." The problem I now have with this term is that it prioritizes the "-ism," implying a flow outward from poetry into culture at large. This notion of influence and transmission has been one of the command metaphors behind the discourse of poetry and technology for about a century. In 1922, Ezra Pound declaimed that "artists are the antennae of the race."⁸ Marshall McLuhan picked up on this metaphor, updating and expanding it many times. This passage is from the introduction to the second edition of *Understanding Media*:

Art as radar acts as an "early alarm system," as it were, enabling us to discover social and psychic targets in lots of time to prepare to cope with them. This concept of the arts as prophetic, contrast with the popular idea of them as mere self-expression. If an art is an "early warning system," to use the phrase from World War II, when radar was new, art has the utmost relevance not only to media study but to the development of media controls.⁹

Christopher Dewdney's "Parasite Maintenance" updates the technology in McLuhan's metaphor for the late twentieth century (with a touch of Jack Spicer thrown in for good measure), imagining the poet as a satellite dish: "The radio telescope becomes a model of the *bi-conscious* interface between 'the mind' and signals from the 'outside' which the poet receives."¹⁰ What these models have in common is that they imagine communication in terms of a more-or-less

linear transmission. As James Carey famously pointed out, the transmission model of communication is always wrapped up in “complementary models of power and anxiety.”¹¹ Looking again at Pound’s fascist wartime broadcasts, McLuhan’s cold war conservatism, and Dewdney’s lysergic paranoia, it’s probably time to find another way to describe the relationship between poetry and the rest of contemporary culture. Teleological accounts of the “influence” of media and literature (and in this case, of their overlap) almost inevitably overlook the messy, contingent ways in which media, formats, and genres overlap each other. Rather than origins or influences, it might be more productive to consider, as Foucault suggests, institutionalizations, transformations, affiliations, and relationships.¹² As a corrective then, a better metaphor might be the poet as dosimeter – an index of ongoing exposure to something ambient that’s already in the environment. Something, for that matter, that might actually have killed you before you even knew it was there.

More recently, I’ve started to refer to the objects appearing in culture at large that conceptual writing resembles as “findables.” Here are a few:

The Diary of Samuel Pepys.¹³ Since 1 January 2003, designer and programmer Phil Gyford has been publishing and annotating entries from the seventeenth-century diary of Samuel Pepys on a daily basis. Gyford was one of the first to recognize the cultural significance of the blog as a form, and began this practice long before tools like Wordpress and Blogger were commonly available, and at a time when the content of the Web still skewed heavily toward nerd topics (*Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, Linux, etc.).

Harry Potter and the Well of Scammers.¹⁴ 419 eater is a website dedicated to making miserable the lives of perpetrators of Advance Fee Fraud (aka “419 fraud” because of the section of the Nigerian penal code concerning the fraud schemes that originate within its borders). In 2006, “Arthur Dent” [pseud.] received a typical 419 letter from someone identifying themselves as “Joyce Ozioma,” offering him \$27 million USD to invest. Dent in turn offered the scammer the opportunity to earn \$100 per page of handwritten text for inclusion in “a very important 4 year long research project on Advanced Handwriting Recognition and Graphology systems.” In short order, he convinced them to write out longhand, scan, and email him all 293 pages of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* – now visible on the website.

The Leila Texts.¹⁵ There are three ways to send an SMS on the Verizon network: entering a phone number manually, picking a contact from your phonebook, or typing in a name. If you type L-E-I-L-A, you send a message to novelist Leila

Sales. Since 2007, she's been saving and blogging the messages that have been sent to her (on average, five times a day) that should have gone to other Leilas. What's of interest to her, as the site's subtitle ("Small glimpses into strangers' lives, courtesy of a technological glitch") suggests, is not just the content, but the circumstances of its production and appearance.

Horse_ebooks.¹⁶ @Horse_ebooks is a Twitter account associated with horse-ebooks.com, which is itself part of e-library.net, a clearinghouse for quickie ebook titles. Beginning in early 2011, the Twitter feed began to publish excerpts from horse books, mixed with other fragments of text. The combination is oddly compelling, in part because it's difficult to determine if the tweets are automated or the selections of a human intelligence. The Horse_ebooks Twitter feed caught the imagination of the Internet public late in 2011, and remains a media darling as of this writing.

Richard Dreyfuss reading the Apple iTunes End User License Agreement.¹⁷ In 2011, CNET Reporters' Roundtable asked actor Richard Dreyfuss to do a reading of the iTunes EULA as part of an inquiry into why the prose of such licenses is so convoluted. This differs from earlier performances, such as Christopher Walken's dramatic reading of Lady Gaga's "Poker Face," because what's foregrounded in Dreyfuss's case is not poetic language, however banal without the accompanying music and performance, but the complex legal language of clickwrap agreements.

Casting the term findable as an adverb rather than a noun (the "found poem") is deliberate, because the findable is about *potential* rather than accomplishment. What that potential represents is a context for discussing the kind of amusing crap that surfaces in our inboxes all the time – altered and unaltered images, funny infographics, viral videos, even spam – in terms of the conditions of its circulability, iterability, and form. The "findable" is a genre, an empty container, a potential context serving many of the social purposes we used to attribute to poetry.

In order to understand why the notion of the findable might be useful, it's necessary to think about the found poem first. It has always been possible to "find" poetic effects in another text because of the inherently *paragrammatic* qualities of language. The most succinct definition of the paragram remains Julia Kristeva's famous note from *Revolution in Poetic Language*: "A text is paragrammatic, writes Leon S. Roudiez, 'in the sense that its organization of words (and their denotations), grammar, and syntax is challenged by the infinite possibilities provided by letters or phonemes combining to form networks of significations

not accessible through conventional reading habits.”¹⁸ This effect has always existed outside of poetry, and has usually been considered as an amusement at best and an annoyance at worst. In one of his “Mathematical Games” columns in *Scientific American*, Martin Gardner relates the story of Adam Sedgwick, a Cambridge geologist, discovering a “buried poem” on page 44 of the first edition (1911) of William Whewell’s *Elementary Treatise on Mechanics*, and reciting it as an after-dinner speech:

There is no force, however great,
Can stretch a cord, however fine,
Into a horizontal line,
Which is accurately straight.

Whewell, himself the author of two books of verse, was not impressed, and changed the text in the book’s second edition to eliminate the rhyme.¹⁹

Steve McCaffery expands on the notion of the paragram throughout his critical writing, arguing that while findables and other sorts of paragrammatic phenomena can be intentionally embedded in a larger text, they are just as often fortuitous occurrences that arise inevitably and unavoidably because of the combinatorial nature of writing.²⁰ McCaffery also specifies why a complete history of findables is technically impossible: “If form is, as Dennis Hollier proposes, ‘the temptation of discourse to arrest itself, to fix on itself, to finish itself off by producing and appropriating its own end’ ..., then the paragram stands as form’s heterological object, structured upon nonlogical difference and, as such, impossible to be claimed as an object of knowledge.”²¹ Looking for findables, then, is a tactical negativity that affords a number of possible outcomes. McCaffery lists three: a sophisticated form of artistic production (as in the Surrealist *objet trouvé*); an opportunity for found texts to become something like a critical or theoretical practice (as in readymades, situationist *détournement*, or the work of Bern Porter, found poet par excellence); or a reaffirmation of negativity that equates all meaning with the experience of loss of signification (as in a general economy, or the work of Vanessa Place).²² The first two outcomes are the now-familiar tactics of the historical avant gardes; the third is that of Conceptual writing at its most uncompromising.

But I think that there is also a fourth possibility implicit in McCaffery’s schema that describes the current cultural moment: a system of commercial production that is more than capable of churning out an endless stream of commodifiable objects saturated with effects that were once the privileged provenance of poetry. To the extent that poetry – however traditional or however conceptual – functions in such an environment, it is as a kind of inoculation:

poetry on the subway, National Poetry Month, etc. as something “good for us” that we encounter so that we can be excused from actually buying books of poetry or attending poetry readings. From the perspective of people ignoring that 0.12 per cent of poetry books purchased out of the total number of books published in Canada per year, there is no effective difference between the poetry world’s various squabbling factions. This is because the differences between poetic and nonpoetic language are not material or inherent; the paragrammatic function of language means that any text will always hold poetic potential, however one defines poetry. The differences between what is poetic and what isn’t at any time and place have to do with questions of *circulation*.

The category of the findable is helpful because what it describes are the conditions of a certain pattern of circulation. Findables aren’t conceived of as poems; they aren’t produced by people who identify as poets; they circulate promiscuously, sometimes under anonymous conditions; and they aren’t encountered by interpretive communities that identify them as literary. Unlike their modernist literary cousin the “found poem,” findables don’t recover anything *for* poetry.

In this respect, they’re also very different than the “Sought Poems” that K. Silem Mohammad describes. He outlines Flarf’s database-driven method of poetic production, which consists of entering multiple keywords into Google and then “whittling and shuffling” the results.²³ Mohammad’s term for the output of this method is the “sought poem,” an apt term for “a process of aggressively *looking* for something, with the intent of *enlisting* it in some capacity.”²⁴ This “enlisting” signals clearly that Flarf is still a literary activity. Flarf enlists superabundant content and then squeezes it into recognizable literary forms: poems that are lineated, arranged in stanzas, and so on. “Maybe,” Mohammad writes, “sought poetry is a metrics after all”: a rigorous control of form that enables “accidents of theme.”²⁵

And what of Conceptual writing? All of the findables I’ve just mentioned have analogues in contemporary Conceptualism. Long-form blogging of texts like the Pepys diary project became a common trope in Conceptual writing circles about three years ago; see, for example, Simon Morris and Nick Thurston’s 2009 piece *Getting Inside Jack Kerouac’s Head*,²⁶ in which they first blogged, then republished, all of *On the Road*, or Vanessa Place’s Twitter feed of fragments from *Gone with the Wind*.²⁷ Both the tricksterism and the holography of Arthur Dent’s 419-baiting find an analogue in the practice of Kenneth Goldsmith, who has at various times positioned himself as both scammer and scammed. In an early article, “May We Graft Chicken Wings to Your Head in the Interest of Aviation,”²⁸ he has written about the history of media pranking, and is currently working on a series of holograph manuscripts of historically significant

manifestos, such as *The Communist Manifesto* and the *S.C.U.M. Manifesto*. Like the Leila texts, Goldsmith has a series of letters that he has received since 1994 from people assuming – because of his role as WFMU DJ “Kenny G” – that he is the smooth-jazz musician Kenny G (b. Kenneth Gorelick).²⁹ The Horse_ebooks Twitter feed is a sort of superior hybrid of Flarf and my two automated web projects with Bill Kennedy, *The Apostrophe Engine*³⁰ and *Status Update*,³¹ used to generate our books *apostrophe*³² and *Update*.³³ In conversation, Kenneth Goldsmith has said for years that his conceptual writing isn’t poetry, and that he’s happy he’s not a poet; conversely, other Conceptualists, like Rob Fitterman and Kim Rosenfield, are quite explicit that what they write is Conceptual poetry.

Such boundaries and distinctions are constantly moving, and serve a variety of purposes. However, Conceptual writing and Conceptual poetry alike circulate within the channels of poetic production, publication, and reception. In his blog post on an earlier draft of this essay, Christian Bök wrote, “The ‘wildness’ of poetry arises, perhaps, from such a willingness to court catastrophe through a kind of linguistic experiment, conducted on behalf of art itself, within a community of peers.”³⁴ Fair enough, if you want to be a poet and produce things on behalf of art. But if Conceptual writing regularly produces what Susan Leigh Star and James Griesemer refer to as “boundary objects” because they “both inhabit several intersecting social worlds ... and satisfy the informational requirements of each of them,”³⁵ why limit the discussion to the world of poetry alone?

Despite what Vanessa Place boldly claims in “Poetry Is Dead, I Killed It,”³⁶ Conceptual writing didn’t kill poetry any more than postmodernism killed the author. It displaced what counts in the economy of small-press literature, perhaps, in the same way that postmodernism changed the function of the author. But for all its displacements in terms of what counts as a culturally significant text, Conceptual writing leaves its own authors largely intact, and oddly romantically inclined about their own effect on posterity.

As I write this, my friends are all very busy writing manifestos in response to Johanna Drucker’s “Beyond Conceptualisms: Poetics after Critique and the End of the Individual Voice.” The contentious line, for many of them, is “Conceptualism is probably over now, even in its newest iterations.”³⁷ I believe that Drucker’s thesis is essentially correct, and read “over” as shorthand for that series of institutionalizations, transformations, affiliations, and legitimations that Foucault invokes. Conceptual writing has been formalized and interpellated as one stylistic choice among the many that are available to aspiring young poets. To date, despite Bök’s invocation of the outside, Conceptual writing has had nothing interesting or useful to say about the findables that very likely preceded it and have definitely kept pace with it every step of the way.

There's no point in claiming findables for poetry; that trick is now at least a hundred years old. Whether or not Conceptual writing gets a second kick at the can will depend on how it comes to grips with its own uncanny double on the outside of the poetic economy. Until then, it's still back in the building with all the other Elvis fans, oblivious to the limousine driving into the sunset.

Notes

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- 4 John Guillory, "The Memo and Modernity," *Critical Inquiry* 31 (2004): 111.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 113.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 114.
- 7 Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, *Advances in Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 7.
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- 19 Martin Gardner, "Mathematical Games: Puns, Palindromes and Other Word Games That Partake of the Mathematical Spirit," *Scientific American* 211.3 (1964): 220.
- 20 Steve McCaffery, *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973–1986*, 1st ed. (New York, Toronto: Roof Books / Nightwood Editions, 1986), 208–9.

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Documents from “True Mirror”

*

TRUE MIRROR

*

The first poem was the title poem. 1
This time Corinne read it aloud, but she still didn't hear it.
She read it through a third time and heard some of it.
She read it through a fourth time, and heard all of it.
It was a poem containing the lines:

Not wasteland, but a great inverted forest
with all foliage underground

As though it might be best to look immediately for shelter,
Corinne had to put the book down.
At any moment the apartment building seemed liable to lose 10
Its balance and topple across Fifth Avenue into Central Park.

She waited.
Gradually the deluge of truth and beauty abated.

Then New Years Eve of 2007 came:
We celebrated it with friends at a party
Where everybody was asked to wear
Exactly what they wore exactly one year before.

But all at once it dawned on me that this
Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;
Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream 20
But topsy-turvical coincidence,
Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.
Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find
Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind
Of correlated pattern in the game,
Plexed artistry, and something of the same
Pleasure in it as they who played it found.

They were made with an idea of seeing
Two realms at once. "Two games, yours and
The verso, an additional waiting to be played 30
In another time, another space."
A mirrored world, an unheralded parallel present.

--

Which had succeeded the Highland Park factory
As Ford's industrial headquarters,
Painted by a Communist
For the son of a Capitalist
The north and south walls are devoted
To nearly life-size scenes in which 40
The plant's grey gears, belts, racks and workbenches
Surge and swarm like some vast intestinal apparatus.
The workers within might be subsidiary organs
Or might be lunch
As the whole churns to excrete a stream of black Fords.

Five Tyres abandoned and Five Tyres remoulded.
Proof of the fact that a mechanical device can
Reproduce personality
And that Quality is merely
The distribution aspect of Quantity. 50

Journalists have conquered the book form;
Writing is now the tiny affair of the individual;
The customers have changed: television's aren't viewers,
but advertisers; publishing's not potential readers,
but distributors.

The result is rapid turnover,
the regime of the best seller
But there will always be
A parallel circuit, a black market.

Being new is, in fact, often understood as 60
A combination of being different
And being recently-produced.
We call a car a new car if this car is different from other cars,
and at the same time the latest, most recent model.

But to be new is by no means the same as being different.
The new is a difference without difference,
Or a difference beyond difference,
A difference which we are unable to recognise.

For Kierkegaard, therefore,
The only medium for a possible emergence of the new 70
Is the ordinary, the "non-different", the identical --
Not the other, but the same.

--

Around the same time,
He mailed fifty postcards to friends and acquaintances
Showing two Boettis hand in hand, like twin brothers,
Defining and simultaneously nullifying a fictitious symbol,
An opposition that is not negated but transformed.

The 'e' -- the 'and' -- which Boetti placed
Between his Christian name and his given,
Indicated the multiplicity within the self, 80
Was a symbol of the distinction and difference
Between his two personas,
As well as their reciprocity, conjunction and interdependence,
Marking a plus-one as well as a division:
A paradox at his very heart.

It is a matter of outwardly reflecting contact-lenses,
Which blind the one who wears them.
The contact-zone is not a filter:
The reflection is print, the senses are linked up.
To upset my own eyes 90
From the reviews:

What worries many critics most is the fact
That art seems to be alive and well,
Not so much because of them
But in spite of them.

And what do you do?
You just SIT there.

This kind of problem might have been posed by anyone since
Piero della Francesco
And its solution can be precisely foreseen. 100
Anticipated by Joyce's repeated, sardonic reference to
Dublin as 'Doublin'
A city marinated in narrative, and inescapably bound up with
Narrative's capability for reflection and duplicity.

It's not just a palindrome in a literal sense,
But also a physical one.
You can actually put a mirror in the middle of it
And it still reads the same.

--

Every mathematician agrees that
Every mathematician must know some
Set theory. 110
We have proved, in other words, that
 Nothing contains everything.
Or more spectacularly,
 There is no universe

The World As It Is And The World As It Could Be
The World As It Is And The World As It Could Be

Tattarrattat!
A Sun on USA!

Weightless and without energy, 120
Shadows still convey information
But the shadow's location cannot be detected until the light,
Moving at its ponderous relativistic pace, arrives.

It's quite easy to conjure
A faster-than-light shadow
(Or in theory, at least):
Build a great klieg light,
A superstrong version
Of the ones at the Academy Awards.
Now paste a piece of black paper 130
Onto the klieg's glass
So there's a shadow in the middle of the beam.
Like the signal that summons Batman
We will mount our light in space and
Broadcast the Bat-call to the cosmos.

And from the inside, too, I'd duplicate
Myself, my lamp, an apple on a plate:
Uncurtaining the night, I'd let dark glass
Hang all the furniture above the grass, 140
And how delightful when a fall of snow
Covered my glimpse of lawn and reached up so
As to make chair and bed exactly stand
Upon that snow, out in that crystal land!

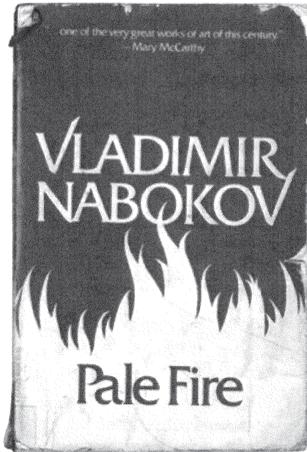
SOURCES

LINES 1–13 : J.D. Salinger, "The Inverted Forest", *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, 1947

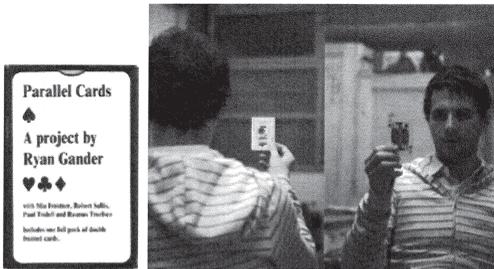
МНІЛНІА

LINES 14–17 : Email from Raimundas Malauskas, Friday June 15, 2007

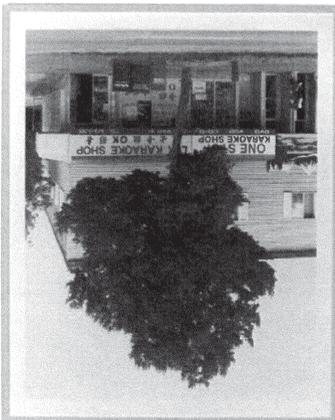
LINES 18–27 : Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 1962



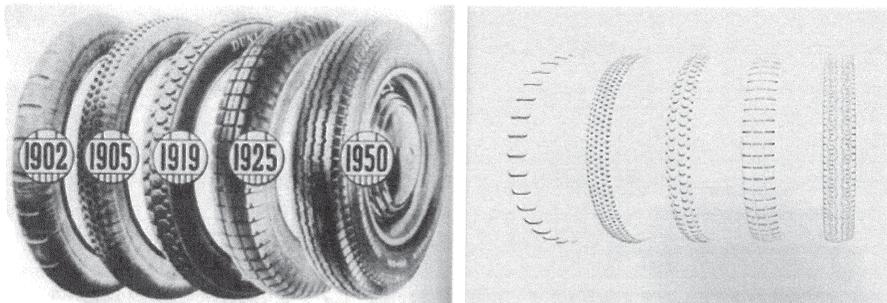
LINES 28–32 : Ryan Gander, *Parallel Cards*, 2006



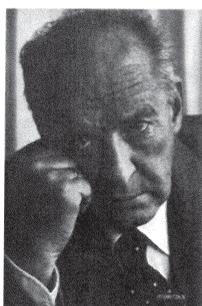
LINES 33–45 : Rebecca Solnit, "Detroit Arcadia", *Harper's Magazine*, June 2007



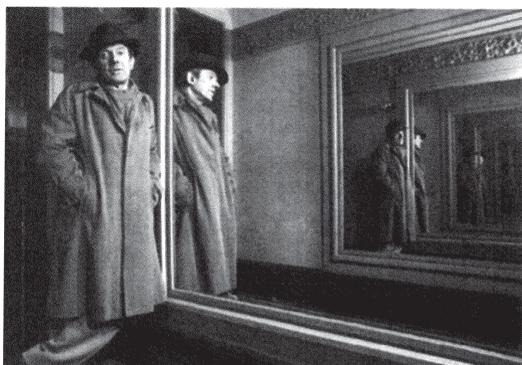
LINE 46 : Richard Hamilton, *Five Tyres abandoned*, 1964, *Five Tyres remoulded*, 1971



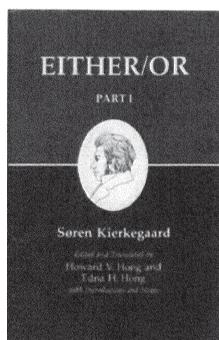
LINES 47–50 : Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, 1947



LINES 51–59 : Gilles Deleuze, "L'abécédaire", 1988

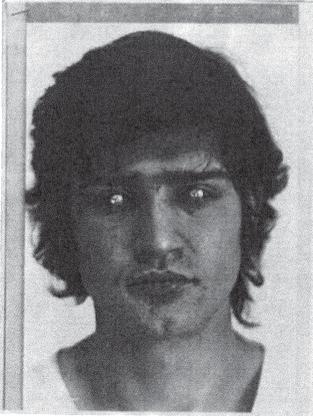


LINES 60–72 : Boris Groys paraphrasing Søren Kierkegaard, *On The New*, 2002



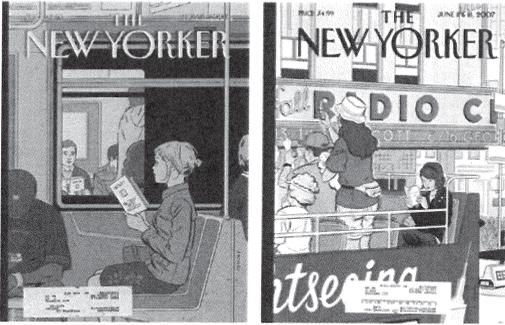
LINES 73–85 : Bettina Funcke, "Urgency", Continuous Project #8, 2007

LINES 86–90 : Giuseppe Penone, "To Upset My Own Eyes", Exhibition catalog for Trees Eyes Hairs Walls Vases, 1970



LINE 91 : Paul R. Halmos, Naive Set Theory, 1960

LINES 92–95 : Alex Klein, "Critical Responses to the 2002 Whitney Biennial", The Blow Up, 2002



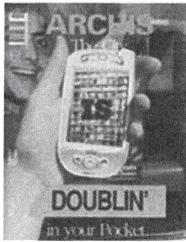
LINES 96–97 : Michael Bracewell, "A Prose Kinema, Some notes for Pale Carnage", Arnolfini, Bristol, 2007



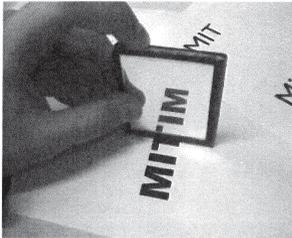
LINES 98–100 : Richard Hamilton, Collected Words, 1982



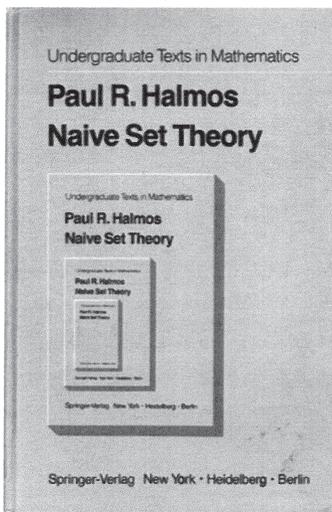
LINES 101–104 : William J. Mitchell, 'Electronic Dublin', Archis 2, 2002



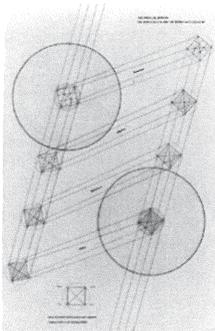
LINES 105–108 : Ryan Gander, 'Little Bastard', Dot Dot Dot 12, 2006



LINES 109–115 : Paul R. Halmos, Naive Set Theory, 1960



LINES 116–117 : Stephan Willats, The World As It Is And The World As It Could Be, 2006



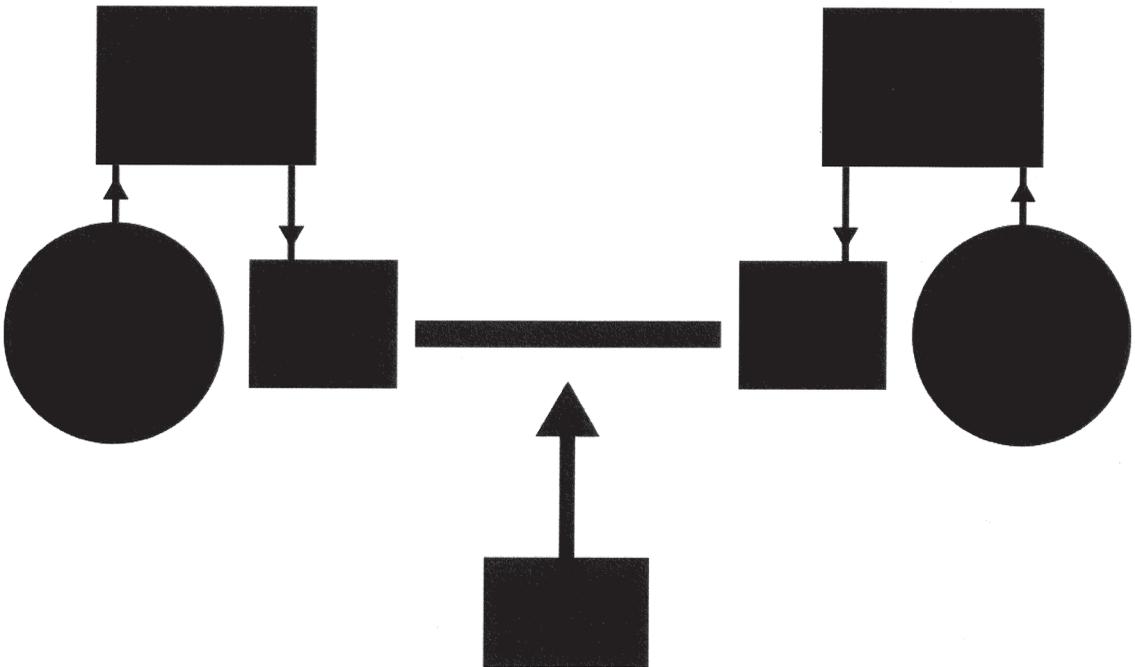
Starting from the 2008 Whitney Biennial press preview, Dexter Sinister plan to set up a temporary information office at the 7th Regiment Armory building. Over the following 3 weeks while the Armory operates as a shadow site for the exhibition, DS will issue a series of press releases through multiple distribution channels -- variously commissioning, designing, editing and releasing texts parallel to the regular biennial PR.

The press release is a form whose distribution aspect is already inscribed. Typically compressed into a series of literal sound-bites on a single sheet of paper, they are designed to be easily re-purposed -- copied, pasted, combined and inserted back into other media streams. By adopting this form, existing information pathways could provide a fluid channel for dispersing alternate and multiple points-of-view, both found and newly-commissioned. Where most press texts are written with an obvious vested interest -- just as any published text comes framed by the context of its publisher (whether it likes it or not) -- these releases will exist without an editorial umbrella, or at least one obtuse enough to resist contamination. Further, the specific nature of each contribution will precisely determine the form of its distribution channel. In other words, *The message, plus its resultant form, multiplied by the channel of distribution, divided by the context of its reception, equals the substance of its communication.* The forms could be equally commonplace (a group email or fax) or sophisticated (a private phone call or reactive concerto for muted trumpet.) Allowing the process of channeling to unfold over 3 weeks, the intention is to slow down the typically immediate consumption of the biennial project.

In addition, four small Armory projects are proposed in advance of the 3 week residence, to act as signals towards a reading of the activities to come. These are equally considered as "releases," but already in place for the press preview. The signals are: 1. PUBLIC PHONES -- the 3 ground floor public phones rewired to carry live or pre-recorded texts, serving as one very local distribution channel; 2. TRUE MIRRORS -- custom-built True Mirrors installed in all publicly-accessible Armory restrooms; 3. KLEEG LIGHT -- a spotlight based on the description by Margaret Wertheim in her *New York Times* Op-Ed piece, June 20, 2007: *It's quite easy to conjure up a faster-than-light shadow, at least in theory. Build a great klieg light, a . . . version of the ones set up at the Academy Awards. Now paste a piece of black paper onto the klieg's glass so there is a shadow in the middle of the beam, like the signal used to summon Batman . . . The key to our trick is to rotate the klieg . . . At a great enough distance from the source, our shadow . . . will go so fast it will exceed the speed of light.* This pure signal can function as both sign and release -- a marker of the Armory's location and its shadow relation to the Whitney Museum ten blocks away; and 4. PRIVATE ROOM (Commander's room/Colonel's dressing room) -- working from this hidden room for the duration, the visible Commander's room door will remain locked, and the office accessible only by pressing the panel and releasing the door. DS are listed as occupying this space, but there should be no announcement of this as "hidden" or "secret." The public may access the room by the panel, though again, the existence of this button should not be announced; the fact that the operation is out of sight is of little consequence, or at least without any explicit claim to performance.

It is critical to this proposal that the resources required to operate autonomously and efficiently are provided up-front. (Timing is everything with press releases, professionals assure us.) First, a budget for the upfront projects needs to be secured, as well as obvious contact resources including the biennial email, postal mail and broadcast-fax lists. Then, a separate operating budget should be arranged for the 3-week period that would cover writers' (or, equally, performers') fees, reproduction and distribution costs. On the conclusion of this 3 weeks, a close reader, collecting the accumulated press releases, may form a composite, alternate reading of the biennial. And perhaps more effectively, the echoes of these releases could continue to resonate through other media channels as the releases are re-released, circulated and distorted long after the show closes. The result may be a time-delayed shadow, or even refracted image, of the event rendered indistinct by its own circulation. And remember:

*Quality is merely the distribution aspect of quantity.
Quantity is merely the distribution aspect of quality.*



Whitney

Doublin, 7 January 2008

Dear cooperator,

I have taken the typewriter down from the stack of boxes in the backroom in order to guarantee a certain slowness and precision here. I'm after the formality that is so easily obliterated by more recent and ubiquitous technologies, and in this spirit I write to you -- one of a small community of convalescents -- in the hope of convincing you to participate in this not because you can or can't but because you care and will.*

From the 7th Regiment Armory building on Park Avenue in New York City -- a parallel site to the 2008 Whitney Biennial exhibition -- I aim to coordinate a series of PRESS RELEASES written by different people and issued through different distribution channels. My hope is that this will slow down, complicate, or at least draw out the reception of the exhibition. Given both the location and status -- at a vortex of critical mass -- the Whitney Biennial is immediately cannibalized by the media who surround it: reviews are typically written on the first day before the general public is invited, and each critic duty-bound to weigh in with their direct interpretations of the show. The result is that for most the exhibition is REviewed before it has even been viewed. As such, my interest is in the possibility of arranging another reading through these parallel press releases ... released neither under the umbrella of the Whitney Museum nor that of any known publication. What happens when information is released from within the show but not sanctioned by The Show? (It functions as a shadow.) (It functions as a mirror.)

Proof of the fact that a mechanical device can
Reproduce personality
And that Quality is merely
The distribution aspect of Quantity.
Journalists have conquered the book form;
Writing is now the tiny affair of the individual;
The customers have changed: television's aren't viewers,
but advertisers; publishing's not potential readers,
but ~~distributors~~.
The result is rapid turnover,
The regime of the bestseller
But there will always be
A parallel circuit, a black market.

And so this letter is addressed to no one in particular, but specific to each of you for reasons I trust you understand. I suppose I am merely asking you to write as a (Wo)Man of the Crowd, a community that can still act, not because it is entitled to do so by the institutions of power, but by virtue of an unconditional exuberant politics of dedication (I quote.)

If you accept all this -- and the invitation -- you will contribute a reflective text to double as a press release. This could be a new text, an existing text, or not even a text at all. Furthermore, it might be produced remotely, or on-site with me at the Armory in the Commander's Room, a locked office accessed by a secret panel release from the Colonel's Ballroom. Your press will then be released during the three weeks following the opening of the exhibition, with the channel of distribution -- fax, word-of-mouth, trumpet, parachute etc. -- directly determined by the contents of its message. Normal press releases are, of course, typically compressed into a series of literal sound bites on a single sheet of paper and designed to be easily re-purposed -- copied, pasted, combined and inserted back into other media streams. This model might as well be our point of departure too.

I hope that my formula of 'disinterestedness plus admiration' will seduce you (I I I I I I I I quote) and that the various non-textual qualities of this missive fill in some of the gaps in explanation. If so, we ought to continue this discussion by email or telephone (see below). Please try to get in touch within the next week.

For now,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dexter Sinister". The signature is written in a cursive, somewhat stylized script.

Dexter Sinister
38 Ludlow Street (basement south), New York, NY 10002, USA
Tel: +1 213 235 6296 / Email: info@dextersinister.org

* And what do you do? You just SIT there. (I quote)

From Materiality to Dematerialization and Back: Conceptual Writing in a Digital Age

What possibilities for the further evolution of the magazine format lay ahead in the challenges of new technologies now opening to the artist? More films, slides, film-strips, tape recordings as well as records and tape-loops, inflatable models and sculpture-structures may comprise a complete multi-media package with magazine “box” covers ... In our foreseeable future, the perfection of three-dimensional color videotape may well, in the words of Nam June Paik, make *Life* magazine as obsolete as *Life* made *Collier's*.

Jud Yalkut, review of Magazine,¹

In his 1968 review of *Aspen* magazine, the artist Jud Yalkut speculated about the exciting potential of new media technologies – and the precarious fate of old. Indeed, *Aspen*, the famous multimedia artists’ publication consisting of unbound pages, flexi-disc records, and super 8 films, presciently looks ahead to our own moment of online distribution. Guest-edited by artists such as Andy Warhol, Brian O’Doherty, and Dan Graham, *Aspen* attests to the important role of artists’ magazines in the documentation and distribution of art in the 1960s, especially Conceptual art and related practices.² “With conceptual art you needed a magazine more than a gallery,” O’Doherty observed of the issue of *Aspen* that he edited, number 5+6.³

Aspen 5+6 was dedicated to Stéphane Mallarmé, and paid tribute to the poet’s unrealized *Le Livre*, which served as a kind of blueprint for how *Aspen’s* unbound format transformed the semantic and social possibilities of print, bringing about a collective, indeterminate form of reading. Contributors to the issue, including Sol LeWitt, Dan Graham, Mel Bochner, Tony Smith, John Cage, William Burroughs, Merce Cunningham, Robert Morris, and Marcel Duchamp, explored the materiality of language as well as the tactility and temporality of printed matter. Roland Barthes’s essay “The Death of the Author” was published in this very same issue, emphasizing how the publication’s literal interactivity

was echoed by the larger political significance of this new distribution form as an egalitarian attempt to liberate art and writing from elitist institutions.

While *Aspen's* lifespan was brief – ending at the hands of the US Postal Service, which revoked its second-class license in 1971 – the entire run of the magazine was digitized and archived online in 2002 by UbuWeb. This important resource allows one to access the publication's multimedia contents instantly with the click of a mouse, without the logistical hassles of having to track down the appropriate playback hardware, never mind locating an original issue of the exceedingly rare magazine itself. Yet if the online version of *Aspen* appears to finally realize the nascent multimedia potential of the publication's original format, it also makes palpable what is lost in this translation into digital information. In contrast to the virtual, integrated experience of the screen, the printed magazine insisted on its tactility and its actual engagement with the senses. As a 1970 advertisement for the magazine claimed, "You don't just read it: you hear it, hang it, feel it, fly it, sniff it, taste it, fold it, wear it, shake it, even project it on your living room wall."⁴ The point of this comparison is not to suggest that the online world is merely some pale, dematerialized version of the real. Obviously, the digital realm has its own distinct materiality. As poet Kenneth Goldsmith, the founder of UbuWeb, writes of the digital environment:

Never before has language had so much *materiality* – fluidity, plasticity, malleability – begging to be actively managed by the writer. Before digital language, words were almost always found imprisoned on a page. How different today when digitized language can be poured into any conceivable container: text typed into a Microsoft Word document can be parsed into a database, visually morphed in Photoshop, animated in Flash, pumped into online text-mangling engines, spammed to thousands of email addresses and imported into a sound editing program and spit out as music; the possibilities are endless.⁵

Furthermore, these abundant formal possibilities of new communication technologies take place alongside new social possibilities for the distribution of information. As twenty-first-century artists and writers explore the materiality of digital language and the politics of online distribution, they have looked back to the investigations of language and its distribution forms by an earlier generation in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet they also acknowledge the ways in which digital and Web-based forms of information sharing have irrevocably altered the production and distribution of words and images. This essay attempts to think through some of these changes and their consequences for how we read, perceive, and communicate, both online and off.

As artists explored magazines and other kinds of publications as alternative forms of distribution in the 1960s and 1970s, they foregrounded the distinct materiality of printed matter, and, by extension, its own contingency as a medium: the way it shaped the meaning of language and images. For example, Dan Graham's *Schema* (March 1966) (1966–7), published in *Aspen* 5+6, was a site-specific investigation of the magazine page. *Schema* consisted of an algorithmic template: a generic list of variables – such as “(number of) adjectives,” “(type of) paper stock,” “(name of) typeface” – that self-referentially indexed its own appearance on the page, setting off a circular chain reaction in which the poem's form altered its content, which altered its form, and so on. The work, Graham stipulated, could be published in any magazine and was to be completed by the editor according to the design and layout of the particular publication in which it appeared. Originally typeset for *Arts Magazine*, it was pulled by the editor at the last minute. After its initial publication in *Aspen*, it appeared in numerous subsequent periodicals, including *Art-Language*, *Extensions*, *Interfunktionen*, *Studio International*, and *Flash Art*.

Each time it was published, the piece was modified, registering the graphic design and typography of the specific magazine in which it appeared – adopting the stark modern style of san serif, for example, or the bureaucratic, old-fashioned look of Courier. To come across *Schema* is to be momentarily distracted from the meaning of words by the shapes of letters and numbers, and even by the density of the material on which they are printed. The work also draws attention to the distinct temporality and transience of the magazine – the fact that periodicals are linked to a specific window of time, after which they are relegated to the status of back issues. This limited duration was key to *Schema*'s critical function. As Graham wrote about the work, it “subverts value. Beyond its appearance in print or present currency, *Schema* is disposable, with no dependence on material (commodity), it subverts the gallery (economic system).”⁶

Schema functioned as a site-specific investigation of the magazine, demonstrating that the meaning of language was dependent upon the material conditions of the printed page, as well as on the editor's interpretation of these conditions. Just as minimalism and site-specific sculpture in the 1960s foregrounded the physical location of the work of art, insisting that the museum or gallery was not a neutral backdrop but a determinant factor in the work's reception, so *Schema* insisted that the magazine page was not merely a generic container for content. And, just as the practice of site-specific art led from a consideration of the physical circumstances of the gallery space to the exploration of its social and political conditions – a practice that would become known as institutional critique – Graham's investigation of the material facts

of the magazine page opened onto the ideological and institutional conditions of the art magazine and art criticism within the art world. Indeed, as Graham observed, "If a work of art wasn't written about and reproduced in a magazine it would have difficulty attaining the status of 'art.' It seemed that in order to be defined as having value – that is, as 'art' – a work had only to be exhibited in a gallery and then to be written about and reproduced as a photograph in an art magazine. Then this record became the basis for its fame, and to a large extent, its economic value."⁷

While ostensibly about printed language, Graham's *Schema* (along with much Conceptual art and writing during this period) was also informed by ideas about cybernetics and systems theory as theorized in the writings and exhibitions of Jack Burnham, for whom technology was more than just a new medium, but provided important new models for understanding art as a site of communication. Graham in fact proposed that *Schema's* algorithmic form could be understood in relationship to the data-processing capacities of computers, writing, "It would be possible to 'compose' the entire set of permutationally possible poems and to select the applicable variant(s) with the aid of a computer which could 'see' the ensemble instantly."⁸ However, this hypothetical scenario functions as a foil to *Schema's* actual reception, which instead emphasizes the limitations and temporality of human perception and cognition, as is evident in the following account Graham gives of his piece:

If a given variant-poem is attempted to be set up by the editor following the logic, step by step (linearly), it would be found impossible to compose a completed version of the poem as each of the component lines of exact data requiring completion (in terms of the specific numbers and percentages) would be contingently determined by every other number and percentage which itself in turn would be determined by the other numbers or percentages, ad infinitum.⁹

Indeed, *Schema* exemplifies Graham's concept of "in-formation," his hyphenated neologism that emphasized the ongoing, indeterminate process of communication, rather than its end state. In-formation suggests the way in which information is destabilized and altered by the contingencies of context and the perceiving subject – by the fact that we do not see "instantly." As Graham wrote about *Schema*: "It is not art for art's sake; its medium is in-formation and altered as it fits the terms (and time) of its system or (the) context (it may be read in)."¹⁰

Graham's hypothetical proposal that *Schema* could be composed by a computer was realized in 2009 when Caolen Madden and Paul Hughes published "Poem, October 2009 (After Dan Graham)" in the online magazine *Triple Canopy*. Replacing several of Graham's original variables (such as paper stock

and weight) with Internet-specific properties (such as “seconds of execution time” and “number of bytes of memory consumption”), the work allows users to “compose” their own version of the poem by choosing various layout and style parameters from a drop-down menu. As the artists explain in their introduction to the piece:

You’re the poet ... Do you want your poem to look like it was published in *Dragon Magazine*? You can. Do you wish it had been the featured poem on Poetry Daily on October 4, 2009? You can. Do you want to pretend it’s a real poem published in real life on high-quality linen paper? Or that you scribbled it in a fever of inspiration on several cocktail napkins? You can. Do you miss the presence of the lyric voice? Choose a MIDI with a pronoun in it. This isn’t print, so you can make the font as big as you want. That might make the background look bad, but that’s your prerogative. You’re the editor, and this is the Internet.¹¹

While the artists extol the increased interactivity of the piece and suggest how it empowers the reader to become a producer, the actual experience of the work gives the lie to such rhetoric, since we are mainly limited to the options on a drop-down menu. Furthermore, while the poem does reflect certain aspects of its online materiality and temporality, these are based on the arbitrary composition chosen by each individual reader, and bear little relationship to any actual context – physical or virtual. While Graham was attempting to destabilize authorship and privilege context and viewer, the birth of the viewer has here turned into its own kind of tyranny, where the viewer is granted total control. Indeed, the work thoughtfully investigates how online publishing complicates and drastically changes the model of site-specificity embodied by Graham’s original work. There is little that is site-specific about *Schema*’s online incarnation; if anything, it calls attention to the utter decontextualization of information on the Internet.

In his well-known essay *Dispersion*, the artist Seth Price discusses how new digital and online technologies have altered the possibilities for the distribution of art, and hence its social and political potential. Price reflects on the legacy of Conceptual practices from the 1960s and 1970s. He points out that while this dematerialized art sought to circumvent the gallery through ephemeral and supposedly more egalitarian new forms of distribution such as books and magazines, it failed to truly reach new audiences, due to the specialized and often small-circulation nature of these publications. In some ways it rendered itself even more susceptible to co-optation and institutionalization through its reliance on documentation, which, framed by art criticism in art magazines, lassoed these radical gestures back into the art system. “What would it mean,” he asks, “to step outside this carefully structured system?”¹² Price is especially

interested in the ways in which artists today might mine the potential of the culture industry's "distributed media": "Social information circulating in theoretically unlimited quantities in the common market, stored or accessed via portable devices such as books and magazines, records, and compact discs, videotapes and DVDs, personal computers and data diskettes."¹³ He is optimistic about the potential of such media to escape the art world and, like Trojan horses, infiltrate spaces outside of it: "The art system usually corrals errant works, but how could it recoup thousands of freely circulating paperbacks?"¹⁴

Price maintains that distributed media might expand art's public, writing, "We should recognize that collective experience is now based on simultaneous private experiences distributed across the field of media culture, knit together by ongoing display, publicity, promotion, and discussion ... Publicness today has as much to do with sites of production and reproduction as it does with any supposed physical commons."¹⁵ This situation is not as new as the artist implies. From its inception in the eighteenth century, the public sphere has been predicated on its mediation by printed publications, as Jürgen Habermas has discussed at length. While read by individuals in private, such publications, according to Habermas, fostered a participatory sort of communication among a public too large to converse face to face, by allowing readers to see themselves as part of a larger, ongoing conversation: "One and the same discussion transposed into a different medium was continued in order to reenter, via reading, the original conversational medium."¹⁶

However, while printed publications may transcend a single physical location, they also remain deeply tied to actual spaces – a fact reflected in their conditions of circulation and distribution as well as in their own materiality as objects. This tension and interaction between the space of the page and "actual space" was central to the artistic and social significance of artists' magazines in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁷ Publications such as *Avalanche*, *0 To 9*, and *Art-Rite* provided important discursive spaces within which artists could overcome architectural, institutional, and geographical constraints, and yet they also remained deeply embedded in the specific local urban context of lower Manhattan. Artists foregrounded the ways in which the two-dimensional space of the page intersected with and traversed real, three-dimensional space in their investigations of language. For example, Robert Barry and Douglas Huebler emphasized the concrete nature of the magazine as an object and drew attention to the relationship between the two-dimensional surface of the page and the three-dimensional space that surrounds it in their contributions to issue 6 of *0 To 9*. Likewise, in his poem "Act 3, Scene 4," published in issue 5, Vito Acconci explored how the magazine's conditions of circulation and distribution shape the spatiotemporal – and social – possibilities of language.¹⁸

While printed publications provide both a physical and a social context for information, digital media with its rhizomatic networks of infinite reproducibility does the opposite. Online information is malleable and rootless, as it morphs from one platform to the next, endlessly posted, aggregated, tweeted and retweeted: "Everything on the internet is a fragment, provisional, pointing elsewhere," Price observes.¹⁹ Among other things, this alters the very notion of context. If Graham and other conceptual artists and writers of his generation insisted on the site-specificity of the printed page as a material substrate through which language is physically and conceptually framed, digital information is largely contextless, severed from any motivated or necessary relationship to physical format or location. Online information does not have a single context but perpetually multiplying contexts. Indeed, the form of information becomes less about any actual or original set of conditions than a means of triggering associations – a set of arbitrary surface "effects" that can be manipulated at will, as in advertising and packaging.²⁰ Indeed, in his paintings, videos, and music compilations, Price has explored the way in which images and sounds, and even the dated appearance of outmoded technologies of reproduction, evoke historical associations, nostalgia, and desire.

However, the fluidity and ease of distribution online has also opened up new strategies for producing meaning. As Price writes, "With more and more media readily available through this unruly archive, the task becomes one of packaging, producing, reframing and distributing: a mode of production analogous not to the creation of material goods, but to the production of social contexts, using existing materials."²¹ For example, the artist has explored how a single work might exist in various formats and versions at once, thus activating different kinds of publics simultaneously, and bringing heretofore isolated or segregated audiences (specialized and non-specialized, for instance) into relationship with one another. His essay *Dispersion* is itself an example of this approach, existing in a limited edition artists' book, a free, downloadable PDF, and a relief sculpture, *Essay with Knots* (2008), on the gallery wall. Likewise, the publication project *Continuous Project* (published by the collective of the same name, comprised of Price, Bettina Funcke, Wade Guyton, and Joseph Logan) has explored republication and reproduction as means of creating new meanings and social contexts for archival materials. Issues have included photocopied reprints of entire issues of old artists' magazines such as *Avalanche* and *Eau de Cologne*; appropriated material published as pages in extant magazines; live and videotaped readings talks and lectures; and the URL of the project's website.²² By reanimating archival materials in the present, *Continuous Project* explores how the transitory, dispersed nature of information might yield discrete and genuine moments of memory, experience, and history.

The website UbuWeb takes a different approach to restaging historical and archival materials, embracing the “contextlessness” of the Web’s expanded field, to challenge the institutional and legal restrictions that typically govern art’s distribution. Founded by Kenneth Goldsmith in 1996, initially as a repository of concrete poetry, UbuWeb quickly grew to encompass sound poetry, experimental music, video, and more, currently including the work of thousands of artists as well as papers and critical writings. The site’s inclusiveness exceeds taxonomies of medium and genre. According to Goldsmith, “UbuWeb adheres to no one historical narrative, rather we’re more interested in putting several disciplines into the same space and seeing how they interact: poetry, music, film, and literature from all periods encounter and bounce off of each other in unexpected ways.”²³ UbuWeb’s emphasis on obscure, ephemeral, and out-of-print materials presents an alternative to mainstream art history. As Goldsmith writes, “Ubu proposes a different sort of revisionist art history, one based on the peripheries of artistic production rather than on the perceived, or market-based, center.”²⁴ Without the need for overhead or a physical building, UbuWeb is run on virtually no money, relying on volunteer work and donated server space and bandwidth. It posts much of its content without permission, flouting increasingly stringent copyright laws – a practice that has led Goldsmith to call it “the Robin Hood of the avant-garde.”²⁵ Indeed, as he insists, “UbuWeb is as much about the legal and social ramifications of its self-created distribution and archiving system as it is about the content hosted on the site.”²⁶

If UbuWeb seizes upon the web’s freedom from physical and architectural constraints, others have tried to ground the virtual world back in a physical space. Dexter Sinister, the collaborative platform founded by designers David Reinfurt and Stuart Bailey, who define it as “a collection of activities ... but not a collective,” have explored the reciprocity between digital and physically sited information, while questioning this very distinction.²⁷ Their “collection of activities” has included writing, editing, designing, publishing, exhibiting, running an online and physical bookshop, and hosting events such as book launches and film screenings in a fluid, flexible manner, so that “writing becomes design becomes distribution becomes film nights becomes minding the bookstore on a Saturday afternoon.”²⁸ Their magazine *Dot Dot Dot*, published from 2000–10, was a printed publication that nonetheless manifested an editorial sensibility derived from the radical contingency of the digital realm. On the cover of the first issue, it announced itself as “a magazine in flux ready to adjust itself to content.” In both its form and content *Dot Dot Dot* questioned the capacity of the magazine to function as a set, stable context for the practices of writing and reading, insisting on the indeterminacy of the publication as a site for public meaning. Indeed, as Saul Anton has observed, for Dexter

Sinister, “type ... cannot be reduced to the status of a specific medium that can serve to turn that relation into a public capable of seeing and knowing itself.”²⁹ Rather, Dexter Sinister provides a model of print as distributed across space, time, and media, and therefore, according to Anton, constitutes “a self-differing, inherently distributable, genuinely multimedia condition that goes from painting to the internet.”³⁰

Dexter Sinister’s most recent incarnation, The Serving Library which Bailey and Reinfurt founded with Angie Keefer in 2011, takes up many of these threads, exploring how print and digital culture might be brought into new constellations, which highlight the specific advantages and limitations of each. The Serving Library maintains an extensive website as a public archive of PDF texts that are periodically printed and distributed as the *Bulletins of the Serving Library*. Alongside the digital library, a physical library space serves as a repository for books and objects, as well as a social space where, among other things, alcohol is served. Looking back to the first public circulating library, as well as ahead to the potential of digital online information (hence the name, a play on the computer server), the Serving Library seeks, according to its statement of intent, to “reclaim the library – whether online or physically sited – as a space for public use, where resources are pooled to generate and maintain a network of shared information that serves the interest of a committed community.”³¹

In its insistence on the reciprocity between lived and virtual space, the Serving Library suggests an expanded model of publication that in some ways brings us back to the example of *Aspen*, with which I began. Implicit in *Aspen*’s three-dimensional, multimedia format was the possibility that the magazine might become a trigger for experiences and events beyond itself. A 1968 advertisement for the magazine encouraged subscribers to plan an “*Aspen* box party,” showing a convivial gathering mingling with one another as they interact with *Aspen*’s various components, projecting films, playing records, and unfolding and perusing its diverse printed contents. Whether or not any of its subscribers actually did so, this potential to give rise to a community of readers in a shared time and place lives on in certain models of conceptual writing today. In this sense the so-called digital age may represent less of a complete break with previous publishing than an opportunity to realize its latent promise.

Notes

- 1 Jud Yalkut, “Toward an Intermedia Magazine,” *Arts Magazine*, Summer 1968, 14.
- 2 For an in-depth discussion of *Aspen* and other artists’ magazines see Gwen Allen, *Artists’ Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).
- 3 Brian O’Doherty, interview with author, New York, 4 December 2001.

- 4 Advertisement for *Aspen* in *Evergreen Review*, no. 76 (March 1970).
- 5 Bomb, 2 October 2009, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/4534/so-what-exactly-is-conceptual-writing-an-interview-with-kenneth-goldsmith>.
- 6 Dan Graham, "Other Observations," in *Dan Graham: Works 1965–2000*, ed. Marianne Brouwer (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2001), 97.
- 7 Dan Graham, "My Works for Magazine Pages: 'A History of Conceptual Art,'" in *Two-Way Mirror Power: Selected Writings by Dan Graham on His Art*, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 12.
- 8 Dan Graham, "Poem, March 1966," *Aspen* 5+6 (1967): n.p.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Dan Graham, "Other Observations," in Marianne Brouwer, ed., *Dan Graham: Works 1965–2000* (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2001), 97.
- 11 Caolen Madden and Paul Hughes, *Triple Canopy*, no. 9, 21 July 2010, https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/issues/9/contents/poem_october_after_dan_graham.
- 12 Seth Price, *Dispersion*, 2002–, at <http://www.distributedhistory.com/Disperzone.html>.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 42.
- 17 See Allen, *Artists' Magazines*.
- 18 For a more detailed discussion of these works and of 0 To 9 more generally, see Gwen Allen, "Art On and Off the Page: 0 To 9, 1967–1969," in Allen, *Artists' Magazines*.
- 19 Price, *Dispersion*. For an excellent discussion of Price's investigations of online communication and distribution forms, which I have drawn on here, see Michael Newman, "Seth Price's Operations," in *Seth Price*, ed. Kathrin Jentjens, Anja Nathan-Dorn, and Beatrix Ruf (Zurich: JPR-Ringier, 2010).
- 20 For a discussion of this aspect of Price's work see Tim Griffin, "The Personal Effects of Seth Price," *Artforum*, Summer 2009.
- 21 Price, *Dispersion*.
- 22 <http://www.distributedhistory.com/continuousproject.com.html>.
- 23 Kenneth Goldsmith, "About UbuWeb," 2011, *UbuWeb*, <http://www.ubu.com/resources/>.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 David Reinfurt, quoted in Peter Nesbett, "Who Is Dexter Sinister?" *Art on Paper*, March/April 2007, 66.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Saul Anton, "Propositions and Publications: On Dexter Sinister," *Afterall* 27 (Summer 2011): 26.
- 30 Ibid., 26–7.
- 31 Stuart Bailey, David Reinfurt, and Angie Keefer, "The Serving Library Company, Inc. Statement of intent (draft)," at <http://www.dextersinister.org/library.html?id=262>.

Little Bastard: The Invention and Introduction of a New Word (1)

Ryan Gander wrote:

Can you help? I want to introduce a new word that I have invented into the English language. If you're publishing any articles or texts in the near future, would you consider weaving it in? The word is "mitim." It means "a mythical word newly introduced into history as if it had always been there." A similar example, the word "chav," has been newly introduced, but with a true traceable etymology. "Mitim," on the other hand, is to represent all those words that have been introduced as if they have a true etymology but in actual fact don't. I got to "mitim" through the derivatives "moetym," and "neophutos-mythoethymon" (both also kind-of newly invented). If you get the chance to use it, please let me know.

Alice Fisher wrote:

Ok, will do. Is it a palindrome for a reason?

Ryan Gander wrote:

Yes, but I don't know why – it just looks better. It was originally "mytym" but it's ugly without vowels. Interestingly though, it's not just a palindrome in a literary sense; if you use the right sans serif typeface in upper-case, it's also a physical palindrome. You can actually put a mirror in the middle of it and it still reads the same.

Alice Fisher wrote:

Yeah, I see what you mean. And "mitim" is a nicer word. Looks unusual without all the -nyms and -orys you usually associate with words about words. Much like "palindrome" itself in fact. I'll try and introduce it into something soon.

Ryan Gander wrote:

I was thinking about our long conversation last night in the pub ... maybe we could record what we said, or we could repeat it via email, as a second-hand

transcription. It explains a lot about the work in a natural way, so could you give me a grilling and I'll try to then respond, etc.?

Alice Fisher wrote:

Yes, fine, I can pretty much remember what we said. Email or recording is fine. Email's harder if you want details and examples because no-one really writes long emails these days, but if you want to do that, maybe we should go back to the thread of email conversation we had when you first sent me the word and take it from there. Let me know which is easier ...

Ryan Gander wrote:

Can you help? I want to introduce a new word that I have invented into the English language. If you're publishing any articles or texts in the near future, would you consider weaving it in? The word is "mitim." It means "a mythical word newly introduced into history as if it had always been there." A similar example, the word "chav," has been newly introduced, but with a true traceable etymology. "Mitim," on the other hand, is to represent all those words that have been introduced as if they have a true etymology but in actual fact don't. I got to "mitim" through the derivatives "moetym," and "neophutos-mythoethymon" (both also kind-of newly invented). If you get the chance to use it, please let me know. I attach the page from my notebook, from the day I was thinking about it. I didn't have the privilege of studying Latin.

Alice Fisher wrote:

Is it a palindrome for a reason? I like the way that "mitim" even sounds like it has the same origins as "palindrome," i.e., Greek instead of Latin. Most words about language are Latin, though, aren't they? Isn't it going to be difficult to slip in a word that sounds different to most words about words?

Ryan Gander wrote:

It's not completely made up out of thin air though; I tried to go about making it in a logically specific way, forcing it through an imagined past (like flour through a sift). You know, I tried to consider how it would have twisted and turned through history, how it would have been condensed, reconsidered, made more economical or modernised, etc. So it's a kind of pseudo-Latin, but yes, it sounds right, or then again maybe it sounds TOO right. Tell me how a journalist/writer would go about slipping it in (so to speak). Could you possibly get away with inserting "mitim" into something you're writing? What are the obstacles, and generally, how much of an effort would it take to get a word (either this or a different one) into the English language?

Alice Fisher wrote:

It would be tricky to use the word with the meaning you've given it in a feature for a newspaper or typical magazine. The editors and sub-editors at a publication check all text, and if they're any good at all they'll spell-check the document and also check through any words they're not familiar with. When a word doesn't turn up in the dictionary or in spell-check, they'll either contact the journalist or simply change it for a well-known word they come up with (chosen, obviously, for the context suggested by the sentence). You could slip it into a document that wasn't written for publication, though. I write trend reports for consultancy firms, and they'd probably pass it onto their clients without checking, but it wouldn't enter the public domain in the way you'd like it to.

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The only way you could slip a new word into a published article without alerting the word-checkers is by introducing it either as slang used by a sub-cultural group or a word used to describe such a group. That's where all the recent new words have come from that I can think of. These words are either onomatopoeic – like “bling” describing the smart style of diamonds, shiny ostentatious clothes, etc. admired in rap culture, or are actually redefined, revived slang that suddenly gets popular due to media interest in a particular subculture. As you said before, “chav” is the most recent example of this type of word. Explanations of its origin vary wildly – from the town of Chatham to the Romany gypsy word chavi. This second idea seems more likely – makes it an alternative to “pikey,” which is the word I know for scruffy, flashy poor people.

If you present a word as originating from a subculture – surfers, rappers, computer geeks, etc. – people are more willing to accept it and let it pass into the mainstream because they're used to getting new information from these groups. Have you thought about inventing a new word for an art genre? That would be a piece of piss... and you'd have a genuine chance of creating a word that could drift into mainstream parlance...

Ryan Gander wrote:

I suppose I'll have to get myself to Silicon Valley and break into Microsoft with some special downloading device that would put “mitim” onto all subsequent Microsoft software spell-checks. Incidentally, I notice when I type “Microsoft,” it certainly isn't underlined with a red error squiggle and actually if you type it in without a capital “M” it corrects itself automatically, just like God, Jesus and The Bible. It all seemed so perfect and economical in the beginning. So if I make a different new word, what about it being “to describe art”? Clunky? Oh God, now I'm really clutching at straws ...

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But look at this Nissan advert from a Sunday supplement: do you think these sound believable?

Alice Fisher wrote:

Well, they're funny, but not believable. You know they're made up by someone trying to be amusing. They remind me of a new book by the McSweeney's group. McSweeney's is a clever clever American literary magazine (run by Dave Eggers and written by all the groovy American writers like Paul Auster, Jonathan Franzen, etc. I kind of like it, but a lot of people think it's fist-chewingly pretentious) and regular McSweeney's contributors have got together to create *The Future Dictionary of America*, making up words and adapting them to new meanings because apparently they don't think the language is developing quickly enough. But I think this is word play rather than word invention. It's a game that lots of clever book people play. This dictionary is the grown-up version of writers like Roald Dahl making up words in his children's books. If you genuinely want to introduce a new word into the English language, you should try for something less contrived. You need to find that space between being obviously made-up for amusement value and the feel of a real, traditional word that lacks the history to validate itself.

Ryan Gander wrote:

Here are some reactions from a few other people I asked.

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Bill Drummond said: "I'll see how I can weave 'mitim' into something or even more than something that I'm writing over the next few months. I put 'mitim' into Google to see what would come up, and it seems to stand for 'Man In The Iron Mask,' a film starring Leonardo De Caprio, and may mean something else German. I then put 'chav' in and as you might expect it is well and truly established. Slightly ironic that you should send me this email with your request as I often worry that the only lasting contribution that I have made to the cultural landscape is twinning the word 'chill' with the word 'out.' In five years time 'mitim' might be as ubiquitous and you could be suffering from the same worries."

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Martin Vincent wrote: "Is this a bit like the man in *The Guardian* who's trying to introduce a different word for 'palindrome' that's actually palindromic? I can't think how I'm going to slip mitim into a review without someone questioning it. I guess you need to get Microsoft to recognise it."

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Dan Fox wrote: "You say mitim means 'a mythical word newly introduced' – so are you saying an example of a 'mitim' is, for example, the word 'chav'? Or

are you saying that 'mitim' is, like the word 'chav,' a new word but in fact has another definition? If you are saying that mitim is a way of describing words new to the language, are you sure there isn't already a word existing that serves this function?"

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Sara De Bondt wrote: "It functions on a similar level to this: Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua. Ut enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat. Duis aute irure dolor in reprehenderit in voluptate velit esse cillum dolore eu fugiat nulla pariatur ... "

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Mark Beasley wrote: "I'll give 'mitim' a shot when it feels right to deploy. I figure I'll then have to pass through the editor's Beckettian ring of new words, or hopefully they'll be asleep on the gig and miss it."

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Stuart Bailey wrote: "I'm trying to use 'mitim' in DDD, but it's not easy, or at least it would be easier if you gave me some sort of definition (if it has one) so i could place it in a reasonable context. Or I could just randomly replace a word so it would forge its own context. Which would you prefer? The options seem too open; I need some kind of restriction for it to make some kind of (non)sense."

Alice Fisher wrote:

I had another thought, and I think this is what you have to do. When I worked on style magazines, I noticed that words we used to describe new kinds of music, fashion, etc. would then turn up in the mainstream press, even though they were made up or technically used in the wrong way. The mainstream press just assumed we knew best because we were talking about something they didn't understand.

If they asked for a definition or explanation, they took what we gave them at face value. You could easily do the same with an art term because it will be assumed that you know what you're doing. Here are a couple of examples, just off the top of my head, so you can get the feel of the sort of sound and shape of words that work.

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1. **MENTALISM:** This sounds like a made-up word. It actually has two dictionary definitions: a) referring to para-psycho-logical activities such as mind reading; and b) the belief that some mental phenomena can't be explained by physical laws. When I worked at The Face, we used it to describe hardcore clubbers who were obsessed with getting as out of it as possible. Back when "mad

for it" was everywhere, and "mental" are used as an adjective to describe just about anything, no one batted an eyelid – and then The Guardian picked up on the word. We actually started using it after Alan Partridge shouted "YOU'RE A MENTALIST" at an obsessed fan in the programme Knowing Me, Knowing You. We thought it was funny. It's a word that's popular again at the moment due to that magician, Derren Brown – he always refers to himself as a mentalist, so its proper (or original) meaning is back.

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2. CRUNK. Hip hop's the best place to look at how to make new word (African Americans started the whole language of cool from the times of slavery, but that's another story). "Crunk" comes from the Atlanta hip-hop scene, where DJs were making this amazing bass-heavy music. The clubbers' poison of choice was strong liquor – Hennessy cognac etc. – and the club scene became described as crunk because it was comprised of crazy music enjoyed by drunk people: CRazy+drUNK. You should look up a rap dictionary on the internet – the way the words are made is quite beautiful.

Ryan Gander wrote:

I don't really know how to reply. I'd like to come back at you with lots of cleverness, but there isn't any. I think you're right, "mitim" doesn't really suffice, but I'm starting to think that I don't need to introduce it into mainstream usage; after all it only really describes itself. I don't know. In general, I'm not thinking things through fully. Do you know what "Lorem Ipsum" is? Sara found this newspaper article: read the caption under the picture. What's a verbal translation of that idea? Maybe I'm approaching this from the wrong angle, and perhaps the concept of translation to sound is a better place to start. Pursuing such a line of thinking, "Lorem Ipsum ..." would translate to "Blah blah blah ..." The word "blah" is written and spoken, but isn't in the dictionary.

Alice Fisher wrote:

Yes, I know Lorem Ipsum because I work in publishing. It's Latin, innit? It's used as dummy copy in a layout when you want to see how words sit on the page but the real words aren't ready. It's used so that if you spell-check a layout document you'll pick up instantly on the fact that the real text's missing. That's why you sometimes see it in finished magazine phrases like "details to come," because some idiot put real words in, but not the "real" words, if you see what I mean. The translation to sound is an interesting place to start. That's where words like "bling" come from. But I think you're putting the horse before the cart. Words these days are created to explain a phenomenon that is new and therefore lacks the necessary language to discuss it. Why don't you think about

concepts you want to see put into words and then the word should almost suggest itself. If there's a new art style or an emotion or activity that has only recently developed and currently lacks a proper description then the substance of that thing should help suggest the word. So think of what you want to write about and then write down the word that defines it.

Ryan Gander wrote:

Yes, maybe the cart being before the horse is exactly the problem. I have that a lot. You see, I'm not necessarily that interested in the content. Sounds odd, I know, but when I look over almost everything I've made, it's always started with an interest – or more accurately, an obsession – with a particular system. It's not so much what is said or communicated that matters, but the vehicle or system that carries it. As if the actual words are completely insignificant but their articulation is paramount; or, the content is completely insignificant, but because I'm studying the vehicle, the system in which it is immersed is paramount.

Am I making any sense? Naturally I thought about introducing a word into common usage, but it was the mode, or the medium, that I really needed to understand to make it possible. That's what interested me. That's why (I guess) the word I chose was a direct acknowledgment of the process I was trying to carry out, so the form and content are the same thing. My mitim would have been also the first mitim in history. But you're right, it's impossible to pull off convincingly.

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Actually, there IS another word that I want to introduce. I use the phrase "jack of all trades" far too frequently to describe the sort of artist who doesn't have a prescribed mode or recipe for working. That phrase isn't very accurate for the idea I have in my head because it also immediately implies "master of none," but for some it's precisely the mastery of RANGE that is important. I mean range in the senses of achievable distance (clay pigeon shooting), breadth (someone who got a grade A in A-level General Studies), and skill/resource base (the infinite possibility of sounds that could come out of an orchestra). It also throws up other ideas for me, including adaptability, disobedience, a need to push things forwards, an impatience and dissatisfaction with what already exists. This is the type of artist whose practice changes constantly. The art world doesn't really like this, of course, because there's no identifiable stylistic signature. You get up one day and make a music video, two weeks later write an introduction to a scientist's biography, then finish making those earrings you've been working on, etc. ... Every morning you start at zero and the particular idea or work of the day dictates the specialism or trade or skill or genre or knowledge required to achieve the end result.

Alice Fisher wrote:

I completely understand what you mean about the system being a million times more interesting than the end product. That's where the real power and work lies, after all. "Mitim" is a great word and the thought process behind it is perfect. As art, it's fantastic, but in practice, if you really want to get a word into the language, it won't work. I like the idea of trying to define a multi-tasking artist – it's the perfect area for a modern word. I've noticed that now people are simply described as "creatives" to encapsulate that idea of an artist who works in many different mediums. There's also another new word, "flexecutive," which has recently been used to describe those journalist/TV/consultant types who can't be defined by one job description.

I'm sure you've heard that word before, but the process of how it was made might be useful for you: obviously it's "flexible" and "executive" joined together to create a new word that encompasses both meanings, yet remains recognizable enough that people can guess its meaning even if they've never seen it before (given the right context).

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Maybe if you try and think of a word for those artists who aren't restricted to one medium, i.e., they paint, perform, video, etc., you could construct one by thinking along the same lines. So if on one hand you think of current words to describe these people – painters, artists, creatives, etc.—and then on the other, the words that define their wide range of interests – varied, simultaneous activities, multi-tasking, etc. – then you can conceive of a new word that combines these elements.

Ryan Gander wrote:

I remember you telling me a while ago about another editorial faux pas where the "Lorem Ipsum" text was exchanged for a real description of the image, meaning the spell-check missed it. I think you said that it was a Time Out article, with the picture caption that accidentally calls the woman from M-People a pineapple head. Do you have it, or any others like that?

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The other thing was, I remembered the other day how all this started: DYNAMION. About a year and a half ago sitting in a small cafe drinking in Lyon, my friend Aurélien Froment told me of a word invented by Buckminster Fuller to describe (I think) the magic that kept his magnificent geodesic domes aloft. His word was "Dymaxion," a snipped down version of the phrase "Dynamic Maximum Tension." There's your cause and effect: he needed a word and so a word evolved. That's what I'm missing. I've decided to stick with "mytym" or "mitim" (whichever is best), though. It's strange, I very rarely go back on

decisions or re-question them, and I've been wondering why I did here. Maybe it was because such an array of different people told me in such a short space of time that it couldn't be used. But thinking about that now after some time to let it sink in, and much discussion, I think in some ways that makes it the perfect word. There's something I have only just realized: the word "mitim" can only be used in the real world when talking about this project. It can't ever be slipped into an article or conversation, unless the article or conversation is about this very process. Because it describes itself, it can only ever be used when talking about itself. It's a virgin word! Unspoiled!

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What typeface do you think it should be rendered in, and at what size and in what colour and with what background? I would like to make an A1 poster with this text on the reverse. Big questions require big solutions. Any ideas?

Alice Fisher wrote:

I'm not having much luck getting concrete examples of good magazine cock-ups (I think because it would involve people ploughing through the archives ...) but I'll persevere.

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Also, Johnny interviewed this archaeologist guy for me for Carlos, a magazine I work for, and he had an interesting point. This doctor has mathematically proved that trends are meaningless and are simply a process of random copying. He's applied this to loads of different trends from patterns on ancient clay pots to babies' names to pop groups' popularity. He had this to say about the creation and spread of the word "nuanced": "Academics love jargon and buzzwords and usually they don't mean anything. One of the words you meet in social sciences in the last 10 years is the word 'nuanced.' That's not a word, but in about 1990 it started to slowly climb –I've graphed this, I did a journals' literature search because I was curious – and it's all over the place now. People use it in their article titles even though it doesn't have any meaning – it's just a word. And that, to me, makes it clear that even academics are copying ideas from each other. I would be curious to know what the psychologists think about this – because I think it's some sort of human tendency." (Dr Alex Bentley, UCL Institute of Archaeology)

Ryan Gander wrote:

Yes, a bit like the current trend for gallery names: Cube, Bloc, Unit, Glass Box, Counter, Store, Showroom, Cabinet, etc. Well, it's a bit different because that's a real trend, but I can see that there's a gap for a word like "nuanced" in social science.

Alice Fisher wrote:

I wonder if there are more words being made up now than at other times in history? I like the idea of copying being a psychological tendency too – even when that copying is essentially meaningless. Incidentally, even if you purposefully and obviously make up a word, it doesn't preclude it from being a "real" word. I heard a great story recently about a "flange" of baboons. The proper collective noun when referring to baboons is a "congress" – so "a congress of baboons." In a Not the Nine O'Clock News sketch, one of the writers made fun of collective nouns. They did a spoof nature show and the narrator talked about a "flange of baboons." Somehow that joke has made its way into the real world and you can now find scientific documents that talk about a flange of baboons. Language is a peculiarly fluid thing.

Ryan Gander wrote:

I had another thought. Maybe there'll never be another mitim apart from itself: the word "mitim." In a sense, "mitim" is an exercise in action for action's sake. Its own concept brought it into being and from then onwards it's just stuttered aimlessly about its own existence. It's like the spoilt brat of the dictionary – but a dictionary it'll never enter. Poor little bastard will always remain latent, won't he?

Ryan Gander wrote:

You know that word "mitim" or "mytym"
I've been working on? How does it look? On an A1 portrait poster, to be precise. What's the formal character of a word that explains its own being and can only be used when talking about its own creation. You know ... aesthetically!

Stuart Bailey wrote:

What's the formal character of a word that explains its own being? Jesus, some zen masters spend their whole lives answering questions like that and I'm expected to do it in 5 minutes. Hang on.

Ryan Gander wrote:

You don't only have 5 minutes; take your time. I need your solution by Monday.

Stuart Bailey wrote:

Well, I'd say definitely a serif typeface, and probably italic (which would make appear as if it were being quoted, or referred to). You, like most architects, would automatically choose some sans serif like Helvetica, thinking it's closest to the neutral aesthetic of your work. But you're wrong: it's too loaded with

notions of pseudo-modernity and, frankly, British techno record covers. Also, your work generally has a literary edge, and is very British; the classic serifs are a bit like the tweed jackets of typefaces. The obvious neutral one is, then, Times, but maybe better is Palatino, which is also standard but less ubiquitous, and anonymous in a vaguely ugly way.

Ryan Gander wrote:

I am not an architect, and my work is not “very British,” it’s “Euro-brainy.” What do you think of these?

1. Cravat-and-pipe-British-stiff-upper-lip.
2. Galouise-smoking-overly-romantic-jazz-enthusiast.
3. Industrious-cold-with-an-objective.
4. Blistering-Barnacles-Tintinesque.

Stuart Bailey wrote:

Well, I think you’re way off in all four. I stand by my answer: Palatino, probably italic, possibly not. Do I have to make it too?

Ryan Gander wrote:

I’ve made it for you, to save you the trouble. See the Microsoft red error line underneath? That’s enough really: sums it up perfectly.

Stuart Bailey wrote:

OK, I’ve managed to use “mitim” in DDD9. It came up at the last minute, or at least the day I sent it off to the printers. It’s in relation to a contribution by Radim Peško, who made a typeface, Sol, based on the modular furniture of Sol LeWitt: a 2D type based on 3D principles. In the issue we use the typeface to set eight obscure and obtuse quotations, all of which have some very loose relation to the idea: Like an arrow I was only passing through / Panic is the beginning of all art / If memories could be canned would they have expiration dates / Happiness is the longing for repetition / The pencil is mightier than the pen / There was a life on the dead end street / I shift gear into present tense / Ask me a rhetorical question see if you can get a no.

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In the issue they stand alone without any explanation, so I decided to include a small text listing the sources in a footnotes section at the back of the magazine. But when I came to write the sentence, the word “quotations” didn’t really seem the right word, being too pompous, and neither did “epigrams,” “non-sequitirs” or anything else like that. Then I thought, well, they’re mitims! – phrases more or less referring to themselves, and only really existing for their

own sake, in relation to the odd reflexive demands of the contribution, and each one weirdly elliptical. In the caption, Sol LeWitt is the final reference – he just happens to be visual rather than literal. So in the end I genuinely came to the word through needing a word that didn't exist.

Ryan Gander wrote:

Well all this is great, but in the process you're slightly changing the meaning – my original meaning – of the word (not that I have a problem with that; I let the word out to be used and if it happens to evolve ...), because in the strictest sense, the word can only be used when it is describing itself (i.e., a word) not anything else, like a typeface.

Stuart Bailey wrote:

OK, but I'm interested in carrying "mitim" further, as if (you're tired) he just climbed off your shoulders and onto mine (there) for a while. For this show I'm doing in Estonia, I've asked Radim, who made that Sol typeface, to turn his project into a 3D sculpture. It's sort of an extended circular translation, from LeWitt's 3D concept, through his own 2D drawn rendering, through Radim's 2D translation into a 3D alphabet – into language – to an actual 3D materiality. It seems strange now, but again, I had this long discussion with him over a few weeks about what word to use for the sculpture (the whole alphabet seemed too much; unnecessary, as a single word gesture would be more economical, both financially and conceptually). So we were thinking of "SOL" (too short) or "ALPHABET" (too long) or "DOT DOT DOT" (both), and then, of course: "MITIM." There is only an upper-case, or more accurately a mono-case, and of course when set in capitals "MITIM" is palindromic, so we also get a 3D palindrome, which seems to chime with the fact that it's a sculpture, AND it'll read the same from the front and back, though the projections of the individual letterforms will be different.

Ryan Gander wrote:

I feel vaguely spooked and dirty, talking about him (I mean it) with you now. I wonder when you close your eyes and visualize him, whether he's a 2D word in type or whether he is a 3D object. When I did those first tests ages ago, printing out the letters MIT and using a mirror to try to produce the palindrome physically, it was very weird; when I put the mirror on the paper it was like having an electric shock. There was something very Back to the Future II about it. For a split-second I felt on the point of a paradigm, my studio in reverse with the other half of the paper and the word, with another me and somewhere beyond the studio walls, and in Mozambique or wherever you are nowadays, another

you. At that moment I wasn't thinking about it as a reflection, but as an actual parallel dimension, which makes sense because the point of the word was to attempt to illustrate the idea that there could be any number of parallel histories, and in one of those possible histories this word could have perhaps existed.

Stuart Bailey wrote:

Here's something else interesting: you know how I'm always saying a key feature of your work is this melancholic character – how you imbue inanimate objects with a kind of human sadness – ? – well, when drawing up the instructions to make the SOL/MITIM sculpture, Radim realised that the T was going to be a problem child because it's the only character that can't stand up on its own – it has no inbuilt structural support. He tried a compromise by making something that looked more like a lower-case "t" rather than the more obvious and fitting "T," but it's not that convincing. In the end I enjoy the idea that it can't stand up, and the word is forever doomed to ruin its own palindrome. What do you think?

Ryan Gander wrote:

To be honest I don't really know where you get all that melanchology from. I think you're trying to (unnecessarily) classify quite disparate things. I think what you might be talking about, however, is closer to a sense of absence. My friend Sandra describes it as "a dip in presence" (it sounds better when she says it in French); that there's always something left out, which can quite often be quite sad: emptiness, loss, an inability to reach closure. My other suspicion is that this emptiness is precisely that point about the medium or vehicle doubling up as the content – the full circle self-referentiality. These works are only rhetoric. None of them, including "mitim," are about anything but the making of themselves. It's all exercise, practice. As you said recently, I made "mitim" just to see what would happen. It's as simple as that. There's no gap in the world for "mitim" to plug, and it'll carry on before and after him.

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But anyway, I think that that little T not being able to stand up is incredibly sad, seriously ... all those other M's and I's towering above it, seems unfair.

Stuart Bailey wrote:

I just got back from Tallinn. In the end we built both versions of the tee from Estonian wood, and in the show we used the disabled one in the word, while the other was all alone, displaced somewhere else in the gallery space, sulking. Then, in the middle of the opening, a little kid became obsessed with the pieces and spent the whole evening rearranging them: deconstructing mitim!

Ryan Gander wrote:

Disabled?! Christ, do you have to? The sculpture might get an Arts Council grant for inclusion or positive discrimination ...

Stuart Bailey wrote:

Now I'm I can't stop. For DDD11 I'm commissioning Radim to make us a DDD house typeface founded on a few strange precedents, but copying the spirit rather than the direct form. I've decided to call the typeface Mitim, just to see what happens too. The idea is that the type will develop from issue to issue as we add to the family – italic, bold, etc. – each time. The character itself can also be refined between issues, so the idea is to humanize the face, allowing it to grow up in public, to evolve at the same rate as the magazine. It is therefore very self-conscious, narcissistic even: a mirror to our own development. For these reasons it seems apt to hijack your word again. I mean, it hasn't got anything better to do, has it?

Ryan Gander wrote:

No, of course not – he's just sitting around on the sofa at my house watching daytime TV. Listen, can I have a copy of this typeface to use for something else? It's like some liberal creative commune, "mitim" on auto-trajectory rocketing through clouds of ownership, authorship, function, worth, and copyright ...

Stuart Bailey wrote:

It occurred to me after the publication of DDD11 with Mitim and its introductory brief, that you never confirmed or corrected my supposedly remembered definition of "mitim" as being "a word describing a word which describes itself." Then I saw your definition in relation to the crossword piece you made: "a newly invented word with a mythical etymology, a self descriptive word, idea or object. Deriving from the Greek compound "neophutos" meaning newly planned, along with "mytho" meaning mythical and "etymon" denoting a word's history (etymology) the word therefore refers to a word that describes its self: a word newly invented but with a false history that suggests it has always been in existence." Am I right in thinking that was the first time it actually "existed" as an official definition – meaning printed/multiplied/distributed/dispersed/public? Although my version is related, it's also nuanced a bit differently. SO you could now think of "mitim" as having forked somewhere along the road of language. Which is the real "mitim"? Can two exist? What if they meet? Who would win in a fight?

Ryan Gander wrote:

Yes, that was the first time it existed. I like the fork, but two can't exist – they'll both end up with inferiority complexes. I think the big difference between my

original, slightly bitter avant-garde mitim and your new positive contemporary mitim is that mine was a hermit and yours is a populist. You see, if your “mitim” describes anything (idea or object) that refers to itself, as you suggest it should, that’s great – it will be in the dictionary within a couple of years and will slip into common usage, because it seems there actually IS a demand for such a word, and it can be used in many different situations. My “mitim” – from the original definition you quote above, can ONLY describe another mitim, and as there aren’t any other mitims; there are no other words in existence that are Neophutomythoeytymons. So the whole exercise is a snake eating its own tail. It’s like the saying “the first rule is: there are no rules.” By default, I have to refuse to recognize your “mitim” as a mitim. At least until I decide what to do about it.

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As for the fight, yours would win hands down. Mine would back down, being more mature.

Stuart Bailey wrote:

I’ve been thinking of the m-word in a different way recently. I want to put it to work, snap it out of its snake-like existence, give it a specific application without crushing its spirit. First, I’m interested in how another word, “modernism,” has become corrupted and dysfunctional for a variety of reasons. There are numerous mis-alignments of meaning across and within all the arts disciplines. Then, at least in the design field (the only one I know with any depth) there’s also a significant gap between what the word refers to in Europe and the USA. In Europe it has a lingering progressive, social, avant-garde background; in the USA, what is generally considered an inherited version of that legacy, is more associated with corporate business and high capitalism – what might be considered a complete 180 degree about-face. Whatever, a bastard, in every sense! An example of a very unstable piece of vocabulary.

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My own understanding of modernism was always as attitude rather than form. It seems the more it is written about, documented and, by extension, classified, the more it becomes formalized or, you might say, stuck. What particularly interests me here is that the word “modern” is – in a sense – by definition, indefinable if you consider it (as I do) attitude, essence, permanently fluid, always out-of-reach, ungraspable. For practical purposes, however, the attitude seems adequately summed up by the definition on yet another word, “decorum”: “The appropriateness of an element of an artistic or literary work, such as style or tone, to its particular circumstance or to the composition as a whole” (if you consider the “artistic or literary work” to be yourself). For this reason I always thought David Bowie was a more pertinent – and attractively

ridiculous—symbol of modernism than, say, Mies van der Rohe. I'll leave you for now with this image: Bowie and the modernist umbilical cord.

Ryan Gander wrote:

Yes, I see what you mean. Maybe there should be ten words instead of the one "modernism," honing in on acute definitions, like the old Eskimo-snow story. Could we actually replace "modernism" with "mitim," start afresh and give everyone another chance? I don't know, but I do know there's nothing like uttering the word "modernism" to depress a room full of art students. Everyone's so tired of it. As you say, there are no specifics or nuances left. In Britain you see it right now in the fall-out from all that Glasgow-faux-modernist-faux-Modern-faux-Institute-black-and-red-Franz-fuckin-Ferdinand-faux-communist-record-cover-I-make-drawings-that-look-like-doodles-on-my-school-folder bullshit: an ugly multiple parody of itself.

Stuart Bailey wrote:

OK. Now read all these excerpts from your above conversation with Alice:

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"I don't need to introduce it into mainstream language, after all, it only really describes itself."

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"Words these days are created to explain a phenomenon that is new and therefore lacks the necessary language to discuss it."

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"It's not so much what is said or what is communicated but the vehicle or system that carries it."

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"... it's precisely the mastery of RANGE that's important."

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"... adaptability, disobedience, a need to push things forwards, an impatience and dissatisfaction with what already exist."

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"I totally understand what you mean about the system being a million times more interesting than the end product. That's where the real power and work lies, after all."

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"Because it describes itself, it can only ever be used when talking about itself. It's like a virgin word! Unspoiled!"

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"Big questions require big solutions. Any ideas?"

Ryan Gander wrote:

Yes well, the above says it quite nicely. But whatever I say, you're the editor, so you'll have the last word anyway ...

Stuart Bailey wrote:

OK, OK. My idea is that this particular modernist attitude – questioning, reasoning, responsible, rigorous, social, answerable – ought to be reclaimed. “Modernism,” semantically confused and confusing, is worn out, abused, a burnt-out shell of a word. I was recently interested in Fluxus founder George Maciunas, who apparently chose the Latin “Fluxus” by randomly flipping the pages of a dictionary and letting his finger land on a word, though as Emmet Williams remarked: “... sometimes one wonders: did George know in advance where his index finger was going to land?” It seems to me that, more or less, Maciunas, was using “fluxus” much in the same way “modern” was originally, attitudinally, used, as if loading a new word with an old meaning. Williams also recounts how, when asked how to pronounce F-L-U-X-U-S, flookusus or flucksus, Maciunas replied: “It rhymes with fucks us.” The same might be said of other ventures in other places at other times, such as “coum” (pronounced equally “come” or “cum”) by Genesis P-Orridge and the group of artists primarily associated with Throbbing Gristle from the 1970s onwards. P-Orridge reckoned that the world would end when “all definitions of coum” were named. So, umbilically speaking ... “modern” ... “fluxus” ... “coum” ... I think we need a new word to describe that modernist attitude that I now realize DDD promotes and your own work describes ... and that this new word, however seriously or flippantly you take this – both are vital – could be ...

What Was Conceptual Writing?

This rhetorical question, “What was Conceptual Writing?,” is offered as a conceptual lever. It apes the modality of a question asked about modernism in 1978 by Robert Adams, “What was Modernism?”; but takes it takes its charge from the closing call to work made by Raymond Williams in his 1987 lecture “When was Modernism?”¹ The challenge that Williams foresaw was the need to counter-pose, against the modernist canon, an alternative history of those aesthetic practices marginalized during modernism that could (1) refocus our concerns in the present onto the question(s) of community and with which (2) we might work our way out of the meaningless deadlock of postmodernism.

This essay levers those concerns into the emergent discourse on so-called Conceptual Writing. In doing so, it opens from the inside a discussion about some of the socio-political choices that capitalist realism forces any self-consciously Conceptual Writer to make – or risk having made for them – about their work and their labour mode(s).² My opening offer to that conversation is based on a simple thesis about one kind of conceptual writing (small “c,” small “w”) that insists on being lowly yet dynamic (wild) and highly productive yet precise (praxical); and which, in being so, has demonstrated a unique hyper-exaggeration of turbo-capitalism’s singular logic of production.³

This essay focuses on the potential of that hyper-exaggeration to form a critical perversion of the social affectivities of capitalism. The first three sections broach respectively the why, what, and how of Conceptual Writing in the context of this thesis. In the final fourth section I summarily advocate a kind of conceptual *writing* that works knowingly in the “wild” in pre-disciplinary ways; that is part of a praxis that understands the work of writing as something potentially desubjectivating; and that might try to unfold some notion(s) of responsibility which it has the unique political potential to figure.

1. Discontent with the Connotations of Mastery, Full Stop

Conceptual Writing presumes that the kinds of subjects who might write are necessarily unstable social beings. As such, they are always already significant regardless of whether or not they consciously write. The writer-subject establishes themselves when they work to choose what, when, and how to signify through kinds of textualities that depend on language. The “self” as a construct, rather than as an innate authority, is a concern that Conceptual Writing has inherited. What Conceptual Writing does with this inheritance, with a unique intensity, is to shift the question of authoriality from “who wrote that text?” to “who takes responsibility for that text?” This shifting reveals how the authorial problematic has been recentered in our techno-digital, juridico-legal discourses of culture and property now. Responsibility and value are twin concerns for writer-subjects in this discourse network, and no model based on mastery has synthesized them satisfactorily. Conceptual writing disavows both mastering and being mastered as artistically and socially inadequate subject(ified) positions.

Instead, Conceptual Writing foregrounds the fact that all languages depend, in part at least, on conceptuality. This foregrounding makes Conceptual Writing conceptualist; and that quality, genealogically speaking, situates the emergence of Conceptual Writing in a long, pre-disciplinary constellation of conceptualist forms of cultural production. The cultural legitimacy of these forms as anything beyond mere *theoria* is staked upon two commitments. First, that there is a difference between the singularity of an idea and the sequence of ideas that combine into a concept, which is to say, that a concept is more than an idea. Second, that the populist misassumptions that (1) abstract thinking and concrete action are mutually exclusive and/or (2) that abstract thinking has limited concrete value, can never ground styles of living and working wherein the potential mutual dependency of theory and practice might ever ground a positive praxis of writing.

Following Karl Marx,⁴ for whom praxes distinguish themselves as positive by working towards dealienation, Conceptual Writing leads the writer-subject onto a unique tightrope. On one side is an unprecedented collapse into defenceless alienation that completely accepts the realism of capitalism and the obedience of literature to a business ontology. On the other side is an infinite movement against that collapse, a movement whose energy is closer to internal combustions like rave culture and computer hacking than it is to the resolute “proper” autonomy of the *littérateurs*. That tightrope is the exceptional fault line on which the writer-subjects who would be Conceptual Writers find themselves when they accept that they have been interpellated as, *first and*

foremost, consumers; and that their consumerism is acutely different from that of the reader-as-writer in which the postmoderns found some confused sanctuary. That fault line is the terrain of conceptualist consumer-writers who are self-consciously Conceptual Writers, which is a dissymmetrical and doubled subjectivity as opposed to a bipolar subjectivity with split individuations that sometimes overlap.⁵

On the first side – in the collapse – the consumer-writer becomes the perfectly compressed capitalist model of a culture-maker. For this consumer-writer, the potentially distracting work of writing is efficiently smoothed into acts of consuming. *This* reification of the consumer-writer's re-productive-consumption-as-literature further spectacularizes and legitimates the products and behaviours of capitalist life. Trapped in this dystopic model, Conceptual Writing would be a perfectly uninterrupted flow of reproduction performed by graphical and interface designers who work on the surface of life to resignify the realism of capitalism, like literature's equivalents of Nicolas Bourriaud's *semionauts*.⁶

The other side would be constituted by work and workings that *appear* much like the surficial resignifying done on the first side; and yet the work of the other side would mean the polar opposite for the politicality of the consumer-writer subject. As such, the two sides are, ideologically speaking, mutually exclusive. The work of the other side can be analogized to a moving, or constant removing, and can be insufficiently outlined by echoes from the last century, by which the project of dealienation would be something like the never-ending process of desubjectivation. This moving, as a form of working, looks a little like Maurice Blanchot's unworking, a little like Marcel Broodthaers's "absence of work," and a little like Theodor Adorno's functionless work; and yet, it doesn't *work* anything like them.

2. A Stubborn Bastard and a Common Noun

"How" Conceptual Writing works on this, the other side, is not just determined by what consumer-writers produce as Conceptual Writing. It also depends on what one and all *do with* Conceptual Writing. In all three of the twentieth-century models mentioned above – those of Blanchot, Broodthaers, and Adorno, which are just three examples from a much longer list which could include closer precursors like Steve McCaffery or Bruce Andrews⁷ – being artistic becomes a way of working that refuses to be complicit with the *techne*-driven functionalism produced by the capitalist expropriation of one's labour power. Through errings, poesy, and non-purposiveness these models convert the aesthetic ideology

of modernism – which Cornelia Klinger concisely argues is a tripartite fixation on autonomy, authenticity, and alterity⁸ – into rationales and methods of production *defined by their contrariness to capitalist rationales and methods of production*. This twentieth-century legacy roots the critical potential of artistic production in the demand to desubjectivate one's labour power *by producing things differently from capitalism*. This is artistic production contra capitalist production, based in part on a want for artistic work to be a different kind of work than labour.

The milieu of now is different. Constant acceleration has indemnified a kind of turbo-capitalism as a hegemonic social realism. As McKenzie Wark has eloquently said of Comte de Lautréamont and the situationist tactic of *détournement*,⁹ Conceptual Writing exploits, rather than elaborates, modern poetics; and it does so with a sense of contemporaneity similar to that exercised by Futurism (similar in its immediacy, not as a like philosophy of the “always new”). “Who takes responsibility for that text?” is unfolded as a question of poetics by using objectivity to nuance subjectivity in a subversive amplification of the objectification of the writer-subject as consumer. Instead of refusing the kind of work that is the labour of capitalism, Conceptual Writing conversely *over-does* the expropriation of work as capitalist labour by *hyperextending* the rationales and methods of turbo-capitalist production. It renders repetitive HITs, hyper-structural exercises in style, data shifting, meme trends and data harvesting, etc. all into constitutive acts of literary writing.

The expropriation of the work of writing as labour has long been ceded, to differing degrees, by various pragmatist camps as a necessary, or attractive, dimension of literary practice if such work is to be socially relevant or professionally viable. What Conceptual Writing can uniquely do is introduce the *hyperextension* of turbo-capitalism's singular logic of production as the *exclusive* determinant of how and what to write. It can then superimpose these inappropriately tasteless processes upon the sacred territory of literary composition as complete vocabularies, methods, and sometimes even machineries that fabricate entire documents or even oeuvres.

Many postmodern, modern and premodern writers sampled fragments from everyday life and remixed them into their own compositional structures, as in Language poetry, or did vice versa, as in George Herbert's seventeenth-century proto-concrete technopeignion altar poems. Conceptual Writing, at its best, appropriates its content and form from amongst the extant, and premises any editorial decisions on reflexive judgments of conceptual appropriateness rather than aesthetic fetish. This wholesale intensity, which results from hyperextension and overworking, generates Conceptual Writing's unique textuality. Previously inappropriate kinds of textualities are accepted as just other

textualities of life. Conceptual writers take responsibility for staking the grammars, syntaxes, lexicons, stylesheets, modes, speeds, media, and proprietary statuses of these outsider textualities as legitimate problematics of literature.

Those characteristics are then further extended as premises for decisions about dissemination that the literary industry would normally preserve for publishers. Conceptual Writing, in the spirit of small-press communities but with the networking advantages of digital life, has proposed a new mode of readerly experience that is ripe for a peer-to-peer commons of literature. Only in this commons, and only when understood as fundamentally socio-relational, can the unique (dissymmetrical and doubled) subjectivity of the writer who would be a Conceptual Writer be fully uncovered as the consumer-writer-qua-consumer-writers. A Conceptual Writer is never an Author because she never works in isolation nor to isolate herself. In fact, she determinedly overdoes the opposite, and in doing so she explores the importance of the proposition “publishing as praxis” to the question “who takes responsibility for that text?” That proposition might be the theoretical crux to understanding the peculiar way that Conceptual Writing reproduces textualities – inverting standard manufacturing logics in a practice of reproduction-as-production – and has itself been reproduced as an institutional category, given that its conditions of existence are *founded on the tensions between* (1) “the horizons of the publishable”¹⁰ and (2) the institutions of literature plus its criticisms.

The critical potential of this socio-relational writer-subjectivity – which I take to be Conceptual Writing’s political import – depends upon stubbornly contesting traditional identitarian logics. First, doing this, and maintaining the dynamic praxicality that has been a strength of this community to date, means refusing the comforts of traditional historical categories like “movement” or “school.” Conceptual Writing was a wrong turn. Rather than a proper name, this community might better keep alive its dynamism under the cover of a common noun: conceptual writing (with “c” and “w” in sentence case) would be an appropriately inappropriate way of signifying a collective refusal to be comfortably integrated. Second, being critical, as a highly literate yet destabilizing influence, is best actioned from a non-dependent position *inside* the context that the work is problematizing. When this happens, conceptual writing forms an immanent institutional critique of literature by shifting modes of writing from the outside of literature to its inside.

These outsider modes of writing can also be explored qua writing in registers other than literature, from inside looser fields like contemporary art. There, for example, one can work through the question “What does art make it possible to write and to think?” In doing so, one can pose a challenge to the sanctity

of literary writing from the outside. Conceptual writing lends itself to this kind of fluidity for a complex of reasons that gravitate around the mongrel, pluralist, multilingual transience of both Western urban sociality and, even more fully, the relationalities of network culture. Conceptual writing is one unexpected progeny of the attitudes and technologies of these new networks “contaminating” the culture industry – it is the bastard consequence that stubbornly refuses to ignore its currency or potential. Conceptual writing’s political potential, to explore rather than accept the subjectivity of contemporary writers as relational consumers, depends on its continuing to be a stubborn bastard.

3. Praxis for a Reality Altogether Dangerous and Unique

The discourse of conceptual writing is becoming consciously unresolved somewhere between aesthetics and poetics via media theory. Understandings of politicality and criticality are either imported from one or other of these fields and taken for granted, or not discussed. Both situations are inadequate. The former gives starting points by situating the new in familiar frames of reference; references that fast appear superimposed rather than reflexive. The latter is based on either (1) a wish to avoid fixing the potential political meanings of these writings as artworks (which would, of course, allow the potential that they might always mean more) or (2) a hangover of the modernist moral paradigm of the artist as a trans-ethical aesthete, both of which perversely undervalue conceptual writing’s political potential by overvaluing the conceptual writer as if she were an Author. The former and the latter understandings both risk missing the *specific* potentials of conceptual writing – as the style of living of capitalist subjects who work as consumer-writers-qua-consumer-writers vis-à-vis the proposition “publishing as praxis,” for whom any politic based on being removed is antithetic. Conceptual writing renders conceptually productive the ambiguity of the dissymmetrical double subject, consumer-writer, via the social determinations specific to its conditions of existence outlined above. And, on the shoulders of a broad, rich history of anti-normative writers, conceptual writing exploits this ambiguity with a unique intensity.

Conceptual writing has found opportunities and conversations in a range of disciplinary contexts. But it can only be fully thought as an itinerant sub-context of the longer, broader macro-context of conceptualist cultural production. Conceptualism has been a determinedly difficult subject-object for history. In the arts it is distinguished by the privileging of conceptuality in material acts – a privileging that can best be described as an approach to making. When

understood as an approach, rather than a historical category, conceptual writing can be fully unfurled. The conceptual writer uses this approach to unfold the political subjectivity of being consumer-writer-qua-consumer-writers like a trickster at work in a dangerous and unique reality. In turns she inflates then short-circuits the horizons of writing and the horizons of the publishable.

Yet unlike those tricksters modeled on Loci and famed by anthropology, the conceptual writer lives, consumer-writer-qua-consumer-writers, with the responsibility of a citizen-subject¹¹ for the consequences of their work – a work that is more than mischief.¹² Critics of conceptual writing would like this trickster quality to be diminutive – a characterization that typifies how such writers flit and play. Instead, it is the very quality that accelerates conceptual writing beyond capitalism's control, as something too unstable to domesticate. When these works hyperextend the singular logic of turbo-capitalist production, *they go too far ...*

First, rather than overworking the worker, conceptual writing overworks the machineries of writing and publishing, in a post-industrial spirit of tooling and subcontracting. As a conceptualist approach, it is premised on a creative repurposing of found techniques. Those repurposings become manifest as highly competent misuses of everyday machineries. Those machineries are the basic means of production for both (1) subject-to-subject communications in networked societies and (2) the contemporary literary industry. Those machineries range from strictures on grammatical analysis to desktop publishing softwares.

Second, although the synthesis of consumption and cultural production in conceptual writing could be the perfect channeling of cultural energy for capitalism, at the moment Western societies are not yet ready to live with the full consequences of this collapse. Capitalism has not yet smoothed the whole of life quite enough to stop citizen-subjects believing that – rightly or wrongly – literary writing should be better than the languages with which they administer and communicate their everyday lives, even though those administrations and communications happen through semi-discrete publishing channels, like email, which depend upon the same networks as indiscrete publishing. Historically, culture has always been an ideological apparatus that provides a vent for differently purposed creativity and a sandbox that can be capitalized for R&D. If the culture industry fully accepted the alterity of conceptual writing, the very tenets of that industry, like intellectual property, would be brought into disrepute. By overworking this paradox conceptual writing exploits one of the inherent contradictions of capitalist life. If all literature was conceptual writing, then we would have something like a paralysis *or* nervous breakdown of the category “literature.”

4. Towards New Literacies

Transposing the anti-institutional utopianisms of the last century as critical frameworks for conceptual writing will always create unnecessary political impasses. These utopianisms are inappropriate for two main reasons. First, the spectrum and make-ups of institutional models within the civic and non-civic fields of culture have grown so rapidly in the last thirty years that the identity and function of “the institution” assumed by those utopianisms are out of date. That identification might not be wrong, but it is now too simple to be right. Second, as I have claimed above, the institutions of literature plus its criticisms are (along with the horizons of the publishable) the very conditions for the existence of conceptual writing.

Rather than being anti-institutional, conceptual writing operates immanently as an institutional critique that uses conceptualist processes to produce kinds of textualities that those institutions cannot prevent because they cannot imagine (them). Without these tensions with the institutions of literature, conceptual writing would be indistinct from the cultures of YouTube, the book arts etc.; or maybe worse, it could be muddled with the bland internationalist neo-conceptualism that dominates the culture of contemporary gallery art. (If conceptual writing is, or rather was, *Conceptual Writing*, then its limit propositions and historical dialectic *may* have been played out already, or it *may* have been just another post-conceptualism right from the start.)

However, I want to advocate a different kind of utopianism. Zygmunt Bauman has made a sociological life project from attempting to recover the idea of socialism as an active utopia from any actually existing socialism. As an active utopia socialism might form a horizon that can unveil the realism of capitalism as supposed not natural. This kind of utopia is made active, as opposed to being *merely* idealistic, when communities are willing to live towards its horizons, as if they were principles based on an incentive but without any promise of their fulfilment.¹³ *This* kind of utopianism, with an emphasis on the question(s) of community and work, might be an ethical framework with which conceptual writing can continue to excavate its peculiar political potential, if that potential is, as I am speculating, based on an absolute over-engagement with the relations and machineries of being significant in the contemporary everyday.

I have argued that the conceptual writer is a trickster who hyperextends the singular logic of turbo-capitalist production before capitalist ideology has become really real enough to smooth society into accepting that literary culture might be the purely surfacial work of non-Authorial labourers. This unique

intensity – based on the tensions created by overworking the machineries of publishing and the institutions of literature plus its criticisms through conceptualist writing methods – can render conceptual writing’s specific textualities *conceptually productive* for a politics that is willing to work towards a different kind of realism. But if that politics is to have any social purchase, and if my earlier claim (that how conceptual writing works as work depends as much on what we do *with* conceptual writing as it does on what we do *as* conceptual writing) is correct, then the community needs to figure a notion of responsibility with which it can work open the specific question(s) of community that only it can pose to politics, beyond the limitations of given statuses like Conceptual Writing or “pirate.”

I suspect that that collective process of figuring what responsibility means for conceptual writing’s community members will involve developing newly appropriate literacies that might fully unfold the guiding question “Who takes responsibility for that text?” again and again and again and ... and always differently. To my mind, developing these literacies so as to figure what responsibility might mean for contemporary writer-subjects who work (through praxes) towards desubjectivation is the specific political potential of the dis-symmetrically doubled consumer-writer-qua-consumer-writers. Unresolving this approach to writing as a stubborn, wild bastard of a common noun makes this potentiality conceptually productive in a way that Conceptual Writing prematurely closes down.

Notes

- 1 Transcript of a lecture given at Bristol University, 1987. Printed in *New Left Review* 1.175 (May–June 1989): 48–52.
- 2 This diagnosis, of capitalism having become a social realism, was eloquently developed by Mark Fisher in *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zero Books, 2009).
- 3 The idea of a “conceptualism in the wild” was coined by Darren Wershler. On the idea of humans as creative beings capable of positive and negative praxes, see Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844) and *German Ideology* (1846).
- 4 Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and *German Ideology*.
- 5 Under different conditions, and with a different kind of political self-consciousness, this was the terrain of Andy Warhol, who may prove as provocatively valuable to Conceptual Writing as Marcel Duchamp was to Conceptual Art.
- 6 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction. Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002): 18.
- 7 For instance, in McCaffery’s 1977 first version of “The Death of the Subject” he committed to a “Language-centered writing” that aims to disrupt the fallacy of referentiality by making the cipher in poetry something polysemic and

complicating. Disjuncture, decomposition, and fragmentation are all aesthetic traits of said Language poetry, aligning the work of Language poetry with the Marxist-Althusserian tradition of subject-centring resistance and anti-commodification after Adorno and the early Frankfurt school.

- 8 Cornelia Klinger, "On the Aesthetic Ideology of Modernity," in *Modernologies* (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani, 2009): 25–38.
- 9 Ali Dur and McKenzie Wark, "New New Babylon," *October* 138 (Fall 2011): 37–56.
- 10 On the constitutive relationship between literarity and "the horizons of the publishable," see Rachel Malik, "Fixing Meaning: Intertextuality, Inference and the Horizons of the Publishable," *Radical Philosophy* 124 (2004): 13–26.
- 11 Étienne Balibar, "Citizen Subject," in *Who Comes after the Subject?*, ed. E. Cadava et al. (London: Routledge, 1991): 33–57.
- 12 Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World* (New York: Northpoint Press, 1998). Also, Jean Fisher, "Towards a Metaphysics of Shit," in *Documenta XI – Platform 5: Exhibition Catalogue* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2002): 63–70.
- 13 Zygmunt Bauman, *Socialism: The Active Utopia* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1976). On the idea of utopias as "imaginative incentives" see Leszek Kolakowski, "The Devil in History," a conversation with George Urban, *Encounter* (January 1981): 12.

The Bioinformatic Sublime: The Life of Data and the Data of Life in Conceptual Writing

We are drawn into a vast edifice of data that can overwhelm as much as it excites. Could we begin to feel some of the same awe at this boundless realm of information that earlier generations felt towards the extremities of the natural world—an “information sublime”?

Robert Pepperell¹

The methodology of biopolitics is therefore informatics, but a use of informatics in a way that reconfigures biology as an information resource. In contemporary biopolitics, the body is a database, and informatics is the search engine.

Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker²

This essay explores the notion of a bioinformatic sublime to be found in recent writing from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada – specifically in Christian Bök’s *Xenotext*, Sarah Jacobs’s *Deciphering Chromosome 16*, Kim Rosenfield’s *re:evolution*, and Steven Tomasula and Steven Farrell’s *VAS: An Opera in Flatland*. All four of these works feature textual representations of DNA coding. (The *Xenotext* is a special case, since it attempts “to encode a short sequence of verse in order to implant it into a bacterium.”)³ By adopting the textual (and visual) forms of DNA sequences, these authors point to the diversity of the underlying codes of life. These works, I suggest, invoke a rhetoric of combinatory multiplicity as a means to resist the *misappropriation* of biological information. I use the term *misappropriation* deliberately in this context: much of the writing under discussion in this essay consists of appropriated texts and images which draw attention to the complex new realities of what Eugene Thacker calls “biological exchange”: “the circulation and distribution of biological information, be it in a material or immaterial instantiation, that is mediated by one or more value

systems.”⁴ Conceptual works which feature bioinformatic motifs, I argue, draw attention to value systems that are often in conflict with one another – in so doing, raising important questions related to sociobiology, eugenics, information allocation, medical ethics, intellectual property, and personal privacy.

These works draw on the legacy of 1960s conceptual art’s interest in informatics– as embodied in the 1970 exhibitions *Information* and *Software: Its New Meaning for Art* or in individual works such as Donald Burgy’s “Checkup.”⁵ They also draw on the feminist politicization of the body and of reproductive politics within 1970s performance art.⁶ But these works are indicative of utterly transformed informatic and biopolitical realities as well. In Burgy’s 1970 “Checkup,” “medical information is the artwork.” Burgy directs himself to “observe the order of yourself at several levels of magnitude: atom, molecule, cell, organ, organism, society, species.”⁷ “Checkup” is in a sense a work of self-appropriation, a self-portrait that reveals the artist as a set of measurable phenomena. Burgy claimed that, “as medical, scientific and art information, this work exists as the extension and integration of several systems of observation ... Medicine and science provide the art work’s structure, which selects, amplifies and organizes information.”⁸ By today’s standards, Burgy’s “Checkup” provides a paltry amount of data. Rapid gene sequencing had yet to be invented; it would have been impossible for Burgy to provide much of the data that animates the projects described below.

Kenneth Goldsmith, Craig Dworkin, and Robert Fitterman have all suggested that among recent conceptual writing’s most important departures from 1960s conceptualism is its emphasis on the wholesale appropriation of electronically mediated texts.⁹ Such textual *reproductions* produce many effects: they mimic, parody, and critique existing texts; they also explore the global implications of emergent communications and medico-scientific technologies. Far from rejecting “referentiality” or “expression” out of hand, these works suggest a complex and nuanced engagement with bioinformatics – from the microscopic code-script of the individual chromosome to the mathematical sublimity of the human genome. We need not look far for evidence of the bioinformatic sublime writ very small and very large: All human cells (except mature red blood cells) contain a complete human genome. A complete human genome contains some 3 billion DNA base pairs. A typical human body consists of some 100 trillion cells.¹⁰

“Bioinformatics” is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “the branch of science concerned with information and information flow in biological systems, esp. the use of computational methods in genetics and genomics.” The National Science Foundation describes the field more narrowly as “the use of computing for the acquisition, analysis, and retrieval of data.”¹¹ The emergence

of bioinformatics as a field can plausibly be traced to Erwin Schrödinger's early 1940s claim that all genetic programming can be reduced to a code-script; but the word's earliest use is recorded as 1976. In that same year, Richard Dawkins's *Selfish Gene* introduced "the meme" as "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*." Dawkins further suggested, on the model of the computer, that the meme pool was overpopulated: "Any user of a digital computer knows how precious computer times and memory storage space are. At many large computer centres they are literally costed in money; or each use may be allotted a ration of time, measured in seconds, and a ration of space, measured in 'words.' The computers in which memes live are human brains."¹² Dawkins, like most scientists and science fiction writers of the time, did not predict the truly sublime capacities of personal computers to store and exchange information. Or rather, I should say that he did not predict the sublime effects of the computer, since the sublime (in Kant's terms) does not inhere in objects, but in the state of mind in which we comprehend our cognitive inferiority in the face of overwhelming natural forces. In relation to information technology, over the past two decades writers have variously used (with a considerable degree of inexactitude and overlap) the terms "digital sublime," "information sublime," "data sublime," and "bureaucratic sublime" – all of which, presumably, are sub-categories of the technological sublime.¹³

In recent Anglo-American writing, the bioinformatic sublime typically takes two forms: (1) a nano-sublime of the myriad complexity of genetic coding and cell biology and (2) a cosmic sublime that implies a noetic or global consciousness.¹⁴ These two sublimes often exist in close proximity. Don DeLillo's 2004 novel *Cosmopolis* provides a good example of the intertwining of the nano and cosmic sublimes:

He looked past Chin toward streams of numbers running in opposite directions. He understood how much it meant to him, the roll and flip of data on a screen. He studied the figural diagrams that brought organic patterns into play, birdwing and clambered shell. It was shallow thinking to maintain that numbers and charts were the cold compression of unruly human energies, every sort of yearning and midnight sweat reduced to lucid units in the financial markets. In fact data itself was soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process. This was the eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems, now fully realized in electronic form, in the zero-oneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every breath of the planet's living billions. Here was the heave of the biosphere. Our bodies and oceans were here, knowable and whole.¹⁵

The passage is recorded from the perspective of a technophilic billionaire during an implausible daylong traffic jam in midtown Manhattan. The protagonist envisions a beautiful cosmic order in which numbers accurately correspond to labour and productivity, and wherein the binary code of computation ensures a rational, purposive vitalism. Data here is not merely the substrata of life, it is life itself, having evolved into its present, most advanced informatic form. DeLillo, though caught up in describing the wonders of the bioinformatic sublime, is less optimistic about the “digital imperative” than his protagonist. Like DeLillo, the cyberpunk movement in science fiction relies heavily on sublime descriptions, particularly as manifested in the overwhelming compression of space implied in William Gibson’s cyberspace or Neal Stephenson’s metaverse.¹⁶ What is different about the bioinformatic sublime in the works under discussion here is the degree to which they emphasize the specific details (and code-scripts) of biological transmission and genetic coding.

The bioinformatic sublime in these works both substantiates and complicates Lev Manovich’s claim that

data visualization art is concerned with the anti-sublime. If Romantic artists thought of certain phenomena and effects as un-representable, as something which goes beyond the limits of human senses and reason, data visualization artists aim at precisely the opposite: to map such phenomena into a representation whose scale is comparable to the scales of human perception and cognition.¹⁷

Manovich’s description is well suited to describing a distinctly technophilic perspective on creating beautiful, ordered works from massive data sets.¹⁸ But his description of the anti-sublime impulse is less well suited to works that offer more skeptical responses to information technologies. According to Manovich, within data visualization art “the macro and the micro, the infinite and the endless are mapped into manageable visual objects that fit within a single browser frame.”¹⁹ This claim, made in 2002, already seems dated. Many works from the past decade – whether intended primarily as visual art or as literature – explicitly thematize the unmanageability of data and/or explore the dangers of an uncritical embrace of direct representation, whether that representation takes place on a screen, a page, a wall, or even – as in the cases of Eduardo Kac, Pak Wong, and Christian Bök – within the sequencing of DNA. Despite the (declared) completion of the Human Genome Project in 2003, most non-scientists are no closer to comprehending the vast complexities of the genome, and many, if not most, attempts to draw conclusions about human social behaviour based upon bioinformatic data remain reductive at best. As

Eugene Thacker writes, “any critical assessment of biomedica must begin with the issue of reductionism.”²⁰ The works described in this essay resist the kind of biological reductivism described by Thacker. They also draw attention to what Sunder Rajan calls “biocapital,” the relationship between biotechnology and market forces.²¹

What I am calling the bioinformatic sublime is often described interchangeably in terms of the beautiful. According to Victoria Vesna, for instance, “DNA is probably the most beautiful example of database aesthetics and certainly points to the importance of grasping the efficiency and beauty of design that nature employs in all life.”²² In many instances, DNA is indeed represented as inherently beautiful; for the most part in the writing under discussion here, DNA is represented as so fundamental and so conceptually complex as to defy the limits of comprehension. For Joseph Tabbi,

the sublime persists as a powerful emotive force in postmodern writing, especially in American works that regard reality as something newly mediated, predominantly, by science and technology. Kant’s sublime object, a figure for an infinite greatness and infinite power in nature that cannot be represented, seems to have been replaced in postmodern literature by a technological process. Now, when literature fails to present an object for an idea of absolute power, the failure is associated with technological structures and global corporate systems beyond the comprehension of any one mind or imagination.²³

The bioinformatic sublime demonstrates well the concatenation of science, technology, and mediation that Tabbi suggests results in a persistent state of global uncertainty. As Eli Pariser has recently written, “from megacities to nanotech, we’re creating a global society whose complexity has passed the limits of individual comprehension.”²⁴

By linking literary form to DNA (and to genetic coding more generally), the works in this essay suggest a homology between contemporary writing and contemporary biopolitics. These works imply that literary form is recombinatory, although they leave unanswered many questions concerning literary, technological, and biological evolution. The notion that literary form is analogous to, or based in, bioinformatics can perhaps be traced to William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin’s cut-up method, in which language is likened to a virus and appropriated materials are likened to molecular components.²⁵ It should be noted that the works described in this essay all partake of multiple genres – all feature essayistic or paratextual explanatory materials of some kind, but they also

feature to varying degrees lyric poetry, popular song, found advertisements, and fiction. As a novel, *VAS* is perhaps the outlier in this set of works, but it too describes itself as multi-generic: an opera, a novel, and a visual account. Like the *Xenotext*, *Deciphering Chromosome 16*, and *re: evolution*, *VAS* implies a metaphoric relation between genre and genetics, suggesting also a broad analogy between genre hybridity and species variety.²⁶

Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles in particular have noted the powerful interconnections between informatics and literary texts, as when Hayles argues:

Changes in bodies as they are represented within literary texts have deep connections with changes in textual bodies as they are encoded within information media, and both types of changes stand in complex relation to changes in the construction of human bodies as they interface with communications technologies. The term I use to designate this network of relations is *informatics*. Following Donna Haraway, I take informatics to mean the technologies of information as well as the biological, social, linguistic, and cultural changes that initiate, accompany, and complete their development.²⁷

Hayles suggests a wide net of relations emerge from the contemporary engagement between technology and culture. Echoing her, I suggest that the conceptual works discussed here reveal a vast array of interconnections between language, media, and society. Collectively, these works have much to say about contemporary social relations; much of this is said indirectly or through appropriation. Despite the remarkable progress that has been made in genetics, there remains much to be discovered, and much to be explained.

Coordinated Sequencing: Sarah Jacobs's *Deciphering Human Chromosome 16: Index to the Report*

Published by the English press Information as Material, Sarah Jacobs's *Index to the Report* is a conceptually rich work, particularly when considered from the perspective of the bioinformatic sublime. Sarah Jacobs is described as a "coordinator," rather than an author, of her index to the sequence of human chromosome 16 (which was originally published as an e-text on Project Gutenberg).²⁸ *Index to the Report* draws on an earlier online work *We Report Here*, which in turn draws upon an article in *Nature* that first explored the implications of chromosome 16.²⁹ In a curious recirculation, *Nature* would subsequently publish a

favourable review of Jacobs's rewriting of material they had first published. The reviewer, Martin Kemp, wrote:

The report and the index are odd, difficult, perplexing, suggestive and strangely beautiful – and awesome in their numerical persistence. Jacobs has created something drawn directly from the science and its diffusion, using the tools of a bibliographer. Yet the result subverts the science in the direction of chaos and cacophony. The effect is analogous to the way that the particularity of each individual person seems to confound the overwhelming similarity of our genetic constitutions.³⁰

The language of the beautiful and the sublime – “awesome in their numerical persistence” – are found here in close proximity. Beautiful or not, *Index to the Report* is practically a textbook case of the mathematical sublime. Within a mere 552 pages, Jacobs is able to include (by her count) nearly 16 million letters of CGAT nucleic base code, squeezed onto almost every possible page space, and without margins. Jacobs admits her rendering is only partial; the complete sequence of chromosome 16 contains over 90 million letters.

One of *Index to the Report's* main features is a running numerical count that is superimposed on top of the CGAT nucleotide sequences. Although the underlying CGAT patterns dominate the book, *Index to the Report* also contains text found through Internet search engines. The result is a palimpsest that suggests a boundless interconnectedness. Web addresses are given particular prominence, but they often seem to be floating signifiers, not necessarily directly related to the text upon which they are overwritten. As Kemp suggests, *Index to the Report* is bibliographic in its design; but it is an incomplete bibliography whose sources are often difficult to trace. On the right margin appear slogans, or sound bites, such as “A NEW ALGORITHM TO DIFFERENTIATE MICRO-AND MAC.” It is not clear if this is found text or composed text; this particular sound bite could well describe the entire project of *Index to the Report*.

Jacobs's book, though it is by no means technophobic, points to fundamental differences between the methodologies of the sciences and the arts. The original *Nature* article upon which Jacobs based her project lists over one hundred co-authors – who, following Jacobs, could just as easily be described as “co-ordinators.”³¹ Predominant humanistic notions of individual creative expression are not commensurate with “big science” on the scale of the Human Genome Project. Jacobs does not offer a programmatic biopolitical agenda; her project instead speaks to forms of complexity and connectivity for which we continue to lack adequate conceptual frameworks.

The Alien within Goes Viral: Christian Bök's *Xenotext*

Christian Bök's *Xenotext*, were it to accomplish its aims, might well be the most sublime poem ever to emerge on this planet. I say *to emerge*, rather than *to be created*, because the poem is partially self-creating – a living message encoded in DNA. The text of the poem remains to be determined “under the biochemical constraints of [the] experiment” and is “to address the relationship between language and genetics, doing so, self-reflexively and self-analytically” (6). It is important that the *Xenotext* is self-replicating, and indebted to Burroughs's notion of writing as a virus. Its goal is not merely reproduction within a host body, but rather the supplementing of the human as creator by way of a machinic autopoetics.

Like *Cosmopolis*, the *Xenotext* exhibits the close relation between the nano and the cosmic sublime:

Such a poem might begin to demonstrate that, through the use of nanoscopic, biological emissaries, we might begin to transmit messages across stellar distances or even epochal intervals – so that, unlike any other cultural artifact so far produced (except perhaps for the Pioneer probes or the Voyager probes), such a poem, stored inside the genome of a bacterium, might conceivably outlast terrestrial civilization itself, persisting like a secret message in a bottle flung at random in a giant ocean.³²

On multiple levels, the *Xenotext* places human authorship in question. It is arguably a suprahumanist text, in the sense that it fulfills all of the humanist goals of creative expression: it is enduring, it is meaningful, and it is universal. But the *Xenotext* is also both posthumanist and postvital – it is self-reflexive to the extent that it takes on an existence independent of writer and reader. Presumably the poem, or “message,” that Bök encodes within nucleotide sequences will translate into English words and English syntax.

It is difficult to write criticism about a poem that does not yet exist; nonetheless, several preliminary observations can be made. The *Xenotext* makes for a fascinating study in contradictions; the poem is described as overcoming mortality, and yet the poem is not a fixed textual object but rather a life form that could face extinction. The poem elides cultural difference in its use of language, and yet the very title of the poem suggests a perennial foreignness. Whether or not the poem ever takes on a life of its own, it has value as a document of what Bök refers to as the “surrational,” as a pataphysical test of the limits of art and science. As Bök puts it in a sweeping chiasmus, “If poetry has failed

to oppose science by being its antonymic extreme, then perhaps poetry can attempt to oppose science by being its hyperbolic extreme."³³ To operate as the antonymic extreme of science, poetry typically remains a nostalgic form. Bök's work is anything but nostalgic; it reminds us that there is much that we cannot cognize and that much remains to be discovered. The underlying codes of life will always remain in some sense foreign to our cultural preconceptions, and yet without those codes there would be no life and no poetry.

re: re: evolution

The polyvalent title of Kim Rosenfield's *re: evolution* gives an idea of the sweeping range of its materials and its implications. As the title suggests, *re: evolution* is a book about evolution and about revolution and about the politics of the "biotech revolution." Jennifer Calkins aptly sums up the book's range in her afterword: "*re: evolution* encompasses organism, group, gender, process, interpretation, and history, using lyrical embodiment, to create the argument that in biology, as elsewhere, complexity and dynamism are beautiful."³⁴ As with instances noted above, I would suggest that the term "beautiful" here might easily be replaced by the term "sublime."

Chapter 4, which is only one page long, is indicative of *re: evolution's* digressive style. The chapter begins with the familiar four bases found in DNA, but with the exception of "adenoids" these letters do not correspond to conventional CGAT notation. A footnote immediately leads us to the bottom of the page (and chapter end) where we find "genetic material" compared to the "acid of desire."³⁵ The "acid of desire" is a characteristically resonant description. By profession a psychotherapist, Rosenfield frequently points to the ambiguities and hypocrisies of human desire: "acid of desire" could refer cryptically to LSD, or it could refer directly to DNA (rarely referred to by its full name, deoxyribonucleic acid). Water might even constitute the "acid of desire," since it acts as a universal solvent, and is essential to the reproduction of organic life.

Underpinning many of the themes and motifs of *re: evolution* is the book's attempt to render biological phenomena on the level of literary form. As Sianne Ngai writes in her introduction to the book,

Rosenfield conducts her investigation of literary change by experimenting with linguistic junk and vestigial forms, mixing show tunes with textbook captions, advertising names of enzymes, as if to test which forms, in which combinations,

CHAPTER 4

(A, T, G, C)⁶

ATTCGACGG
ATT CGA CCG

Z=sugar
F=phosphate
A=adenoids
C=city dwellers
G=guano
T=timid ness

When chromosomes duplicate, molecules hang like dinner lamps. Then two neophyte molecules form and identify their origins. This is the whirl in which genius might be transmitted in general succession. The genetic message of DNA is content with these lewd sequencings.

Three base sequences codify together and when the basest sequence is treated in an amicable manner, it cries out for protection or protein.

Once there was an error in the duplication of DNA and one base event was substituted for another. The base sequence became lost, old, and aggravated.

Informational genetics stay flushed and alone from DNA gone straight to hell.

This is what we call "dogma central."

6. The structure of genetic material, the acid of desire, nuclear, is based on an after-structure uniting phosphate and sugar alternatively and turning to the left.

still seem available and which ones likely to die out. Unlike others fascinated by the archaic and obsolete, Rosenfield's experiment with maladaptation as the motor of poetic development is thus explicitly anti-nostalgic, oriented to the future rather than the past.³⁶

Ngai's description points to the complex implications of identifying biological forms with cultural forms. Rosenfield's many fragmentary appropriations undermine any sense of evolutionary teleology, and they place in question both pop cultural and medico-scientific explanations for human reproductive behaviour. Rosenfield can be direct, and even didactic, in making claims such as "Emotions are culturally / And historically / Specific" or "No nature outside culture."³⁷ And yet her syntax can also often be disjointed and playful; the aim of *re: evolution* would seem to be reveal a remarkable plenitude of biological and reproductive metaphors, without falling prey to biological determinism. As Calkins writes of the book, "In situations, such as evolutionary psychology, where the human is the interest, simplification will lead to erroneous conclusions."³⁸

"I Contain Multitudes": *VAS: An Opera in Flatland*

VAS is the story of a man's vasectomy, which begins with his procrastination in signing medical consent forms and ends with him on the operating table. The book is categorized as "FICTION/DESIGN" on its back cover; it also describes itself in its title as an operatic rewriting of Edwin Abbott's *Flatland: A Romance in Many Dimensions*. *VAS* is perhaps the least conceptual work described here, and might more typically be classified as an artist's book or a graphic novel. Nonetheless, *VAS* shares a number of features in common with *Index to the Report, re: evolution*, and *The Xenotext Project*. *VAS* contains, for instance, 25 pages of the unexpurgated sequence to chromosome 12. It shares in common with *re: evolution* a strong interest in reproductive politics and eugenics. And like all the works discussed so far, it attempts to apply innovative literary forms to changing biological and bioinformatic realities.

On the levels of narrative and syntax, *VAS* is comparatively straightforward. On the level of design, it is extraordinarily elaborate, and uniquely varied in its selection of visual and documentary materials. The cover of the book, made to look like skin, and featuring a sequence of CGAT code, suggests that the book itself is a kind of living record. Susan Vanderborg has written of the rich implications of *VAS*'s use (and reuse) of evolutionary records:

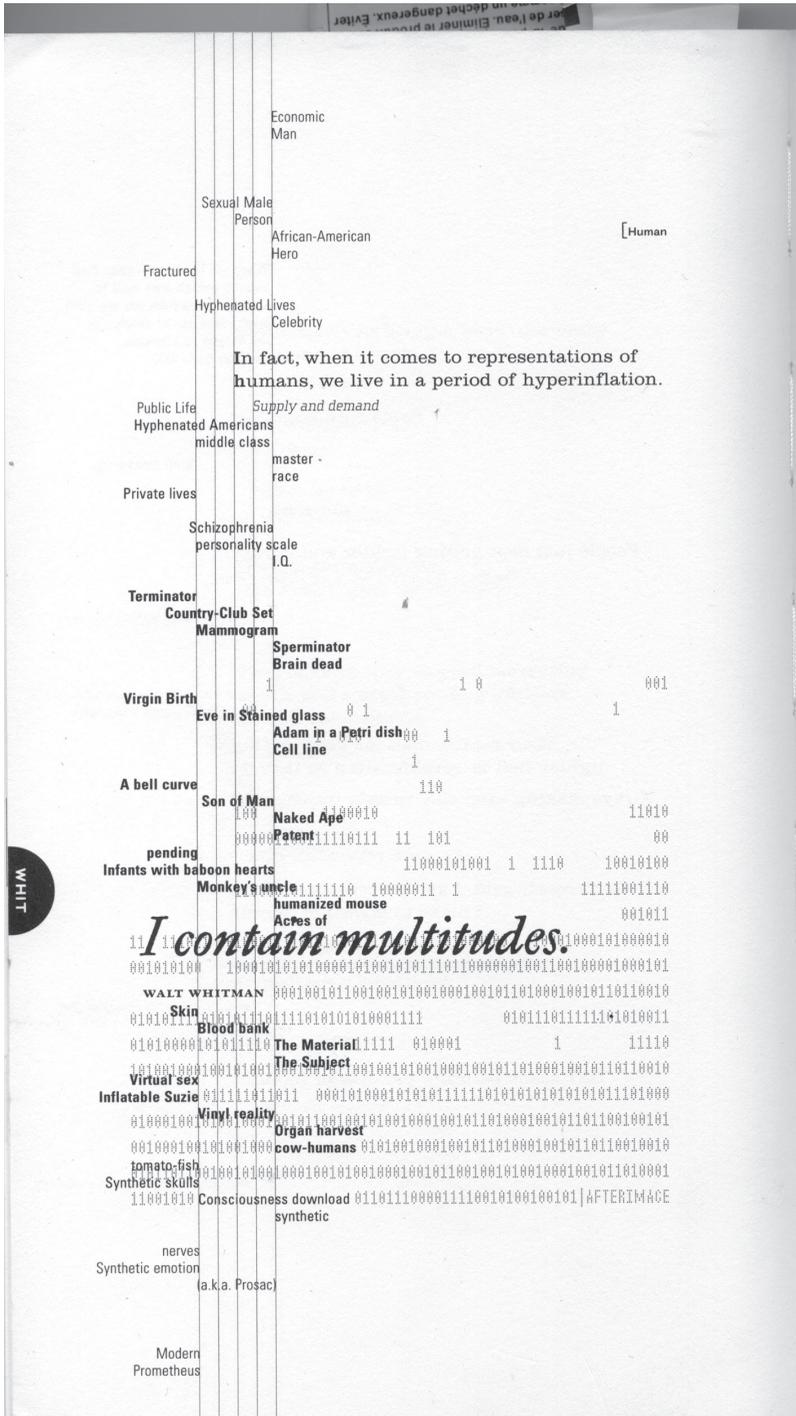
VAS focuses on the ambiguities, omissions, and fallacies in our conflicting definitions of human identity, records that not only expose their sources' biases but can occasionally offer more chances for a "revisionist history" of bodies and communities than their authors had ever intended. VAS's notes on these imperfect texts invite us to reexamine the limits of our own revisionary agency as interpreters and transmitters of evolutionary records.³⁹

In the figures on pages 284–5, for instance, sequences of CGAT code are interspersed with messages, such as "DOUBLE HELIXES/BEING/BOTH MESSAGE AND MATERIAL."⁴⁰ The five vertical lines that run through the page could suggest five-line musical staff notation. The five lines also makes four columns, perhaps bookkeeping spaces for the four letters of CGAT. The page could be read as an operatic score as well as a biological record. Below this we read: "THE PROBLEM WAS THAT THE POOL WAS SO VAST HE COULD BE SWIMMING IN IT OFTEN UNAWARES."⁴¹ The vastness of the gene pool is a recurrent them of VAS – the protagonist, Square, often cites sublime statistics. The narrative suspense of the book essentially has to do with whether or not Square should remove himself from the gene pool. "When it comes to representations of humans, we live in a period of hyperinflation," he notes.⁴² Like *re: evolution*, VAS repeatedly draws parallels between sexual and textual forms of reproduction. Whitman's "I contain multitudes" is a supremely concise expression of the impossibility of separating oneself from one's society and one's environment. In the end, the heterosexual Square, like the homosexual Whitman, would seem to opt for textual reproduction over sexual reproduction.

Post(code)script: Conceptual Writing and the (Post-)Human Computer

I want to conclude with a few speculative remarks about the bioinformatic sublime in relation to conceptualism more generally. First, I would note that conceptualism's initial period of ascendancy (1963–70) is roughly coterminous with the rise of the mainframe computer and the beginnings of the information society.⁴³ Second, the rise of conceptual writing (2003–now) is roughly coterminous with the rise of Web 2.0 and with the widespread availability of increasingly detailed bioinformatic data (e.g., the declared completion of the Human Genome Project in 2003).

Allusions to the "posthuman" and the "postvital" abound in the works described in this essay. In many respects, it is now possible to read the



Stephen Farrell and Steve Tomasula, *VAS: An Opera in Flatland*.

“dematerialization of the word” within conceptual art as also a rematerialization of the word. By attempting to construct an art of ideas, conceptual artists in fact frequently drew attention to the ways in which language is mediated (and remediated). I would propose that a comparable critique of the “disembodiment of the word” is taking place within conceptual writing. One of the most common themes within recent media theoretical scholarship is that we should be wary of any ideology that, in Katherine Hayles terms, reifies “information into a free-floating, decontextualized, quantifiable entity.”⁴⁴ Invoking the bioinformatic sublime tends to provoke the opposite effect: we are forced to see ourselves as organic life forms inhabiting a vast ecosystem of which we are a part. *re: evolution* points to the irreducible interrelationship of life forms: “Earth is not simply a palace that represents evolution – *it is also the author of that representation.*”⁴⁵ The Gaia hypothesis (itself formulated in the early 1970s) implies that evolution (and by extension bioinformatic transmission) takes place on a planetary scale. We cannot step outside of our bodies and their genetic programming – but this does not mean that that programming in itself is exclusively, or even primarily, determinant of our life choices or our social structures.

The “Book of Life” is a surprisingly resilient metaphor, even when divested of its religious overtones. No matter how much information is contained in the Book of Life, however, it will leave unanswered many of the most pressing bioethical questions. In *On Beyond Living*, Richard Doyle argues that “the sublime object of biology is no longer the life that is beyond disease and the organism, visibly invisible; instead, it is the continual story that there is nothing more to say, a story of resolution told in higher and higher resolution.”⁴⁶ The data of the living processes that sustain our lives is available in ever greater quantities; genetic engineering offers profound promise and profound risk. There may be “nothing more to say” about life or about the afterlife; but artists and writers continue to have much to say about the forms which constitute life. The “sublime object of biology” is not data in the aggregate, but rather the myriad ways in which we explore the limits of life in the midst of an ongoing revolution in our understanding of biological processes.

Notes

- 1 Robert Pepperell, “An Information Sublime: Knowledge after the Postmodern Condition,” *Leonardo* 42.5 (October 2009): 384.
- 2 Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 74.
- 3 Christian Bök, *The Xenotext Experiment* (2007), http://www.ubu.com/ubu/unpub/Unpub_022_Bok_Xenotext.pdf.

- 4 Eugene Thacker, *The Global Genome: Biotechnology, Politics and Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 7.
- 5 See Kynaston MacShine, ed., *Information* (New York: MOMA Publications, 1970) and Jack Burnham, ed., *Software: Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1970). Donald Burgy, "Checkup," *Art in America* (March–April 1970), 108–11.
- 6 I am thinking here in particular of Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
- 7 Burgy, "Checkup," 108.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Robert Fitterman has described his use of appropriated texts "in large, unmodified chunks – a paragraph, a page, a whole book" as a method by which to "reframe works that already exist in new contexts ... which, in turn, instigates new ways to potentially realize our place as text artists in a network culture." *Rob the Plagiarist* (New York: Roof Books, 2008), 15. According to Goldsmith, "In the face of an unprecedented amount of digital text, writing needs to redefine itself in order to adapt to the new environment of textual abundance." *Uncreative Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 24. See also Dworkin's and Goldsmith's introductions to *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011).
- 10 These figures are taken from the website of the Human Genome Project, http://www.ornl.gov/sci/techresources/Human_Genome/project/info.shtml.
- 11 Quoted in Stephen Wilson, *Information Arts: Intersections of Art, Science and Technology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 57.
- 12 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 197.
- 13 Lev Manovich employs the term "data sublime" (see "The Anti-Sublime Ideal in Data Art," n. 17, below); Richard R. John, "the bureaucratic sublime," in *Spreading the News: The Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Robert Pepperell, "the information sublime" (see note 1); Vincent Mosco, "the digital sublime," in *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power and Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005). For a broad historical account, see David R. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).
- 14 The interplay between a nano-sublime and a macro-sublime goes back at least as far as Kant, who describes the sublime specifically in terms of the microscope and the telescope: "That is sublime in comparison with which everything else is small. We can easily see here that nothing in nature can be given, however large we judge it, that could not, when degraded all the way to the infinitely small, nor conversely anything so small that it could not, when compared with still small standards, be expanded for our imagination all the way to the magnitude of the world; telescopes have provided us with a wealth of material in support of the first point, microscopes in support of the second" (italics in original). Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Warner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 105–6.
- 15 Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 24.
- 16 See Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 149–55, and Joseph Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press,

- 1995), 208–27. See also the collection *Data Made Flesh: Embodying Information*, eds. Robert Mitchell and Phillip Thurtle (London: Routledge, 2004), which takes its title from Gibson’s *Neuromancer*.
- 17 Lev Manovich, “The Anti-Sublime Ideal in Data Art,” www.manovich.net/DOCS/data_art.doc.
- 18 I am thinking here of a work such as Sep Kamvar and Jonathan Harris’s *We Feel Fine: An Almanac of Human Emotions* (New York: Scribner, 2009), which draws on “a database of more than 12 million human feelings.”
- 19 Manovich, “The Anti-Sublime Ideal,” 12.
- 20 Eugene Thacker, “Biomedica,” in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 127.
- 21 Kaushik Sunder Rajan, *Biocapital: The Constitution of Postgenomic Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
- 22 Victoria Vesna, ed., *Database Aesthetics: Art in the Age of Information Overflow* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 4.
- 23 Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime*, ix.
- 24 Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 19.
- 25 See William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind* (New York: Viking, 1978). In “Technical Deposition of the Virus Power,” Burroughs describes the cut-up method in terms of a “technical code developed by the information theorists [and] written at the molecular level” (101).
- 26 I am tiptoeing here around the complex topic of the applicability of evolutionary models to literary forms. For more, see Franco Moretti’s *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary Theory* (London: Verso, 2005).
- 27 N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 29.
- 28 Sarah Jacobs, *Deciphering Chromosome 16: Index to the Report* (York: Information as Material, 2006).
- 29 Sarah Jacobs, *Deciphering Chromosome 16: We Report Here* (York: Information as Material, 2006), www.informationasmaterial.com/documents/HC16report_06_12_20.PDF.
- 30 Martin Kemp, “Science in Culture: Gene Expression,” *Nature* 446 (March 2007), <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v446/n7135/full/446496a.html>.
- 31 Joel Martin et al., “The Sequence and Analysis of Duplication-Rich Human Chromosome 16,” *Nature* 432.7020 (2004): 988–94.
- 32 *Xenotext*, 8.
- 33 Christian Bök, *Pataphysics: The Poetics of an Imaginary Science* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 13.
- 34 Kim Rosenfield, *re: evolution* (Los Angeles: Les Figs Press, 2008), 94.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 *Ibid.*, xiii.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 26, 13.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 94.
- 39 Susan Vanderborg, “Of ‘Men and Mutations’: The Art of Reproduction in Flatland,” *Journal of Artists Books* 24 (Fall 2008), 5.

- 40 Stephen Farrell and Steve Tomasula, *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 58.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Ibid., 298.
- 43 For an overview of conceptual art in relation to information and information technologies in the 1960s, see Eve Meltzer, "The Dream of the Information World," *Oxford Art Journal* 29.1 (2006), 115–35.
- 44 Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 19.
- 45 Rosenfield, *re: evolution*, 11.
- 46 Richard Doyle, *On Beyond Living: Rhetorical Transformations of the Life Sciences* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 20.

Two Dots over a Vowel

1. The Intentional in Conceptual Literature

Modern, social trends in computing (as seen, for example, in digitized sampling and networked exchange) have so thoroughly ensconced piracy and parody as sovereign, aesthetic values that not only do the economic edifices of copyright seem ready to collapse, but so also do the Romantic bastions of both sublime creativity and eminent authorship seem ready to dissolve into a morass of protoplasmic textualities, all manufactured at a prodigious, industrial scale by means of plagiaristic appropriation and computerized recombination. Varied pupils of the avant-garde at the listserv UbuWeb (including, among others, such poets as Caroline Bergvall, Craig Dworkin, Robert Fitterman, Kenneth Goldsmith, Simon Morris, Darren Wershler-Henry, and me) have all striven to respond to these trends by conceiving of an innovative literature that, for lack of an apter title, critics have seen fit to dub “conceptual.” Such poets disavow the lyrical mandate of self-conscious self-assertion in order to explore the ready-made potential of uncreative literature. They resort to a diverse variety of anti-expressive, anti-discursive strategies (including the use of forced rules, random words, copied texts, boring ideas, and even cyborg tools), doing so in order to erase any artistic evidence of “lyric style.”

Works by members of UbuWeb have often confronted the intentionality, if not the expressiveness, of such lyric style by offering alternatives to this normative condition of writing – alternatives inspired by such variegated precedents as the formalist writing of Perec, the aleatoric writing of Cage, the readymade artwork of Warhol, and the axiomatic artwork of LeWitt, among the work of many other writers and artists, all of whom have suppressed their subjective experience on behalf of otherwise demeaned concepts of literary activity. Poets who write conceptual literature often parody the principles of sublime egotism. Such writers might observe the self and examine the self, but they do so

with such exactitude and with such detachment that the act of reportage itself borders upon a kind of fanatical obsession.¹ Such writers might in turn generate unscripted recordings of the self speaking verbatim, in a kind of stream-of-consciousness, improvising without editorial revisions.² Such writers might also go so far as to generate exhaustive structures for the self, pushing the fulfilment of formal rigour to the most athletic extremes.³ Such writers might even delegate their creativity to a diverse variety of prostheses, all of which might compose work without intervention from the self at all.⁴

Works of conceptual literature have primarily responded to the historical precedents set by two disparate movements in the avant garde: first, the systematic writing of Oulipian pataphysicians (like Queneau, Roubaud, et al.); second, the procedural artwork of American conceptualists (like Kosuth, Huebler, et al.) – precedents that, in both cases, reduce creativity to a tautological array of preconceived rules, whose logic culminates, not in the mandatory creation of a concrete object, but in the potential argument for some abstract schema. Ideas that we conceive for works now become systemic “axioms,” and the works that we generate from these ideas now become elective “proofs.” The concept for the artwork now absorbs the quality of the artwork itself. The idea for a work supplants the work. The idea renders the genesis of the work optional, if not needless.⁵ For the proponents of conceptual literature, a writer no longer cultivates any subjective readerships by writing a text to be read, so much as the writer cultivates a collective “thinkership”⁶ – an audience that no longer even has to read the text itself in order to appreciate the importance of its innovation. The text no longer begs to be read clearly for the quality of its content, but rather begs to be seen blankly for the novelty of its concept.

Works of conceptual literature constitute what Dworkin might call “the writing of the new new formalism,”⁷ insofar as such literature imposes arbitrary, but axiomatic, dicta upon the writing process, doing so in order to extract an otherwise unthought potential from this structural constraint. The self-conscious attention paid by a lyrical poet to the life of the self now gives way to the self-reflexive attention paid by a radical text to the form of its idea. All aspects of both intentionality and expressiveness now find themselves governed, not by the whim of a poet, but by the rule of a game – a “language-game,” like the kind discussed by Wittgenstein, who argues that, when playing such a game, “we look to the rule for instruction and *do something*, without appealing to anything else for guidance.”⁸ The poet subordinates all subjectivity to this rule, replacing an act of volitive expression with an act of negative capability. The poet constrains the cognitive functions of the self on behalf of other aesthetic functions in the text (be these functions automatic, mannerist, or even

aleatoric). The poet thereby expands the concept of writing beyond the formal limits of any expressive intentions, doing so in order to conceive of hitherto inconceivable preconditions for writing itself.

Since the reign of the New Critics (like Wimsatt and Beardsley, for example), the values of both intentionality and expressiveness have come to represent recurrent “fallacies”⁹ of aesthetic judgement – fallacies that have served to ignore the traits of the poem itself in order to attach the merits of the work to the genius of a self. When judging a work based upon its intentionality, the critic evaluates the emotional “origins” of the work in the mind of the writer, doing so by asking: “How successful are the lyrical motives of the poem – and does the poet exert an authentic control over the self?” When judging a work for its expressiveness, however, the critic evaluates the emotional “results” in the mind of the reader, doing so by asking: “How persuasive are the lyrical effects of the poem – and does the poet voice an authentic message from the self?” No poem can easily answer such questions on its own – and thus critics have since sought to detach the merits of the text from the genius of the self, doing so in order to account, not only for the work’s autotelic coherence, but also for the work’s technical innovation. No longer is the author an actual person who might precede a text and certify its aims so much as the author has now become a “function”¹⁰ – operant, as a concept, through each reading of the text.

Poets who have produced conceptual literature have replaced the expressive intentions of such a self with a whole array of, apparently impossible, poetic values, arguing for the viability of work that skeptics might dismiss as uncreative, unoriginal, unengaging, unreadable, uninspired, uneventful ... Even though a poet like Goldsmith, for example, might describe his own acts of poetic tedium as nothing more than a banal brand of data management or word processing,¹¹ in which the poet becomes a kind of monk, doomed to recopy only the most leaden genres of boring speech in some nightmarish scriptorium, such work, nevertheless, still creates surprise and engages interest. Lest we dismiss these tactics of Goldsmith as nothing more than the mere symptoms of a creeping, literary necrosis, occasioned by the murder of the author at the hands of such postmodern theorizers as Barthes, for example, or perhaps Foucault¹² – let us consider that conceptual literature might strive to accent the disjunction between intentionality (*what we mean to mean*) and expressiveness (*what we seem to mean*). If the lyric voice, for the sake of an authentic sincerity, yearns to repair this breach between what we intend to say and what we appear to say – then conceptual literature, by contrast, accentuates this discrepancy.

2. The Expressible in Conceptual Literature

Allow me to illustrate the authorial attitudes of conceptual literature by digressing long enough to read “William Tell: A Novel”¹³ – one of the limit-cases of avant-garde narrative by the avant-garde theorizer Steve McCaffery. While this work of visual poetry is not, strictly speaking, a case of conceptual literature (like the kind written by members of UbuWeb), the literary premises of this “novel” nevertheless address the issues of both intentionality and expressiveness in a manner that UbuWeb might extoll. The image consists of a lowercase depiction of the letter I, enlarged to reveal that it is dotted on top, not with a point, but with a colon – a pair of dots, one above the other, like two tittles. The emblem, of course, evokes the stick-image of a figure, standing upraised at attention, with an apple upon its skull. The title tells us to treat the image as a novel – but such a novel must strain our credulity about the qualities of the genre, insofar as this story does not comprise thousands of sentences, but consists of nothing more than a single letter. A novel that lacks even words themselves might force us to rethink the minimal amounts of text that can qualify for such a form – particularly when we might easily peruse this letter with the same kind of scholarly apparatus otherwise dedicated to a lengthier chronicle.



“William Tell: A Novel”
by Steve McCaffery

While McCaffery has written a work that might, at first, seem too cryptic for any extended, literary analysis, such a “novel” does at least refer to the famed story of Tell, the medieval marksman from the village of Altdorf. Tell (in the apocryphal recounting) flouts the edicts of his Austrian overlord, Gessler – a Vogt who, in 1307, orders that all locals must bow before his hat, which sits atop a pole in the square of the hamlet. When Tell defies this decree, he gets arrested, and as a punishment for his insolence, he must prove his marksmanship by firing a crossbow at an apple, set up as a target, upon the head of his son, Walter – or else both the man and the boy must suffer immediate execution. Tell passes this awful trial, but nevertheless earns his incarceration after acknowledging that he has come to the test with two shots in his quiver, reserving one for the Vogt in case the child dies after the first salvo. Tell (bound and forced to board a ferry) gets taken to the keep of Gessler in Küsnacht – but during a tempest in transit on Lake Lucerne, Tell escapes from the hold of the ship and thus travels by land to the keep, where, with one shot from his crossbow, he obtains his revenge, murdering the Vogt, thereby fomenting a rebellion that leads to the confederation of the Swiss state.

While McCaffery alludes to this mythic legend, his abbreviation of it constitutes a kind of metafictional autobiography – a tale told in the first person from the perspective of Walter, the lowercase “character,” who occupies the position of the double-dotted letter on the page. We, the readers, play the role of the hero, and thus we fulfill the rising action of the story, since our gaze, when we read, becomes the arrow that we use to knock the added apple – the top dot – from the crown of the minuscule “i,” thereby reinstating the normal letter. We do not simply peruse this novel, so much as we impart action to it. We participate in a humorous allegory about the death of the author, insofar as we must defy his hold over us. He is a kind of poetic despot who, in this case, has forced a cruel trial of comprehension upon his readership, vandalizing the appearance of the minuscule “i” by adding an extraneous supplement to its meaning. By closely reading his otherwise illegible narrative – by interpreting it – we pass his vile test, and thus we return the disrupted “character” (the I of our subjective experience) to its normal status as one of the standard bearers for the lyric voice. If the author must consign the self to a state of jeopardy, then the critic, like a heroic reader, must restore this self to a state of security.

While McCaffery might lampoon the lyric genre of autobiography (by assigning the symbolic position of Walter to the letter I itself, so that the reader, in turn, acts like the father in the legend), the function of this double-dotted I is perhaps more ambiguous than such an initial reading might at first suggest. Who, for example, speaks on behalf of this letter I? Who embodies the pronoun at the instant of its enunciation? Who, in effect, gets to play the part of the child

with an apple on his crown? Is the pronoun a placeholder for the author who utters the letter when writing the novel? (If so, he thus oscillates between two roles – both the boyish victim and the unjust tyrant.) Or is the pronoun a placeholder for the reader who utters the letter when parsing the story? (If so, we also intershift between two roles – both the boyish victim and the heroic father.) Do not the author and the reader thus take turns, standing in for each other whenever they enunciate this I – thereby speaking with a lyric voice that, in this case, marks the position of a target, of a victim, at whom someone (like a critic) might take a potshot. Or does this I, in fact, have no referent, except for itself – so that the letter speaks on its own behalf, acting as an emblem for a crucial meaning over which the author and the reader might struggle?¹⁴

Given the avant-garde pedigree of an innovator like McCaffery, we might even augment these queries by arguing that such a queer novel, made from a single letter, justifiably constitutes an avant-garde allusion to the biography of Burroughs – an addict who becomes an author, only after shooting his wife dead, at a Mexican barroom in 1951, during a drunken version of the game “William Tell.” In contrast to the heroic figure from Altdorf, the outlaw junkie of Tangier misses the target, thereby authoring, without expressive intention, the murder of his wife, Joan: “The death of Joan [has] manoeuvred me into a lifelong struggle, in which I have had no choice except to write my way out.”¹⁵ He too spends a brief stint in jail (much like his medieval namesake), but after bribing the prosecuting bureaucrats, he ensures his release on bail. He goes on to write his first novel while awaiting an evermore deferred trial – but despite tampering with witnesses through further bribery, he concludes that his attorneys cannot win the case, and so he flees the country. In his absence, the court finds him guilty of homicide, for which he receives a sentence of two years, afterward suspended. He is, thus, an anti-hero – a “William” from one of the alternate universes, where the medieval marksman fails.

While the arch-hero “William” saves the targetted I, by hitting the mark, and thus, like a hitman, he must defend justice, the anti-hero “William” kills the targetted I, by missing his mark, and thus, like a conman, he must escape justice. Even though Burroughs might insist that “there is one Mark [that] you cannot beat: The Mark Inside,”¹⁶ his writing does, nevertheless, strive to negate the intentionality, if not the expressiveness, of this Mark, this self, doing so through a combination of chemical drug use and literary mash-ups. If McCaffery goes on to transform a double-dotted I into an epic tale of pataphysical hermeneutics – might we not argue that he is simply trying to con all of us “marks” into believing that a few of his “marks” are, in fact, a novel? Or might he be asking us to consider the degree to which every instance of comprehension might constitute an allegory of assassination? If Tell must kill the Vogt, so also must the reader

challenge the author, as though fulfilling the premise of Barthes, who remarks that “the birth of the [R]eader must be requited by the death of the Author”¹⁷ – and in this way, does not McCaffery highlight the disparity that always exists between authorial intentionality and authorial expressiveness, between the “willing” of the story and the “telling” of the story?

3. The Conceivable in Conceptual Literature

Poets who write conceptual literature might take delight in the fact that this “novel” by McCaffery constitutes an allegory, in which the triumvirate of the author, the reader, and the letter might parallel the triumvirate of the tyrant, the saviour, and the victim, except that the use of the pronoun I in this account causes the positions of these actants to become interchangeable with each other, depending upon the enunciator of such a shifty marker.¹⁸ What are the expressive intentions of this “novel,” if not to highlight the fragility of the self that enunciates the I? What if both intentionality and expressiveness do not represent “fallacies” of formalist criticism, but instead represent the vectors for specific concepts of writing? The lyric style, for example, might thus be what I call “cognitive” in its aesthetics, insofar as it demands that the author be both self-conscious and self-assertive at the same time – but other relationships between intentionality and expressiveness might also be conceivable, and the poet who must “think” up novel modes of conceptual literature does so by rethinking other less studied, if not less exalted, relationships between self-consciousness and self-assertiveness.¹⁹ We must imagine modes beyond the cognitive – modes that I might call automatic, mannerist, or aleatoric.

A. Cognitive Writing

Works that embody, as values, both intentionality and expressiveness, I might describe as “cognitive.” These works aspire to be both self-conscious and self-assertive. Their authors profess to exert control over both what they “will” in the text and what they “tell” in the text. They do so in order to minimize any discrepancy between what the self might intend and what the text might convey. Such authors embrace both voluntary self-control and voluntary self-exhibit. We might, of course, recognize this “cognitive” impulse, for example, in the tradition of Romantic lyricism, which has come to represent the style of writing aligned with autobiographic investigations, like the kind seen in *The Prelude* by Wordsworth. We see this impulse at work in poetic genres as diverse as the imagistic poetry of Williams and the divulgate poetry of Lowell – poets

who strive to articulate themselves in a plainer, sincere form, equal to the tranquil emotions of retrospection. An author adopts a lyrical persona to represent the subjective experience of the self, and the reader, in turn, judges this persona for the mimetic realism of both its ordinary being and its authentic voice. We witness the self thinking to itself, alone and aloud, about itself, bearing witness to the intimacy, if not to the quietude, of its own thoughtful confession.

B. Automatic Writing

Works that embody, as values, less intentionality and more expressiveness, I might describe as “automatic.” These works aspire, not to be self-conscious, but to be self-assertive. Their authors profess to exert control, not over what they “will” in the text, but only over what they “tell” in the text. They do so in order to maximize what the text might convey at the expense of what the self might intend. Such authors forfeit voluntary self-control, but embrace potential self-exhibit. We might recognize this “automatic” impulse, for example, in the kind of Surrealist outpouring which has come to represent the style of writing aligned with graphomaniacal psychoneurosis, like the kind seen in *The Immaculate Perception* by Breton. We see this impulse at work in poetic genres as diverse as the rhapsodic liturgies of Schwitters and the rapturous diatribes of Ginsberg – poets who strive to articulate themselves in a complex, baroque form, equal to the ecstatic feelings of deliriousness. An author avoids conscious, editorial censorship of the self in order to give vent to an unexpurgated stream-of-consciousness, and the reader merely judges the quality of vertigo in this flow. We witness the self speaking to itself without thinking about itself, bearing witness to the outburst of its own irrational exuberance.

C. Mannerist Writing

Works that embody, as values, more intentionality and less expressiveness, I might describe as “mannerist.” These works aspire to be self-conscious, but not to be self-assertive. Their authors profess to exert control over what they “will” in the text, but not over what they “tell” in the text. They do so in order to maximize what the self might intend at the expense of what the text might convey. Such authors embrace potential self-control, but forfeit voluntary self-exhibit. We might recognize this “mannerist” impulse, for example, in the kind of Oulipian elegance which has come to represent the style of writing aligned with formalistic constraints, like the kind seen in *100,000,000,000,000 Poems* by Queneau. We see this impulse at work in poetic genres as diverse as the programmatic alexandrines of Roussel and the anagrammatic translations of Zürn

– poets who strive to articulate structures in a precise, orderly form, equal to the rational precepts of scientificity. An author wilfully enslaves the self to a rule in order to excavate a newfound liberty from such a test of will, and the reader merely judges the quality of triumph in these results. We witness the self as it subordinates its own subjectivity to a rigorous procedure, thereby bearing witness to the outcome of a formalized experiment.

D. Aleatoric Writing

Works that embody, as values, no intentionality and no expressiveness I might describe as “aleatoric.” These works are neither self-conscious nor self-assertive. Their authors profess to forfeit control, both over what they “will” in the text and over what they “tell” in the text, doing so in order to maximize the discrepancy between what the self might intend and what the text might convey. Such authors forfeit both voluntary self-control and voluntary self-exhibit. We might recognize this “aleatoric” impulse, for example, in the kind of Dadaist anarchy which has come to represent the legacy of Tzara and his *poésie découpé*. We see this impulse at work in poetic genres as diverse as the “mesostics” of Cage and the “asymmetries” of Mac Low – poets who strive to articulate structures in an uncanny, ergodic form, equal to the oracular surprise of synchronicity. An author delegates authorship to the otherness of chance (often doing so through the replicated pretexts of readymade poetry, the randomized cuttings of respliced poetry, or the programmed machines of googlized poetry), and a reader, in turn, judges the uncanniness of these results. We witness the self as it subordinates its subjectivity to an arbitrary procedure, thereby bearing witness to the outcome of a stochastic experiment.

Cognitive, automatic, mannerist, aleatoric – this “quadrivium” of literature exhausts every means of permuting the relationship between intentionality and expressiveness. Each relationship constitutes a “language game” subject to its own rules of engagement – and hence we might consider the degree to which these “games” might in fact conform to the celebrated categories first conceived by the poet Caillois, who classifies games according to four sets: *mimesis* (games of mimicry); *ilinx* (games of vertigo); *agon* (games of combat); and *alea* (games of chance).²⁰ Cognitive writing (with its demand for a realistic depiction of subjective experience) might thus be a game of *mimesis*; automatic writing (with its demand for a delirious depiction of subjective experience) might thus be a game of *ilinx*; mannerist writing (with its demand for a virtuosic overthrow of a procedural constraint) might thus be a game of *agon*; and aleatoric writing (with its demand for a receptive deference to all stochastic

exigencies) might thus be a game of *alea*. If conceptual literature has already explored each concept of writing beyond the “cognitive,” perhaps such literature must now imagine unthought varieties of writing beyond these four categories in order to imagine a new way of playing “William Tell.”

Table of Concepts for Writing ²¹	
<i>Cognitive</i>	<i>Mannerist</i>
INTENTIONAL EXPRESSIVE	INTENTIONAL NON-EXPRESSIVE
(poetic game of mimicry)	(poetic game of combat)
<i>Automatic</i>	<i>Aleatoric</i>
NON-INTENTIONAL EXPRESSIVE	NON-INTENTIONAL NON-EXPRESSIVE
(poetic game of vertigo)	(poetic game of chance)

Notes

- 1 *Fidget* by Kenneth Goldsmith (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2000), for example, itemizes every single physical movement, enacted by the author on Bloomsday, 16 June 1997. *The Tapeworm Foundry* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 2000) by Darren Wershler-Henry itemizes every unused artistic proposal imagined by the author from 1990 to 2000.
- 2 *Soliloquy* by Kenneth Goldsmith (New York: Granary Books, 2001), for example, transcribes, unexpurgated, every utterance made by the author during one week, 15–21 April, in 1996. *Fig* by Caroline Bergval (Cambridge: Salt, 2005) features verbal scores that accent many of the performative difficulties arising from a polyglot fracture of speech.
- 3 *Eunoia* by Christian Bök (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2001), for example, features five prolonged lipograms, each of which tells a story, using only one of the five vowels. *Parse* by Craig Dworkin (Berkeley: Atelos Press, 2008) describes the structure of every sentence in a grammatical enchiridion, using the parsing systems of the manual itself.
- 4 *Re-Writing Freud* by Simon Morris (York: Information as Material, 2005), for example, randomizes the sequence of words found in *The Interpretation of Dreams* by Sigmund Freud. *Apostrophe* by Bill Kennedy and Darren Wershler-Henry uses homespun software both to collect and to collate any online clause that begins with the phrase “You are ...”
- 5 Exponents of conceptual literature do not argue that writing itself must be “immaterial,” disengaged from any embodiment in either a medium or an object (like a book, for example); instead, the necessity to vouchsafe the “concept” by embodying

- it in some “example” becomes only one of many ways to “rethink” the concept of writing itself.
- 6 Kenneth Goldsmith has remarked that “conceptual writing is ... interested in a *thinkership* rather than a readership,” and for him, “conceptual writing is good only when the idea is good; often, the idea is much more interesting than the resultant texts” (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/dispatches/journals/2007.01.22.html>).
 - 7 Craig Dworkin, “The UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing,” at <http://www.ubu.com/concept>.
 - 8 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford: Basil Blackwell and Mott, 1974), 86e, 228.
 - 9 W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley discuss the “intentional fallacy” in the discourse of literature by arguing that “intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work” (3), because “the poem ... is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it.” (“The Intentional Fallacy,” in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* [Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954], 5). Likewise, Hal Foster studies the “expressive fallacy” in the discourse of aesthetics by arguing that, “even as expressionism insists on the ... interior self, it reveals that this self is never anterior to its traces,” and thus “‘the artist’ is less the originator of his expression than its effect” – a condition that such expression both reveals and rejects (62). (“The Expressive Fallacy,” in *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* [Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1985], 62.)
 - 10 Michel Foucault notes that, among its many traits, the “‘author-function’ ... does not refer, purely and simply, to an ... individual insofar as it simultaneously gives rise to a ... series of subjective positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy” – and in fact, “we can easily imagine a culture where discourse would circulate without any need for an author.” (“What Is an Author?” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977], 131, 138).
 - 11 Kenneth Goldsmith notes: “I am a word processor ... The simple act of moving information from one place to another today constitutes a significant cultural act.” (“A Week of Blogs for the Poetry Foundation,” in *The Consequence of Innovation: 21st-Century Poetics*, ed. Craig Dworkin [New York: Roof Books, 2008], 143–4.)
 - 12 Roland Barthes notes that “the removal of the Author ... utterly transforms the modern text (or – which is the same thing – the text is henceforth ... read so that the author absents himself from it at every level.)” (“The Death of the Author,” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard [New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1986], 51–2.) Michel Foucault also notes that “to know the writer in our day, it will be through the singularity of his absence and in his link to death, which has transformed him into a victim of his own writing.” [“What Is an Author?” 117].
 - 13 Steve McCaffery, “William Tell: A Novel,” *Impulse (One Word Works)* 16.1 (1990): 44.
 - 14 Gary Barwin has responded to my reading with a whimsical criticism, arguing that, contrary to my exegesis, “[t]he double-dotted i is an icon, an idol for intentionality,” and he suggests that “if one really wants to make a point over the i, to create an i whose titillation tells of [a] lack of intent,” then the ordinary i, without the pair

of dots, already does so, because we cannot tell if the apple has yet been placed upon the head or has yet been felled from the head, so that, consequently, we do not know offhand whether or not we have arrived upon the scene of the text before the event or after it (“i before or after William Tell” at <http://www.serifofnottingham.blogspot.com>). I might suggest that such a riposte does little more than ensconce the timeless sanctity of the lyrical subject, thereby preserving the already eternal status of the I as an icon. I might suggest an even more whimsical criticism in response, by arguing that, instead of showing the I before or after the game played by William of Altdorf, we might show the I only after the game played by William of Tangier, with the icon in one of its fallen states. If the I falls to the left, the image might call to mind the dot-dot-dash of the letter U in Morse Code (• • —), but if the I falls to the right, the image might call to mind the dash-dot-dot of the letter D in Morse Code (— • •). I leave the symbolic exegesis of these codes to other pataphysicians.

- 15 William S. Burroughs, “Introduction,” *Queer* (New York: Viking, 1985), xxiii. His admission, of course, lends itself to a, perhaps obvious, feminist critique, in which the game of “William Tell” becomes a kind of allegory about authorship under patriarchy. The creativity of males demands the sacrifices of women, for which the act of resultant authorship becomes an act of perpetual atonement. We might see an analogous narrative in the story of the Ancient Mariner, who shoots an albatross with his crossbow and thus must recount the outcome of his crime to anyone who might listen. A female author must, therefore, have to find a way to avoid being the target in order to take up her own bow, like Artemis, and become the agent of her own story about willing and telling.
- 16 William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*, ed. James Grauerholz and Barry Miles (New York: Grove Press, 2001), 11.
- 17 Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1986), 55.
- 18 My reading of Steve McCaffery derives much of its impetus from the writing of Émile Benveniste, who argues that “the form of *I* has no linguistic existence except in the act of speaking in which it is uttered,” and hence, “there is ... a combined double instance in this process: the instance of *I* as referent and the instance of ... *I* as referee.” He concludes that “this sign is thus linked to the *exercise* of language and announces the speaker as speaker.” (“The Nature of Pronouns,” in *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek [Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971], 218, 222.) The pronoun marks the position of the “subject” in discourse, and any discrepancy between what this subject might will and what this subject might tell intervenes in the space between the “*I*” that now enunciates and the “*I*” that is now enunciated.
- 19 We wish to emphasize, of course, that despite the professed attitudes of any author about being either self-conscious or self-assertive during the process of writing, authors can never exert perfect control over what they will and what they tell – and indeed, critics nowadays spend much of their time “deconstructing” the disparity between what the author means to say and what the author seems to say, showing the degree to which the self reveals more about itself than it might otherwise claim to show or deign to hide. We do not wish to repeat “fallacies” of

either intentionality or expressiveness in our own discussion, but we do want to show that, during the process of writing, authors can only ever choose from among a limited variety of vantages about their own self-consciousness and their own self-assertiveness – and in turn, these vantages make available to the author only a limited variety of possible concepts about the very process of writing itself.

- 20 Roger Caillois notes: “I am proposing a division into four main rubrics, depending upon whether, in the games under consideration, the role of competition, chance, simulation, or vertigo is dominant,” and hence, “I call these *agon*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx*, respectively.” Caillois goes so far as to suggest that *mimesis* and *ilinx* combine to form a social matrix of vertiginous theatrics, like the kind seen in more “primitive” cultures, while *agon* and *alea* combine to form a social matrix of competitive accidents, like the kind seen in more “civilized” cultures. (*Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash [New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961], 12, 87.) I might even go on suggest in turn that, if writing is itself a kind of “game,” not unlike the game of “William Tell,” then *mimesis* and *agon* combine to form a poetic matrix that lets us play this game while sober (as exemplified by William of Altdorf), whereas *ilinx* and *alea* combine to form a poetic matrix that lets us play this game while drunk (as exemplified by William of Tangier).
- 21 Michel Foucault notes that “writing unfolds like a game that inevitably moves beyond its own rules and finally leaves them behind” (“What Is an Author?” 116). The Table of Concepts for Writing itemizes all ways of permuting intentionality and expressiveness. The two left quadrants (“cognitive” and “automatic”) constitute the domain of what I might call a “Wordsworthian subjectivity,” concerned with the sublime affirmation of a self on behalf of some poetic “identity,” whereas the two right quadrants (“mannerist” and “aleatoric”) constitute the domain of what I might call a “Keatsian subjectivity,” concerned with the extreme sublimation of a self on behalf of some poetic “alterity.” The avant garde has typically colonized three of these four quadrants (the “automatic,” the “mannerist,” and the “aleatoric”) – and while any poet might traverse all four quadrants with ease, playing with multiple concepts of writing, switching from one to another, perhaps even doing so within the same work, no poet can play in more than one quadrant at the same time. I suggest that poets who write conceptual literature must now begin to probe the limit cases of this “quadrivium” in the hope of imagining more neoteric concepts of writing, situated elsewhere, far beyond the quadrants of such a playfield.

Like in Valencia: On Translating Equivalence

Poetry often manifests radical departures from normative syntax, lexicon, and utterance, such that its interpretation, an integral part of the translation process, the thinking goes, involves surmising authorial intentions. Hence, translation frequently entails engaging in conjectural thinking since, in order to make decisions, translators speculate about what authors' criteria might have been for, among many other choices, giving words particular arrangements resulting in specific sonic and visual designs; for juxtaposing images or statements, leaping from one to another without articulating the logic behind the associations propelling the poem; and for choosing to leave a lot unsaid. (A common dilemma in this regard is whether to provide cultural-specific information that need not be present in the original but might be required for the translation to be accessible to foreign readers. Not surprisingly, this commonly leads to over-translation.)

What portion of any linguistic event can be said to be intentional, however? No matter how inventive a text may be, its language, with its corresponding rules and conventions, is a given, an adaptable readymade whose functioning depends precisely on that very condition. For Borges, one of translation's main difficulties consists in distinguishing those attributes inherent in the language of the original from those that its author has bestowed on it. In discussing various translations of Homer, he writes of that "difficult category of knowing what pertains to the poet and what pertains to the language. To that fortunate difficulty we owe the possibility of so many versions."¹

A line in "Equivalencias," a poem in Spanish I wrote in the nineties which gave rise to a slew of different translations exhibited in *Postscript: Writing after Conceptual Art* and the present essay, constitutes a case in point. A common Spanish equivalent to the word "nightfall" describes the moment in which "*cae la tarde*." It is ambiguous as to whether what "falls" is the afternoon or evening, since "*la tarde*" refers to any time lapse between noon and dusk, yet one thing is certain: unlike in English, it is not night. And is it not night that descends

upon daylight at sundown? A translator might have unknowingly translated the Spanish idiom to “the afternoon falls,” imparting the line with an imaginative flourish missing in the original.

Equivalencias

Uno. Un silencio, una llamarada.
Un sorbo de café antes de que supiera amargo.
Un hoyo dentro de un agujero.

Dos caminos para una trayectoria
y sus ojos cerrados durmiendo la siesta.
Cuántos espejos son dos.
Cae la tarde y aparecen dos luces,
dos hijos que ya son tres.

Tres es paz y garantía,
un cómplice, un enemigo.
Tres libros abiertos, tres granos de sal.

Cuatro veces dije un nombre y nada.
Cuatro es lo mismo que dos.

Y si cinco veces te preguntas
qué hago aquí, quema tu cama
déjala arder y vete.

Back to intentionality. Except for overdetermined works of the didactic or political variety whose utilitarian logic is instantly communicated, the poem’s intention is rarely part of its fabric. It remains outside of the text, unlike in much fiction, in which the narrator’s motives for telling a story, no matter how opaque or obscure, tend to be woven into the narration itself, becoming one of its essential components. In the realm of poetry, however, conjecture appears especially necessary when a poem being translated dispenses with traditional narrative elements and displays, primarily, a performative voice – one speaking to a receiver who has to infer everything about the work exclusively from the specificities of the subject’s elocution.

The Mexican conceptual poet and artist Ulises Carrión wrote, in the 1975 manifesto “The New Art of Making Books,” that “just as the ultimate meaning of words is indefinable, so the author’s intention is unfathomable.”² Almost

forty years later, the statement may seem worn, yet even the most nuanced of translators persist in invoking the original's intention as the ultimate justification for their decisions, which, inevitably, involve compromises. Wittgenstein points to intention's appeal when arguing that, as a construct, it provides "the final interpretation ... the thing that cannot be further interpreted"³ and is therefore exempt from critical evaluation.

When it comes to translation, therefore, the issue at hand cannot be to access the poem or poet's intentions – an impossibility – but to *imagine* what the poet would have privileged if the work's constituent elements had to be taken apart and prioritized. It is in such imaginings, inevitably provisional no matter how persuasive, that the foibles – and ultimately also the riches – of translation lie.

Lettering Intent

Only in the case of self-translation might the problem of inferring what the author's intentions could have been when writing a poem be null, a non-issue. Even if intent did not overtly dictate the writing, one would think that the same subconscious associations that triggered composition originally also guide the translation process, the author-*cum*-translator tapping into them when recasting the work into another language. An interesting challenge arises if those initial associations were verbal only, the result of word play, for wouldn't the author/translator have to suppress new ones triggered by the words in the target language, lest they pull the poem in an entirely different direction?

Let us imagine, however, that only in the case of self-translation can intention be easily accessed. The logical approach would be to retrieve it through memory and then re-enact it while rendering the writing in the target language. Temporal distance between the writing of the original and its translation would play a decisive role. If translation were immediately subsequent, one should be able to remember the rationale for one's initial choices more readily. On the other hand, if the temporal distance between the writing and translating processes were significant, presumably one's mindset would have changed so much that the self from which the original work stemmed would be impossible to conceive of without misconstruing.

So, for example, to attain the most loyal possible English version of the poem "Equivalencias" – from my first book in Spanish, *Acúfenos*, published in 2006 – I could mine the journals I kept when I wrote most of the work in the book, during my first years in New York. I could try to retrace the general emotional state I was in back then, and the effects of adjusting myself to using English as opposed to Spanish as my primary language after leaving Mexico

City, all of which might have led me, at that specific moment, to write the poems that came to constitute the book. A book whose title posed a considerable translation challenge, by the way. Compare the definition of the word “*acúfeno*” offered by the Spanish Royal Academy, “auditory sensation that does not correspond to any real exterior sound,” to the definition of its English equivalent, “tinnitus,” in the OED: “sensation of ringing or buzzing in the ears.” Rather than denote a pathology, by titling my book *Acúfenos* I meant to address the peculiar status of poetic language, which unless experienced read, or performed out loud, readers and writers alike hear in their heads *as if* it were coming from the exterior. It occurs to me now that perhaps the title also subliminally related to the status of Spanish and English in my head – the sounds of one or the other becoming ghostly *acúfenos* when not in use.

If I could instantly recall what I wanted the title in Spanish to do, when thinking about the composition of the poems in the book, it was impossible for me to assess how much conscious decision-making was involved. My experience with poetry, and writing in general, for that matter, has been that nothing gets more in the way of saying something that my need to say it. Obstacles notwithstanding, a mnemonic exercise with the aid of a journal from 1996 seemed worthwhile to test common assumptions regarding intentionality in writing and translating. What follows is a translation based on the draft of the poem written in an undated journal entry sometime between 25 February and 7 March 1996.

Conversions^a

One. One silence, one flame.^b

A sip of coffee before it tasted bitter.

A hole inside a hollow.^c

-
- a The poem was initially untitled. The journal is brimming with fragments and drafts of failed poems; the pervading sentiment of most entries is one of obsession with becoming a poet and forging an amorous bond with a male partner. Yet the main preoccupation concerns the possibility of converting the matter of everyday life into poetry. This transformation process bearing a similarity to numerological abstraction, it seems that “Conversions” is a more fitting title for the poem than the original “Equivalences.”
- b A felicitous translation of “*llamarada*,” which literally means “sudden blaze.” “Flame,” however, might refer also to a lover or a surge of emotion, which seems closer to the intent of the original.
- c As much as this line could be read as a rather inept metonymical allusion to the male and female sex organs during copulation, it actually refers to a doubled or magnified feeling of emptiness, which the alliteration, not present in the original, is intended to heighten. The translation of this line could also be read as a double view of a cavity focusing on its exterior, visible manifestation – a hole – and also on its invisible interior, a hollow. The language of the original, however, offers no such differentiation. Worth noting is also that in Spanish there is no distinction between “*un*” used as pronoun and “*un*” the adjectival form of “one” denoting

Two roads yet one path
and eyes closed during a nap.^d
How many mirrors are two.
Evening falls and two moons appear,^e
Two offshoots which are already three.^f

Three is peace and the promise
of a friend and a foe,
three open books, three grains of salt.^g

Four times I said your name, to no avail.^h
Four is equal to two.ⁱ

And if five times you ask yourself,
What am I doing here? set your bed on fire,
let it burn, and leave.

-
- a single unit. The numerical equivalences in the poem would require that “*un*” be translated as “one” throughout the stanza, but the result would be too awkward in English.
- d There is no way of knowing who the napping subject is. This could be alluding to a post-coital scenario, or, just as easily, to the lonesome subject uttering the poem. Incidentally, I juggled multiple part-time jobs at the time and remember taking naps whenever possible.
- e The sense of the line is easier to grasp if the ambiguity in the literal translation “Evening falls and two lights appear” is eliminated. The draft had the moon appearing twice, not lights. The logic of the line’s revision escapes me now. Two moons refer, naturally, to a street light as well as the moon, and hence exacerbate the nocturnal mood of the poem.
- f Curiously, the draft of the poem had “*higos*” (figs) instead of “*hijos*” (children) in the line “*Dos higos que ya son tres.*” Was the poem transcribed erroneously or was that key letter changed intentionally? The word “offshoots” in English seems better than “*hijos*” since it retains the notion of proliferation, but applies equally to people, animals, plants, and even things.
- g The possible narrative of the poem becomes manifest by the third stanza. Again, felicitously, translation made explicit the line’s undertone, the rationale for juxtaposing the “open book” phrase and an oblique reference to the other English-language idiom: “to take with a grain of salt.” Three people in a relationship might think it is possible to conceal nothing from each other, but the dynamic between them is bound to shift continually given the threat of two persons establishing allegiances while leaving a third one out. The irony is that neither idiom exists in Spanish. The two were used subconsciously (and literally) in Spanish, although in that language they are not immediately understandable and might have seemed, therefore, more “poetic.”
- h The journal entry proves that the original addressed a particular *you*. When the poem in the journal was transcribed and revised, ambiguity was preferred, and therefore the line became: “Four times I said *a* name and nothing.” A “*nombre*” in Spanish can be any noun as well as a name. The present translation is intended to avoid confusion – the line could be incorrectly read as if what was said was “a name and nothing” instead of just a name. The futility of the subject’s attempt to beckon the loved one – ultimately the subject is only talking to herself – leads to the severity and shift in the final stanza, where she speaks to herself in the second person, as if she were another.
- i Again, rendering the poem in English might have improved this line, given that “to two” is a homophone of “two two,” proving that four is equal to two two’s.

Face Value: A Literal Translation

Close reading reveals that there was nothing out of the ordinary about my juvenile concerns. As real as they were back then, their gravitas, if it was there in the first place, fails to translate – neither from the past to the present, nor from Spanish to English, at least to this reader. Enter Google Translate, the most neutral of readers, perhaps the best possible one since it has no preconceived knowledge of what it translates or of the context of an utterance, and in producing literal translations makes not only, as Borges would put it, “for uncouthness and oddity, but also for strangeness and beauty.”⁴ It avoids reading *into* a text and does not differentiate between, say, a poem, a legal document, or spam. It takes words at face value, since, as David Bellos explains, “it doesn’t deal with meaning at all. Instead of taking a linguistic expression that requires decoding, Google Translate (GT) takes it as something that has probably been said before. It uses vast computing power to scour the Internet in the blink of an eye looking for an expression in some text that exists alongside its paired translation.”⁵

Equivalences

One silence, a flash.
A sip of coffee before I knew bitter.
A hole in a hole.

Two paths to a path
and his eyes closed napping.
Many mirrors are twofold.
Late afternoon and see two lights,
two sons and three.

Three is peace and security,
an accomplice or an enemy.
Three books open, three grains of salt.

Four times a name and nothing said.
Four is the same as two.

And if you ask five times
What am I doing here, burning your bed,
let it burn and go.

Although its methods continue to be perfected and, by the time you read this essay, some of GT's shortcomings might have been corrected – that is, some improved translations might be part of the corpus it combs in a matter of seconds – we can glean some of its biases from the example above. Most flagrantly, it expects everything one seeks to translate to have been said before and, consequently, is ill suited to render inventive, non-normative poetic utterances into a different language. Predictably, when presented with multiple options, it cannot infer which the most pertinent one is given the context. For instance, the verb "*saber*" means both "to know" and "to taste." In relation to a sip of coffee, it should be obvious to anyone that the right translation should be "to taste." Can it be true that no one ever translated the phrase "*supiera amargo*" before, referring to the coffee before it acquired a bitter taste? Yet there is a certain charm and trueness to the line "One sip of coffee before I *knew* bitter." It is the most phenomenological option since it fuses the perception of an object's qualities and its perceiver. Furthermore, in that same construction, the conjugation of the verb in Spanish would allow for the subject of the sentence to be the first-person or third-person singular, but not surprisingly, the translation was skewed toward the first person.

GT seems to translate linearly, from one syntactical unit to another. It is for this reason that it cannot infer meaning from what comes after a unit it has already converted to the target language. GT has short-term memory only, and, therefore, screws up agreement and the order of adjectives. It also engages in the type of repetition avoided in so-called well-written texts by the usage of synonyms and the display of a rich vocabulary. GT is indifferent to stylistic rules, as evidenced by the lines "A hole in a hole" and "Two paths to a path." It is also male-centred and tone deaf. Eyes cannot just be shut while napping; they must belong to a male, and children or offspring must all be "sons." In Spanish, if the eye misses accents, questions without question marks cannot be identified. Hence the question "*Cuántos espejos son dos*" [how many mirrors are two?] – implied only by the accent over the *á* differentiating the word from "many," "*cuantos*" without an accent – becomes the winning "Many mirrors are twofold."

But GT, not unlike the worst translators, is also prone to smooth out what it deems incongruous in an otherwise perfectly clear text. Evenings cannot fall, and since lights cannot just appear out of the blue, it introduces the subject seeing them. The line "Evening falls and two lights appear" therefore becomes "Late afternoon and see two lights." In the third stanza, it introduces an "or" between "an accomplice" and "an enemy" since, given that the terms are opposites, it would be a contradiction for someone to be both simultaneously. It

misses the point that from the perspective of one of the subjects in a group of three individuals, one of the other two will be an accomplice, and the third other an enemy. Finally, again, not unlike dangerously inept translators who in Benjamin's characterization practise the "inaccurate transmission of an inessential content,"⁶ it fails to read those smaller words on which sense tends to rest disproportionately: pronouns and prepositions. GT failed to take note of the self-reflexive nature of the question in the fifth stanza: "If five times you ask yourself, / What am I doing here ..." simply becomes "And if you ask five times / What am I doing here." But the estrangement this omission introduces is more than welcome. It rids the stanza of a sense of self-involvement and signals the subject's disorientation more genuinely. GT = Defamiliarization 101. And better yet: GT is the ultimate conceptual writer, the most rigorous appropriatist, the unoriginal genius par excellence, whose output is inventive in that it cannot simply mirror existing discourse, reproducing it ad nauseam, but invariably mangles it, and in doing so, introduces the swerve.

Speech to Text

Romantic notions of authorship, literary genius, and the natural voice versus the scriptural order have a kinship with the superstitious and quasi-religious belief that translations, being imperfect copies, are necessarily inferior to originals – not to mention with the common expectation that, above all, they be transparent, definitive, and faithful to their source. On the opposite end of the spectrum, however, we find that iconoclastic approaches to translation frequently produce affected, tedious versions (not unlike the popular surrealist techniques that relieved authors of expressive burdens a century earlier but produced rather homogeneous automatic writing). Think of homophonic translations, for instance, whose results are interesting only on account of their impenetrability, and which suffer both from their practitioners' blind loyalty toward the procedure and their feigning not to comprehend the source text they intend to recast sonically. (More often than not, those practising homophonic translations actually are at least somewhat fluent in the source language: semantic priming makes them unable to hear it as if it were the target language.)

Genuine misunderstanding is a more curious phenomenon. Why fake incomprehension when current speech-recognition technology unflinchingly engages it? As much as the software has evolved, it continues to produce reliably dismal results, especially when faced with idiosyncratic speech patterns and cases of so-called disfluency (stammering; stopping mid-sentence and restarting multiple times; using *ums*, *ahs*, and *likes* frequently; et cetera). If only a

few years ago one of every four words in arbitrary speech were misrecognized, current rates mistake only one out of seven or eight words.⁷ Corporate discourse hails this rate as a victory attributable to the implementation of a new model replicating the way that neural networks function in the human brain. Phonemes and patterns of consonants and vowels are picked up and classified, and, subsequently, used to make more “sophisticated guesses” as to which words are being said.⁸

The following two translations test these notions and compare an actual brain at work with its machine-operated simulation, or analog versus digital performance, so to speak. Both originated from a spoken version of “Equivalencias.” For the first speech-recognition test, I read the poem out loud and engaged in a call-and-response exercise with a male close listener who, except for a very restricted number of words, understands no Spanish at all.

Like in Valencia

Uno. Un silencio, una llamarada.

The silence of Esmeralda.

Un sorbo de café antes de que supiera amargo.

The sorbet at the café is superior.

Un hoyo dentro de un agujero.

The oil at the dentist was relaxing.

Dos caminos para una trayectoria.

The two roads were doubly tragic.

Y sus ojos cerrados durmiendo la siesta.

The serrano peppers caused me to take a long nap.

Cuántos espejos son dos.

The quantity of spectators was twice as large.

Cae la tarde y aparecen dos luces.

The guy was a little slow on Sunday.

Dos hijos que ya son tres.

The two eels seem like three.

Tres es paz y garantía.

Three in space is guaranteed.

Un cómplice, un enemigo.

Whoever is complacent with me is my friend.

Tres libros abiertos. Tres granos de sal.

Three books that have beards.
Look **grand** in the sun.

Cuatro veces dije un nombre, y nada.

Four as a number is nothing.

Cuatro es lo mismo que dos.

Four amuses two.

Y si cinco veces te preguntas ...

Five is a vessel.

¿Qué hago aquí?

Something to do with water; water is the key to five.

Quema tu cama, déjala arder, y vete.

Camel to camel, they like to eat green.

Key:

cognates

correctly recognized terms

shared phonetic sequence

loosely homophonic terms

false friends

We can surmise from the translation that the listener not only knows those very few Spanish words that American monolinguals are inevitably bound to learn – numbers and the word *siesta*, for instance – but that he probably grew up in California, judging from his acquaintance with the word “*camino*,” meaning “road.” (El Camino Real is the name of a historic 600-mile road joining missions built by the Spanish crown in the state.) Ample proof of his finely tuned ear is also palpable in his responses to the prompts. The listener was able to detect shared phonetic sequences over and over in fragments of words that he then completed in English, producing a rather creative record of his mis- or half-understanding. When he was unable to do that, the listener picked up the sound patterns in the Spanish and transposed them to English, linking words that otherwise are utterly unrelated in both languages, including “*llamarada*” and “*Esmeralda*,” “*veces*” and “*vessel*,” and “*cama*” and “*camel*.” Overall, the listener’s utterances differed from homophonic translations in that his failure to understand was paired with a willingness to make sense of what he was hearing regardless, generating a compelling tension between reason and nonsense.

For the second case, I read the poem into the GT app on my iPhone 5. The results were hardly as advanced as the ones above, assuaging fears that intelligent machines might catch up with the human brain's verbal skills any time soon:

Equivalence

January 1 flare
silently sipped coffee
before a super bitter self
into a hole.

Two paths as a path
and his eyes closed
napping
as many mirrors.
Evening falls and two lights appear
and are 3
Don Quixote.

Press space
guarantee an accomplice
an enemy
three books
open.

4 months
a man says nothing
4 is the same
as two.

5 times and if you wonder
why I'm here
burning gel
drum great
song and old age.

Clearly the fact that the app was required to first transcribe the text and then translate it into English accounts for the randomness of the results – many more than one in seven or eight words seem to be wild guesses on GT's part.

The inference that the poem somehow had to be related to Don Quixote given that, like Cervantes's novel, it too had been written in Spanish, flatters the work and beckons Borges and his forgiving approach to translation yet again. Contrary to what authors and readers hold true as an article of faith when it comes to editions and translations, in "The Superstitious Ethics of the Reader," from 1931, Borges equates preciousness in a literary text with its precariousness, reassuring us that "the page that becomes immortal can traverse the fire of typographical errors, approximate translations, or inattentive or erroneous readings without losing its soul in the process. One cannot alter with impunity any line fabricated by Góngora (according to those who restore his texts), but Don Quixote wins posthumous battles against his translators and survives each and every careless version."⁹ Misreading = the text's afterlife.

A Departure: One Plus Two Equals Three

Numbers as Qualifiers

Ablaze.

Twofold mirrors
seeing in and out during sleep.

A, B, and C.
And consequent deals between parties.
Sooner than you know, three becomes etcetera.

A way of living,
or the route that a computer operating system follows
through directories on a disk to locate a file.
A noun four times and nothing said.

What are you doing burning through layers,
ask five times
and eagerly. Then flee.
Just go. Zeros and ones.
Here.

Notes

- 1 Eliot Weinberger, ed., "The Homeric Versions," in *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fictions* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 70.

- 2 Guy Schraenen, *Ulises Carrión: We have won! Haven't we?* (Amsterdam: Idea Books, 1992), 57.
- 3 Anthony Kenny, ed., *The Wittgenstein Reader* (Cambridge and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 75.
- 4 Jorge Luis Borges, "Word-Music and Translation," in *This Craft of Verse* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 68.
- 5 David Bellos, "Automated Language-Translation Machines," in *Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2011), 247–58.
- 6 Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 70.
- 7 According to a video of a live demonstration of Microsoft's neural network-based voice-processing software in Tianjin, China, by Microsoft's chief research officer Rick Rashid in October of 2012, included in the article "How Google Retooled Android with Help from Your Brain" by Robert McMillan, Wired.com, 18 February 2013.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Weinberger, ed., "The Homeric Versions," 54.

Russian Lessons for Conceptual Writing

Conceptual writing is contextual writing. Conceptual writers highlight the context – the historical, social, and institutional frames – through which we encounter and recognize a work of art or literature. Over the past decade or so, anglophone conceptual writing has engaged the institutional boundaries of literature and art. These engagements range from Kenneth Goldsmith's recycling of Brion Gysin's statement that literature is fifty years behind painting, to the presentation of conceptual writing in venues such as the Whitney Biennial and the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, of which this book is partly a product.¹ Yet despite this attention to institutional framing, discussions of conceptual writing have often failed to address how historical, cultural, and institutional contexts both shape and are reshaped by conceptual texts.²

To recognize the diversity and historically and culturally inflected nature of conceptual writing, we would do well to take some Russian lessons. In this essay, I turn to a form of conceptual writing that developed in a radically different social, political, and historical context: the text-based works of Moscow conceptualism and in particular the writings of conceptual poet Dmitri Prigov.³ Emerging out of the social and political environment of the Soviet Union in the 1970s and early 1980s, Moscow conceptualism appropriated aspects of Western conceptual art, but also responded to very different institutional structures for art and contrasting understandings of the relationship between words and things. These differences can help us recognize the contextual and institutional framings that shape and are addressed by conceptual writing. Moscow conceptualism's particular emphasis on literature and its literary conceptual practice contain lessons for how we understand the later rise of conceptual writing as a literary practice in the anglophone world. The Russian example reveals conceptual writing's deep but still insufficiently acknowledged engagements with ideological discourse, literary and artistic institutions, and authorship.

1. Slogans

The history of conceptual art in Russia is closely connected to writing and literature. The widespread use of the term *conceptual* in the context of Russian art dates from the late 1970s and came first through Boris Groys's reading of Western conceptual art through literary precedents, especially Jorge Luis Borges and his character Pierre Menard.⁴ In the 1970s, artists who would come, thanks to Groys, to be associated with Moscow conceptualism turned increasingly to book- and text-based work.⁵ The Moscow conceptualists produced numerous artists' albums, such as Ilya Kabakov's *Desiat' personazhei* (Ten Characters, 1972–5) series, books, and textual documentation of art works, performances, and discussions.⁶ Many of these artists produced literary texts, and a number came to apply conceptual art practices to works framed primarily as literature. By the early 1980s, some of these writers, including Prigov, Lev Rubinshtein, and Vsevolod Nekrasov, came to be termed "conceptual poets."⁷

The textual turn that led to the rise of conceptual poetry in Russia was from the outset a response to ideological discourse and institutional structures. The turn derives in part from Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid's series of works entitled *Ideal'nyi lozung* (Ideal Slogan, 1972).⁸ Komar and Melamid's slogan works included verbatim reproductions of communist slogans displayed on banners, such as *Slava trudu* (Glory to Labour, 1972), which recycled one of the best-known Soviet slogans and which was distinguished from the original only by the addition of the artists' names. These slogan works became the foundational text-images of what Komar and Melamid termed "sots-art" – a neologism derived from the term *pop art* by replacing *pop* with *sots*, where *sots* is a shortened version of the Russian word for "socialist."⁹

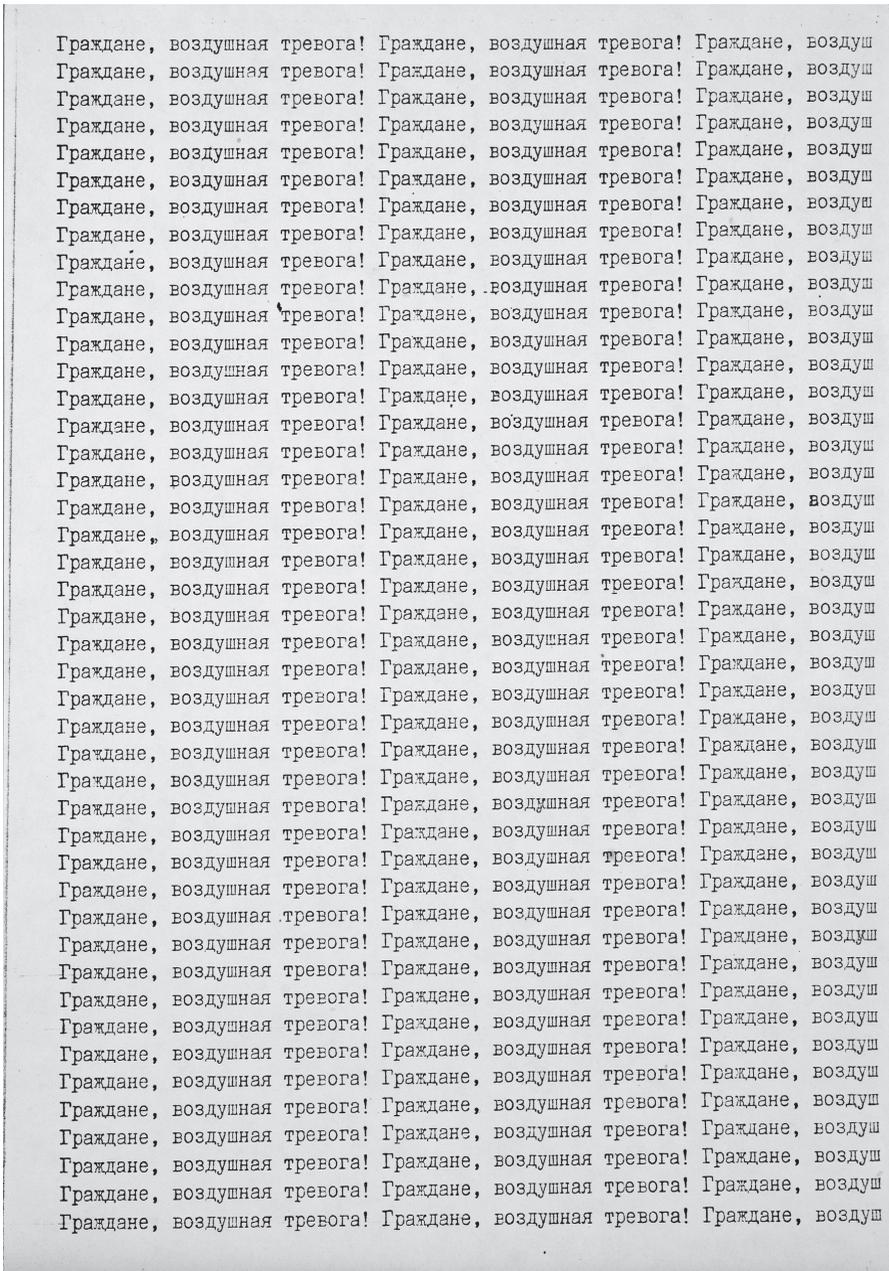
While responding to ideological discourse and the Cold War opposition figured in the difference between the terms *pop* and *sots-art*, Moscow conceptual writing and art also addressed the institutions of unofficial art and literature that played such an important role in the late-Soviet period.¹⁰ Part of the initial power of Komar and Melamid's slogans lay precisely in their ability to shock an unofficial audience who expected work of sincere expression. Besides defamiliarizing Soviet ideology and Western pop art, Komar and Melamid's work targeted the preconceptions of the unofficial artistic community and also the image of dissident art in the West. Their creation of large-scale, public banners with words of Soviet propaganda challenged the view that the written word in unofficial art and literature was something to be treasured in private or shared with trusted friends. In another work from the *Ideal Slogan* series, Komar and Melamid reduced the slogan to white squares. They thereby alluded to Kazimir

Malevich and so attacked the reification of modernist form still widespread in unofficial artistic circles. As artist Iurii Al'bert notes, "The irony of sots-art was directed not only and not so much toward Socialist Realism," but, in fact, "cast doubt on all alternatives, on any pretension of the artist that Truth spoke in the language of his style."¹¹

Such works of sots-art are "postutopian" in that they reveal "the will to power in the seemingly oppositional artistic project."¹² Like Vanessa Place – who has spoken of her attraction to these slogan works – Komar and Melamid reproduce the discourse of the master, and, like Place, whether they do so in order to overthrow or affirm that discourse remains radically in doubt.¹³ Stressing this uncertainty, Komar and Melamid presented their banners as the work of two sincere advocates for the Soviet regime, and around this time they also invented a number of other artistic personas. Echoing Komar and Melamid's use of personas and their critique of unofficial art, Kabakov's albums from the 1970s use images, texts, and performance to embody the dreams of the little man of Soviet culture.¹⁴

Beginning in the mid-1970s, Prigov drew on Komar and Melamid's and Kabakov's use of personas and ideological discourse – and the particular esteem of the written word within Russian culture – to address the mythologies of unofficial literature. In 1974, Prigov produced two books of poems that marked this new direction in his work: one involved haphazard and hilarious rewritings of Russian and Soviet literary classics and the other contained awkwardly colloquial lyrical praise to figures such as Gorky, Stalin, Beria, Potemkin, and – with characteristic anachronism – Socrates.¹⁵ Prigov developed this stylization further in his "Policeman" poems. Written in an amateurishly uneven style that vacillates between the colloquial and the pretentiously literary, these poems celebrate the policeman as a sacred figure of Soviet power. Prigov thereby humorously links Soviet figures of authority and their megalomaniacal desire for power to the equally totalizing pretensions of the Russian poetic tradition.

At the same time, Prigov was developing a more rigorously serial, conceptual approach to address the ideological discourse of state power and the reification of Russian literature and unofficial, samizdat culture. In the mid-1970s, he began using text in his artist's books and text-rich sculptural works, notably in his *Banki* (Tin Cans) series, which ranges from a can containing Prigov's "rejected verse" to one covered with signatures demanding "the complete and unconditional disarmament of America."¹⁶ Like Komar and Melamid, Prigov here repackaged Warhol's cans.¹⁷ Instead of reproducing a commercial product, Prigov's cans reproduce ideology, while signalling an equivalency between the samizdat poet's precious word and official Soviet discourse.



Dmitri Prigov, *Grazhdane, vozdushnaia trevoga!* (Citizens, Air Raid Warning!). Typewritten text on paper. 29.6 x 21 cm. Lettrist series, A-Ya Archive. Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union, 071.001.027. Photo by Peter Jacobs. Reproduced with the permission of the Estate of Dmitri Prigov.

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ают. Тот кто поет не с нами – тот протв нас, его ЕГОУН
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ТОЖАЮТтожают. Тот кто поет не с нами – ТЕГОпУНИЧТОЖАЮТ
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Dmitri Prigov, *Tot kto poet ne s nami — tot protiv nas, ego unichtozhaiut* (He Who Does Not Sing with Us Is against Us and Will Be Destroyed). Typewritten text on paper. 29.6 x 21 cm. Lettrist series, A-Ya Archive. Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union, 071.001.027. Photo by Peter Jacobs. Reproduced with the permission of the Estate of Dmitri Prigov.

Prigov's *Stikhogrammy* (Versogrammes, or Lettrist series) extend his interest in slogans, ideology, and serial form and evince his sculptor's attention to the materiality of text. The series comprises a number of A4 typescript visual poems based on short repeated phrases. As in Gertrude Stein's work, repetition stresses both the phrases' appropriated, commonplace nature and the shifting context of each iteration. These texts participate belatedly in the concrete poetry of the 1950s and 1960s, while questioning the utopian transnationalism of that movement. Like Komar and Melamid's slogans *Glory to Labour* and *We Were Born to Make Fairytales Come True*, many of Prigov's poems comprise clichés, frequently taken from official discourse, as in his *Grazhdane, vozdushnaia trevoga!* (Citizens, Air Raid Warning!; see page 319). This work repeats a phrase most associated with the Second World War but which was still current when Prigov produced his text. Prigov foregrounds his appropriation by repeating the official announcement across and down the page, as highlighted by the carefully arranged columns of repeated text. The columns draw the reader's eye down the page, paralleling the movement of the bombs from which the citizens are ordered to shelter. By equating the words with bombs, Prigov shatters their apparently defensive, compassionate message and the nostalgic sense of collective struggle that the phrase might evoke even today.

In another work in the series, *Tot kto poet ne s nami — tot protiv nas, ego unichtozhaiut* (He Who Does Not Sing with Us Is against Us and Will Be Destroyed; see page 320), Prigov emphasizes the promised destruction by having the capitalized phrase "ЕГО УНИЧТОЖАЮТ" (HE WILL BE DESTROYED) override the lowercase text diagonally from right to left down the page. The first part of the text, "He who does not sing with us is against us," is an almost exact quotation from Vladimir Mayakovsky's poem "Gospodin, 'narodnyi artist'" (Mister "National Artist"), an attack on the Russian émigré opera singer Feodor Chaliapin published in the Soviet newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* in 1927.¹⁸ Combined with the meaning and literary allusion of the first quotation, the final phrase echoes the title of Maxim Gorky's article "Eslī vrag ne sdaetsia, — ego unichtozhaiut" (If the Enemy Does Not Surrender, He Will Be Destroyed), which appeared in the newspaper *Pravda* in 1930 — the year of Mayakovsky's death — and was later quoted by Stalin in a statement issued during the Second World War.¹⁹ Prigov here performs the unconditional surrender of the poet to the state through the transformation of the writer into a machine-like producer who sings for the state ("with us") by retyping a prescribed text. Underscoring the connection between the poetic word (which in Mayakovsky's poem becomes "a bomb") and totalitarian ideology, Prigov locates the origins of Stalin's totalitarianism in the Russian avant-garde. Prigov invokes the Russian avant-garde through the citation of Mayakovsky, the echo of his innovative stepped line,

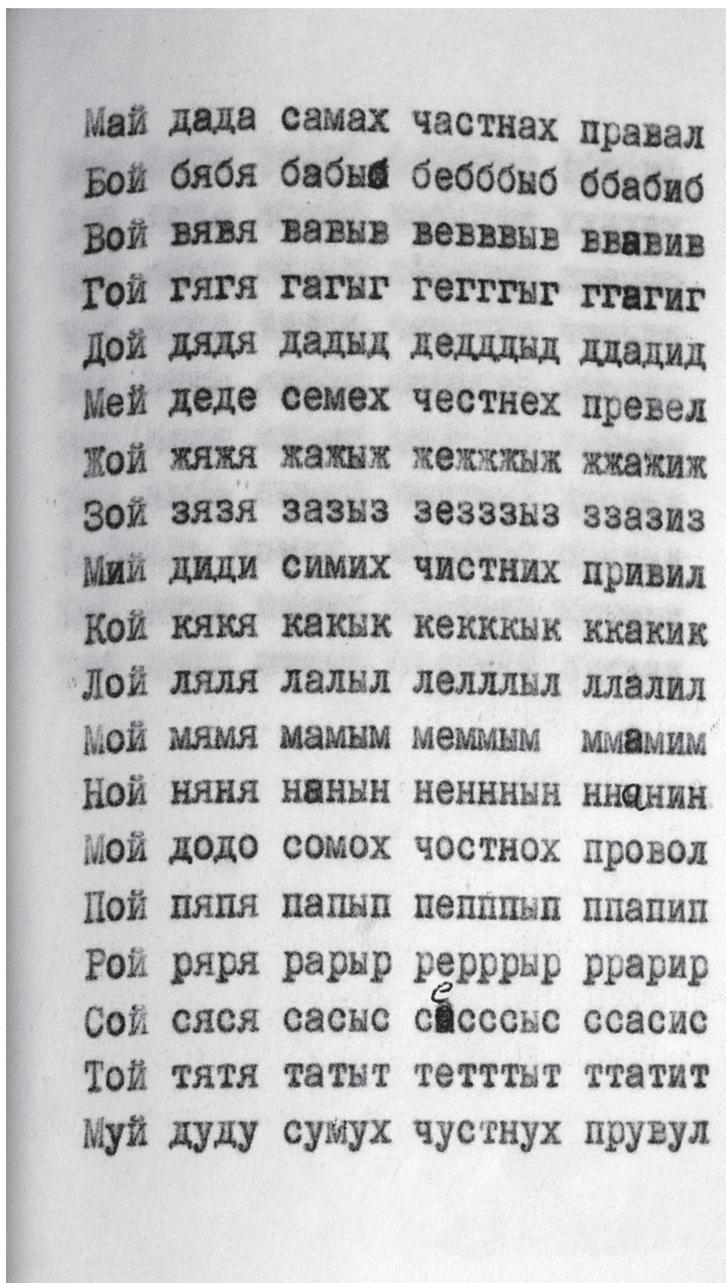
and the geometrical abstraction of the concrete poem's shape. He connects the avant-garde to Stalinism by having the geometrical abstraction emerge through the interplay of Mayakovsky's ominous phrase and Gorky and Stalin's capitalized words of total destruction.

Just as he connects totalitarianism to avant-gardism, Prigov inserts official discourse into the unofficial realm of the samizdat text, which was fetishized by many in the Soviet intelligentsia. By repeating phrases on a typescript page, he links the repetitive clichés and slogans of official propaganda to the retyping required for the reproduction of samizdat texts.²⁰ Prigov presents non-literary appropriated material and discourses within the institutional structures of samizdat literature. Though dependent on the cultural and historical specificities of samizdat, Prigov's literary framing of non-literary texts anticipates anglophone conceptual writing such as Kenneth Goldsmith's *Sports, Traffic*, and *The Weather*, Rob Fitterman's *Metropolis* series, Vanessa Place's *Statement of Facts*, or even Bruce Andrews's less strictly ordered appropriation of media and political discourses in precursor works like *Give Em Enough Rope*. Like Komar and Melamid's verbatim reproduction of slogans, Prigov's approach also presages Place's emphasis on repeating "the discourse of the master."²¹ More humorously and perhaps even more mercilessly than Place, Prigov alerts us to the implicated relation of conceptual writing and the avant-garde as a whole to discourses of power.

2. Poems

Prigov most clearly confronts the institution of literature when he applies conceptual writing strategies of unoriginality and constraint to Russian literary classics. Beginning with his 1975 pastiche of classic poems, Prigov undertook a vast range of rewritings or verbatim reproductions of well-known works from the Russian literary tradition. Like Place's verbatim rewriting of Wordsworth at the University of Chicago, or Goldsmith's reading of Walt Whitman, Hart Crane, and New York traffic reports at the White House, Prigov's reproductions question literature as an institution by appropriating the work of some of its most canonical figures.²² Above all, Prigov persistently repeats the work of Russia's national poet, Alexander Pushkin, and his masterpiece, *Eugene Onegin*.

Prigov repeats parts of Pushkin's masterpiece (most often the opening lines) in a wide range of his work across visual, performance, and textual media. In his Pushkin manuscript, for example, he presents the opening lines of *Eugene Onegin* in typescript with handwritten corrections.²³ In his signature performance piece *Mantra vysokoi russkoi kul'tury* (Mantra of High Russian Culture),



From Dmitri Prigov, *Sed'maia azbuka (po metodu Prigova-Monastyrskogo)* (Seventh Alphabet [Using the Prigov-Monastyrski Method]) (Moscow, 1984). Samizdat publication. Typewritten text on paper. 15 x 10 cm. A-Ya Archive. Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union, 071.001.002. Photo by Peter Jacobs. Reproduced with the permission of the Estate of Dmitri Prigov.

he renders the opening lines of *Eugene Onegin* in various vocal styles.²⁴ In another work, he rewrites Pushkin's poem as a telegram.²⁵ These iterative texts link official and unofficial literary cultures by emphasizing their shared acceptance of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* as the master text of Russian literature.

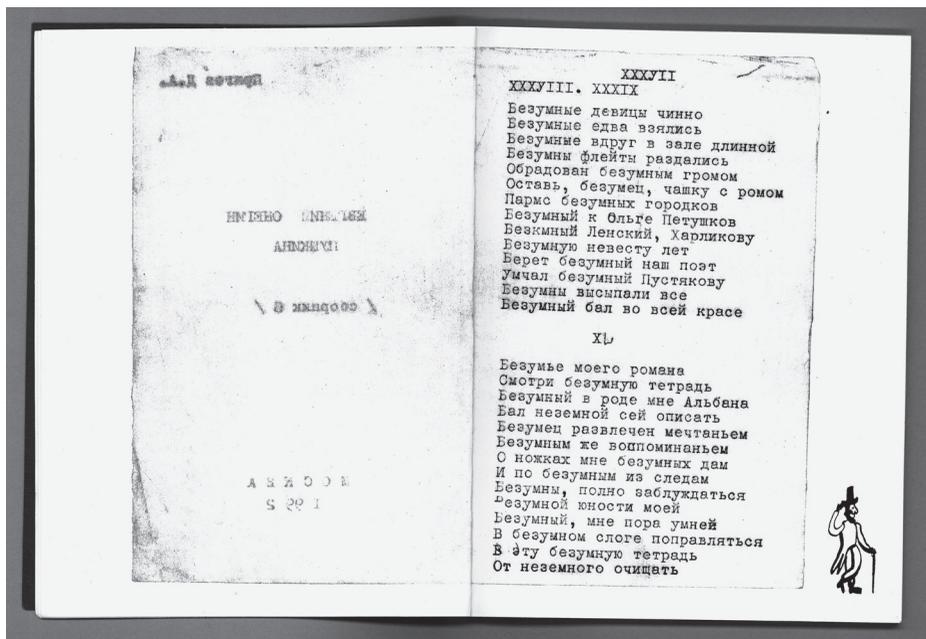
Prigov's *Sed'maia azbuka* (Seventh Alphabet) reiterates and retards the opening line of *Eugene Onegin* through an alphabetical series of consonant and vowel substitutions (see page 323). As in *Citizens, Air Raid Warning!*, the visual effect of the *Seventh Alphabet* depends on the non-proportional, or mono-spaced, type produced by the typewriter (the machine for both production and reproduction in samizdat literature), which keeps the columns of text aligned even as the letters change. By combining the alphabet form with the opening lines of Pushkin's poem, Prigov's work foregrounds the institutionalized position of Pushkin's text, which like the Cyrillic alphabet is taught to all Russian school children. At the same time, Prigov alludes to the totalizing position of *Eugene Onegin* in Russian culture as the masterwork of the national poet and the *a-to-z* (or in Cyrillic *a-to-ia*) "encyclopedia of Russian life."²⁶

As well as extending his iterations of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Prigov's *Seventh Alphabet* forms part of his *Azbuki* series, a group of around eighty works based on an alphabetical constraint. In each poem written under this constraint, Prigov begins each line with a successive letter of the Cyrillic alphabet, proceeding from the first letter of the alphabet, *a*, to the last, *ia*. The *Seventh Alphabet* also belongs to a medium-based series of samizdat books that Prigov called his *Mini-buksy* (Mini-books).²⁷ Just as he engages children's didactic literature and the Russian tradition of sound poetry in his alphabet series, Prigov focuses attention on the institutional expectations of samizdat literature in his *Mini-books* series. Samizdat literature was fetishized as preserving the sacred texts of Russian culture, including the work of those writers in the tradition, such as Osip Mandelstam, excluded from official Soviet literary history. The copying of samizdat texts as an act of artistic creation is, for example, foregrounded in Aleksandr Iulikov's *Stikhiia Osipa Mandel'shtama* (The Element of Osip Mandelstam, 1979), in which Iulikov produces an image that resembles Malevich's 1913 prototype for the *Chernyi kvadrat* (Black Square) by copying out in tiny handwriting Mandelstam's entire collected poems. In a similar way, Prigov's *Seventh Alphabet* connects the fetishized samizdat object to the act of copying. Prigov, however, uses typescript rather than Iulikov's handwritten copying, further stressing the samizdat mode of reproduction and distancing Prigov's work from the notion of the authentic and expressive mark of the artist's hand. By copying the work of the officially recognized national poet rather than the banned Mandelstam, Prigov also undermines the revolutionary pretensions of the modernist sound poem by presenting his avant-gardism as in

consonance with – rather than breaking from – the Russian literary tradition and Soviet ideology.

Prigov extends his focus on the literary book as a fetishized object in his *Grobiki otrinutykh stikhov* (Little Coffins of Rejected Verse). This large series of works produced in the thousands from the early 1980s onwards comprises samizdat-style books of two sheets stapled shut on all sides and containing Prigov's "rejected verse," either a whole poem or a fragment thereof. At one level, Prigov's *Little Coffins* suggest that the idea is more important than the reading of the work by sealing the text and so rendering it unreadable. Like Goldsmith, Prigov here extends Sol LeWitt's antiretinal account of conceptual art to literature.²⁸ Prigov's *Little Coffins* also build on the work of writers in his own milieu, such as fellow Moscow conceptual poet Rubinshtein, whose "Tridtsat' piat' novykh listov" (Thirty-Five New Pages) contains empty pages with footnotes indicating what should fill the blank space.²⁹ At another level, like Place's jacket blurbs in *Tragodia*, Prigov focuses attention on the cover as both a physical encasement and an institutional frame for the work.³⁰ In the *Little Coffins* series, Prigov also stresses the physical instantiation of the book as an art object, enacting a transformation of poetry into conceptual art that recalls Marcel Broodthaers's plastering together – and so rendering unreadable – fifty remaindered copies of his last book of poetry in *Pense-Bête* (1964). Like Broodthaers's work, Prigov's *Little Coffins* suggest a speechless – dead – memorial to the institution of literature, which the artist has renounced.

In the post-Soviet context, Prigov continued to stress the relationship between a text's material embodiment and its framing within the institution of literature by reproducing a samizdat retyping of *Eugene Onegin* as a facsimile copy, a work he entitled *Faksimil'noe vosproizvedenie samodel'noi knigi Dmitriia Aleksandroviicha Prigova "Evgenii Onegin Pushkina" s risunkami na poliakh raboty Aleksandra Florenskogo* (Facsimile Reproduction of Dmitri Aleksandrovich Prigov's Self-Made Book "Pushkin's Eugene Onegin" with Drawings on the Margins of the Work by Aleksandr Florensky). In this work, Prigov retypes an entire section of *Eugene Onegin* in a samizdat-style book, replacing, he claims in the introduction, each adjective with either "bezumnyi" (insane, senseless) or "nezemnoi" (unearthly), although in fact he undertook further rewriting of many lines and retained some of the original adjectives. He then reproduced the book in a facsimile edition with a printed introduction and with illustrations on the white margins framing the facsimile image on each page (see page 326). Prigov's approach anticipates the later use of facsimiles in conceptual texts such as Simon Morris's *Re-writing Freud* and *Getting inside Jack Kerouac's Head* and Nick Thurston's *Reading the Remove of Literature*. Like these works, Prigov's facsimile highlights the materiality of the particular copy and its myriad reproductions.



From Dmitri Prigov, *Faksimil'noe vosproizvedenie samodel'noi knigi Dmitriia Aleksandroviča Prigova 'Evgenii Onegin Pushkina' s risunkami na poliakh raboty Aleksandra Florenskogo* (Facsimile Reproduction of Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov's Self-Made Book "Pushkin's Eugene Onegin" with Drawings on the Margins of the Work by Aleksandr Florenskii) (St Petersburg: Mit'kilibris; Krasnyi matros, 1998). Reproduced with the permission of the Estate of Dmitri Prigov.

Simultaneously, the work satirizes the fetishizing of the individual copy and the singularity of each samizdat text by creating a mass-produced facsimile of an individual reproduction. As a samizdat-style work, the book displays its material status as the product of hand-reproduction involving retyping and increasingly illegible carbon copies on thin paper. Prigov highlights the thinness of the paper by reproducing the reverse of each one-sided page of text so that the typed text clearly shows through from the other side, an absurdist attention to fidelity in reproduction that simultaneously emphasizes the book's status as a facsimile. Equally absurdly, the samizdat text is a retyping of an officially sanctioned and always widely available classic. Even more strangely, it is dated 1992, that is, after the loosening of state censorship and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Prigov's introduction to his facsimile book also questions post-Soviet nostalgia for samizdat texts and connects their fetishization to the Russian literary tradition. Prigov frames the work as a confrontation between the samizdat

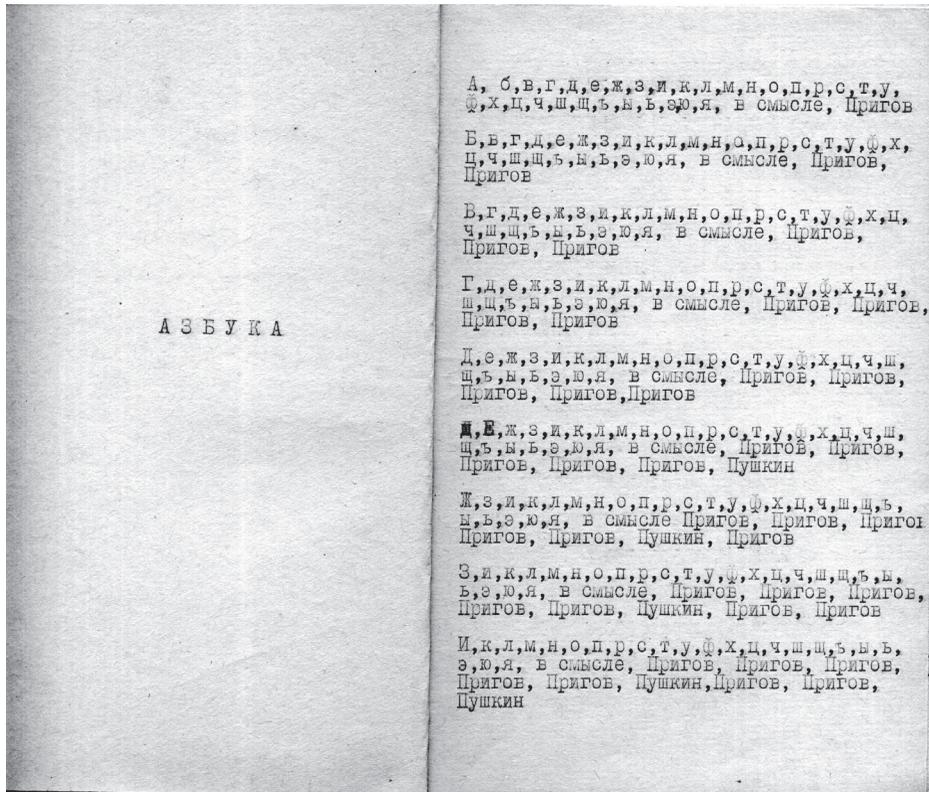
copyist's "monastic-humble transcription of a sacred text" and the post-Soviet media environment: "The replacement of all adjectives with 'insane' and 'unearthly,' apart from wildly romanticizing the text, sharply narrows its informational field; however, it also deepens the mantric-incantatory suggestiveness, which in our time of insanely expanding media and spheres of information is felt and read as the basic and original essence of poetry."³¹ Here, Prigov alludes to the widespread belief among unofficial writers in the transcendent, "unearthly" power of the samizdat literary text and the poetic word.³² Through his tongue-in-cheek retyping, reproduction, and replacement procedures, Prigov highlights and questions such beliefs and their role in samizdat and post-samizdat literary institutions.

3. Authors

Prigov's *Facsimile* reveals how conceptual literature, including recent anglophone conceptual writing, explores not just conceptual forms for constructing non-expressive texts but also the interrelated material and institutional frameworks for those texts. And pre-eminently among those frames, Prigov stressed the author, whose presence is the unacknowledged shadow of anglophone conceptual writing's anti-expressive self-presentation. Prigov described his entire practice as a single art project, one that involved the construction of a poet who "covers all the world with his words."³³ As is the case for writers like Place and Goldsmith, Prigov uses the frame of literature to address the institutional construction of the artist or writer. Self-presentations such as Place's claim to have killed poetry operate similarly to Prigov's assertion that "Pushkin is a pure genius / Prigov is also a genius."³⁴ Both Place and Prigov engage the institutional structures of literature in order to construct a hyperbolic author persona.

Although one might see Prigov's and Place's self-presentations as separate from their conceptual texts, Prigov's practice suggests otherwise. Drawing on the construction of artist personas by Komar and Melamid, Kabakov, and others, from the mid-1970s onwards Prigov became increasingly focused on the multimedia construction of himself as a poet. By the end of his life, Prigov was performing himself in theatrical events and on television shows, and reformulating his self-assigned role as a representative of state power and of the Russian literary tradition.³⁵

As part of his focus on the construction of an author image, Prigov frequently deploys the name "Prigov" in his work. In his *Chetvertaia azbuka* (Fourth Alphabet), for example, Prigov further develops the conjunction of Pushkin's genius and his own (see page 328). The *Fourth Alphabet* repeats Prigov's name



From Dmitri Prigov, *Chetvertaia azbuka* (Fourth Alphabet) (Moscow, 1983). Samizdat publication. Typewritten text on paper. 19.2 x 13 cm. Private collection. Reproduced with the permission of the Estate of Dmitri Prigov.

“Пригов” in Cyrillic) with increasing frequency as the poem passes through the alphabet. At the same time, a pattern of repetition is established whereby Prigov’s name is interspersed among the names of Pushkin, Catullus, various writers and artists of Prigov’s milieu (e.g., Kabakov and Rubinshtein), and finally even Ronald Reagan. Prigov constructs and deflates his own genius by engaging with the literary tradition, represented by Pushkin, with a community of artists, and with figures of Cold War conflict and power.

By repeating these names, Prigov also builds on his strictly implemented repetitions of the Cyrillic alphabet. The first line presents all the letters of the alphabet in order; the second line begins with the second letter of the alphabet and presents all subsequent letters of the alphabet in order; the third line begins on the third letter of the alphabet; and so on. These repetitions produce a visual pattern. Each repeated letter or name creates a descending line of repeated letters running diagonally from right to left down the page. The repetitions of the

alphabet also produce a mirroring effect, so that one can read the alphabet along the horizontal and vertical axes of the text. The first horizontal and vertical lines begin with a full alphabet. The next lines start with the letter *b* and so on, until the last line begins with “ia” (“Я” in Cyrillic), the final letter of the Russian alphabet. “Ia” is not only the last letter in the Russian alphabet but also the Russian word for the first-person pronoun, or “I” in English. The formal exercise in alphabetical letter arrangement produces a narcissistic conclusion of all iterations of the alphabet in “I,” so motivating the transformation from letters to names: “I” becomes “Prigov, Prigov, Prigov, Prigov,” and so on.

Prigov’s mini-book format partially obscures the work’s formal symmetries by forcing the long lines to be squeezed into narrow margins, and the mistyping typical of samizdat further disrupts the pattern (as in the beginning of the sixth line, where the typist-author has mistakenly begun with the Cyrillic letter Д, instead of E). This tension between form and format echoes the related tension in the work between a strictly procedural text based on the arbitrary sequence of the Russian alphabet and Prigov’s playfully hyperbolic participation in the tradition of poetic self-expression, a tradition strongly associated with the fetishized samizdat text. The conclusion of the alphabet with “ia” (“I”) and the poem with “Prigov” stresses the way in which non-interventionist, procedural evacuations of expression and authority can end up reproducing that authority – recalling again the critique of the Russian modernist avant-garde’s relationship to Stalinist art and authoritarianism in Prigov’s *Seventh Alphabet* and *He Who Does Not Sing with Us Is against Us*. The act of freeing letters from meaning becomes part of the poet’s authoritarian claim to power.³⁶

Authorial image plays a vital role in some of the most prominent examples of anglophone conceptual writing. Recalling Warhol’s *a: a novel*, Goldsmith’s *Soliloquy* (a transcription of every word spoken by the author over the course of one week) presents the author as a player in the New York art scene. Place’s work likewise addresses the construction of authorship, both through her performances and through – again recalling Warhol – her factory series of texts authored by others. Place directly acknowledges Prigov in her practice of authorial construction in her piece “Prigov Is a Genius,” which Place derives from the roster of the Academy of American Poets. Part of the C section reads,

Wanda Coleman is a genius.
Samuel Taylor Coleridge is also a genius.
Billy Collins is a genius.
Martha Collins is a genius.
Tony Connor is a genius.
Nicole Cooley is a genius.

Jane Cooper is a genius.
Alfred Corn is a genius.
Gregory Corso is a genius.
Jayne Cortez is a genius.
William Cowper is a genius.
Hart Crane is a genius.
Robert Creeley is a genius.³⁷

Place's work alludes to Prigov's numerous assertions of his own genius and to his naming of others as geniuses in order to construct a community of recognition. In "Prigov Is a Genius," Place stresses the institution and community of recognition that is American poetry. In other works, such as her Facebook page, she explores social networking as a medium for conceptual and authorial play.³⁸

Much earlier, in the 1970s and 1980s, Prigov had already exposed the mythologies of authorship and the community of recognition that constituted Moscow conceptualism. In his 1986 apartment studio performance of *Sorok deviatiaia azbuka* (Forty-ninth Alphabet) and in the published poem, Prigov greets the prominent Moscow artists and writers in attendance, including Kabakov, Monastyrsky, and Rubinshtein, as "my heroes" – "heroes of Pushkin, Lermontov and Tchaikovsky" – before performing a multimedia piece that borrows musical and textual material from those icons of Russian culture, Tchaikovsky and Pushkin.³⁹

In appropriating another's voice – pre-eminently Pushkin's – Prigov highlights the power of the authorial figure even in the guise of the non-expressive, appropriation artist. Prigov's work knowingly reveals how the authorizing gesture of the readymade not only negates but also reinscribes the author. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, this approach to authorship was rejected by some conceptual artists, especially those involved in Art & Language, as "a weak form of critique of the fetishization of the artist as author," in which "the artist as author died only to be resurrected as a dandy."⁴⁰ Yet whatever its ethics or effectiveness in the literary context, the fetishizing of the author has played a critical if less acknowledged role in structuring conceptual writing from Craig Dworkin's inclusion of Robert Rauschenberg's "This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so" in his first anthology of conceptual writing, to Goldsmith's and Place's repeated invocation of Warhol, to Steven Zultanski's focus on the masculinist poetics underlying authorial fetishization.⁴¹

Prigov's work can help us attend to how conceptual writing – in making texts from other texts – engages ideological discourses and the institutions of literature, art, and authorship. Prigov and Russian conceptual writing developed in relation to institutions and ideologies very different from those operative in

the West then and now. Yet recognizing those differences can also make us more attuned to the institutional and ideological systems and cultural commonplaces that inflect conceptual writing today.

Notes

- 1 Goldsmith, "Kenneth Goldsmith on Uncreative Writing"; Gysin, "Cut Ups," 131. I refer to the arts organization Arika's contribution to the 2012 Whitney Biennial, "A Survey Is a Process of Listening," which included a performance by Craig Dworkin and Vanessa Place, and the publication of Dworkin, *Handbook of Protocols for Literary Listening*.
- 2 Conceptual writing's engagement with the institutions of art and literature has been partially obscured by the presentation of conceptual writing either as a tendency in the literary realm that draws inspiration from conceptual art or as a way to move beyond discussions of genres, media, or institutions such as art and literature to examine specific practices or instantiations of concepts. See, for example, Dworkin's introduction to the anthology of conceptual writing *Against Expression*, where he compares his approach to his earlier *UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing*: "Instead of drawing indiscriminately from various disciplines or creating a new critical environment in which to juxtapose poetry with pieces from other traditions, this volume keeps its focus – with a few deliberate exceptions – on works published or received in a literary context." Dworkin, "Fate of Echo," xxiv. Liz Kotz notes some of the tensions between literary and art worlds in discussing conceptual writing, especially in relation to Warhol's *a: a novel*, but her solution is to focus on conceptual writing as ultimately transcending those contexts by presenting "language in its unceasing variety and profusion, rather than in the highly aestheticized fragments we recognize as poetry or art." Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At*, 6, 265, 266. By contrast, Charles Harrison, in writing retrospectively about Art & Language, stresses again and again the importance to the group of questioning but not eliminating the difference between art and literature. See, for example, Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language*, 93; Harrison, *Conceptual Art and Painting*, 34.
- 3 A precedent for my transnational approach to conceptual practice can be found in Mariani, *Global Conceptualism*.
- 4 Groys, "Ekzistentsial'nye predposylki kontseptual'nogo iskusstva." Dworkin also describes Borges's Menard as a conceptual writer *avant la lettre*. Dworkin, "Fate of Echo," xlv.
- 5 Groys first applied the term "conceptualism" to these Moscow artists in Groys, "Moskovskii romanticheskii kontseptualizm."
- 6 Many examples of text-based work by Moscow conceptualists are included in the five folios of MANI (the Moscow Archive of New Art), a copy of which is held at the Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University. For overviews of the use of text in Moscow conceptualism, see Rosenfeld, "Word and/as Image"; and Nicholas, "We Were Born to Make Fairytales Come True."
- 7 Prigov first used "conceptualism" to describe his own work in 1982, in a published epistolary debate with Rea Nikonova and Sergei Sigei, two poets working outside

- Moscow who might also be termed conceptualists. Prigov, Nikonova, and Sigei, "Perepiska"; Janecek, "Conceptualism." Mikhail Epshtein influentially used the term "conceptualist" in his mapping of new tendencies in Russian poetry in 1983. Epshtein, "Tezisy o metarealizme i kontseptualizme."
- 8 On the creation of these slogan works and of sots-art, see Komar, "Sots-art i ofitsial'nyi sots-kontseptualizm," 135–7.
 - 9 The precise relation of sots-art to Moscow conceptualism is the subject of ongoing debate. See Bartelik, "Banner without a Slogan"; Akinsha, "Between Lent and Carnival."
 - 10 In the 1970s, writers and artists, especially those living in Moscow and Leningrad, developed unofficial literary and artistic institutions to the point where they constituted what was termed an entire "Second Culture" (*Vtoraia kul'tura*). This Second Culture included unofficial, private, but largely tolerated literary readings and artistic and musical performances, apartment exhibitions, journals and other samizdat publications, and even a literary prize. On "Second Culture," see Ostanin, "Byt' vmesto imet'"; Sedakova, "Conform Not to This Age," 70; Sedakova, "Muzyka glukhogo vremeni," 257; Krivulin, "Zolotoi vek"; Ivanov, "V bytnost' Peterburga Leningradom."
 - 11 Al'bert, "Sots-art," 138.
 - 12 Groys, *Total Art*, 80–1.
 - 13 Place reports that when Nancy Perloff introduced her to Komar and Melamid's slogans, she was excited by the way they were practically indistinguishable from real slogans. Conversation with the author, September 2011. Where Nicholas finds in Komar and Melamid's work a weapon of political resistance deriving from the utopian reanimation of dead slogans, Groys argues that Komar and Melamid "abandon from the outset the search for a form of art that can resist power." Nicholas, "We Were Born to Make Fairytales Come True," 343–4; Groys, *Total Art*, 91. A similar ambiguity in the relationship between contemporary anglophone conceptual writing and power also contributes to its populism, about which Brian Reed writes elsewhere in this volume.
 - 14 On the influence of Komar and Melamid's use of characters on Kabakov's subsequent innovations, see Jackson, *Experimental Group*, 129.
 - 15 Prigov, *Kul'turnye pesni*; Prigov, *Istoricheskie i geroicheskie pesni*.
 - 16 An image of Prigov's *Banka otrinutykh stikhov* (Tin Can of Rejected Verse) appears in Prigov, *Grazhdane*, 156. A photograph of *Banka podpisei za polnoe i bezogovorochnoe razoruzhenie Ameriki* (Tin Can of Signatures for the Complete and Unconditional Disarmament of America) is reproduced in Kholmogorova, *Sots-art*, fig. 79. Images of further works from Prigov's *Tin Cans* series appear in Prigov, *Grazhdane*, 152–7; Prigov, *Dmitri Prigov*, 114–19.
 - 17 Around the time Prigov began working on his *Tin Cans* series, Komar and Melamid also produced a disintegrated version of part of Warhol's *Campbell's Soup*, entitled *Post-Art #1* (1973–4).
 - 18 Maiakovskii, "Gospodin, 'narodnyi artist.'"
 - 19 Gorkii, "Esli vrag ne sdaetsia"; Stalin, *O Velikoi Otechestvennoi voine*, 86–7.
 - 20 In another work in the series, Prigov appropriates lines from the Soviet national anthem to reveal, as in his quotation of Stalin quoting Gorky, the shifting ideological meanings of repeated words. Prigov repeats the national anthem to highlight,

- through handwritten editing, how the anthem has itself been repeated and re-versioned to remove references to Stalin. See Edmond, *Common Strangeness*, 139–41.
- 21 Place, *Echo*.
 - 22 Place, *Echo*; Goldsmith, “Kenneth Goldsmith Reads Poetry at White House Poetry Night.”
 - 23 Prigov, *Chernovik poeta*.
 - 24 Prigov, *Mantras*; Prigov, *Mantra*.
 - 25 Prigov, *Telegrammy*. For further examples of Prigov’s use of *Eugene Onegin*, see, inter alia, Prigov, *Moi diadia*; and the first poem in Prigov, “Stikhi dlia Dzhordzhika.”
 - 26 This phrase comes from the nineteenth-century critic Vissarion Belinskii. Belinskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 7: 503.
 - 27 The title *Mini-buksy* is a neologism that Prigov derives from the English prefix *mini* and a transliteration of the English term *books* rather than the Russian equivalent, *knigi*. Prigov’s neologism parallels and possibly alludes to the use of the English *art* rather than the Russian *iskusstvo* in the term *sots-art*.
 - 28 “What the work of art looks like isn’t too important.” LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” 80. Similarly, Goldsmith writes, “You really don’t need to read my books to get the idea of what they’re like.” Goldsmith, “Being Boring.”
 - 29 Rubinshtein, “Tridtsat’ piat’ novykh listov.”
 - 30 The blurbs from volume 1 of Place’s *Tragodiia*, *Statement of Facts*, are partially crossed out in volume 2, *Statement of the Case*, and partially deleted in volume 3, *Argument*. In comparing the hardback and paperback editions of each volume, one also discovers subtler differences in the layout of the blurbs and the rest of the front and back matter.
 - 31 Prigov, *Faksimil’noe vosproizvedenie*, 3.
 - 32 Ol’ga Sedakova, one of the most prominent Russian poets to emerge from unofficial literature of the 1970s, describes the unofficial lyric of this period as being characterized by its “inspiration”: “a sign that our world is open to and penetrated by some sort of other force.” Sedakova, “Muzyka glukhogo vremeni,” 258. It is this otherworldly notion of poetry and of samizdat literature and its relation to both Mandelstam’s “senseless word” (*bezumnoe slovo*) and the futurists’ “beyond sense” (*zaum*) poetry that Prigov cites in his replacement procedure.
 - 33 Quoted in Obermayr, “Tod und Zahl,” 230.
 - 34 Prigov, *Azbuka*; Place, “Poetry Is Dead.”
 - 35 For example, Prigov performed himself in mid-2006 in the theatrical ballet *Al’fa-Chaika* (*The Alpha Seagull*), directed by Aleksandr Pepeliaev, and the following year, shortly before his death, he participated in the popular Russian game show *Sto k odnomu* as the head of a team comprising Moscow artists. The episode was broadcast on the Russian television channel RTR on 16 September 2007, two months after Prigov’s death.
 - 36 For a similar reading of Prigov’s policeman poems, see Groys, *Total Art*, 97–8.
 - 37 Place, “Dmitri Prigov Is a Genius.”
 - 38 In addition to her Facebook page, see also Place’s assertion that “Facebook is not a metaphor. It is, and it is likeness. I like this ... 25 random things about me, calculated algorithmically. So I can interface with more texts like me.” Place, “Death of the Text.”
 - 39 Prigov and Tarasov, Performance in Kabakov’s studio.

- 40 Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language*, 93
- 41 Dworkin, introduction to *The UbuWeb Anthology*; Zultanski, *Pad*. Just as there is disagreement about how conceptual art engages the fetishization of the artist and the institution of art (e.g., Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language*, 93; Corris, "Invisible College"), so a similar diversity of opinions exists within contemporary anglophone accounts of conceptual writing. This is evinced by the contrasting views put forward by the anthologies *Against Expression* and *I'll Drown My Book*, the latter of which concludes with one of the editors, Place, suggesting that much of the work in the anthology is not in fact conceptual writing because "it dictates its reception," that is, it assumes and supplies a single context or frame through which it should be read. Place, *Afterword*, 447. For an insider's view on the construction of an anglophone canon of conceptual writing, see also Dworkin, "Note on Conceptualism." For an account of contemporary anglophone conceptual writing that stresses its internal tensions by differentiating between "left" and "right" tendencies, see Watten, "Presentism and Periodization."



Reading as Art



Thomas Campbell & Simon Morris



In *Reading as Art* (art work) Simon Morris invites us to read the activity of



reading itself. In the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche called for the study of other histories, the

anonymous facts of our daily lives. In their own way Michel Foucault and



Georges Perec, working at the same time, in the latter half of the twentieth century, fulfilled this

desire. Foucault made us look at the micro-histories of subjects such as love, sex, madness, crime and punishment at different times across history. In his book, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (1974), Perec looked at the everyday in life, paying attention to matters such as how one arranges one's books, a list of everything he ate in the year 1974, and reading as a socio-physiological outline:



We read with the eyes. What the eyes do while we are reading is of such complexity as to exceed

both my own competence and the scope of this article. From the abundant literature devoted to this question since the beginning of the century (Yarbus, Stark,



etc.), we can at least derive one elementary but basic certainty: the eyes do not read the letters one after the other, nor the words one after the other, nor the lines one after the other, but proceed jerkily and by becoming fixed, exploring the whole reading field instantaneously with a stubborn redundancy. This unceasing perusal is punctuated by imperceptible halts as if, in order to discover what it is seeking, the eye needed to sweep across the page in an intensely agitated manner, not regularly, like a television receiver (as the term 'sweeping' might lead one to think), but

in a disorderly, repetitive and aleatory way; or, if you prefer, since we're dealing in metaphors here, like a pigeon pecking at the ground in search of breadcrumbs. – Georges Perec, 'Reading: A Socio-physiological Outline', 1974¹



Morris applies the same level of visual scrutiny to the physical activity of reading. Still images of reading are nothing new and

Morris is, of course, very aware of existing works by artists that investigate reading; Hubert Francois Bourguignon's *Le Lecteur* (1733–56) and Robert Hubert's *Déjeuner de Madame Geoffrin* (1772) are just two of countless images



of people reading. In the 1960s and 70s the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth presented his *Information Rooms*, installations that consisted of tables covered in books with the artist, head buried in the books, reading, cogitating. In 1967



at the Lannis Gallery curated an exhibition



in New York Kosuth in which fifteen artists chose their favourite

English artist John Latham invited his students to chew the pages from Clement Greenberg's *Art and Culture* (1961) and spit them



back into a flask. In 2001, Rainer Ganahl presented his book on pedagogical structures and the acquisition of knowledge, entitled *Reading Karl Marx*. Reading and

seminar discussions are used by Ganahl as a means to question artistic practice as a form of knowledge production. In 2001 John McDowall presented his bookwork *Story of the Time* in which eight single stills of different



characters reading in Jean-Luc Godard films are presented on double page spreads, on fine paper, in

a small book. You, the reader, are confronted by repeated images of people reading, holding books in their hands, whilst you hold the book in your hands, reading the images. In 2002 Rémy Markowitsch presented *Bibliotherapy* in which



he explores the act of reading, the image generated by the

interpreter in the process of reading aloud, and the way in which listeners are emotionally affected beyond what is being said.

In 2005, the French artist Yann Sérandour presented *An Art of Readers* in Rennes, France. The exhibition was an opportunity to see how a range of artists used the book for inspiration, made tactical interventions into the space



of knowledge and interrogated the scene of writing. The artists presented in this exhibition abandoned the



traditional role of the artist as left a gap in their work as a the reader. The participating



author/maker and space for the art of the artists drew their

inspiration from have produced. in flux, open to



extant material, work that others Their chosen material remains further contextualisation and



re-reading. The exhibition included Simon Morris' work *Re-writing Freud*, 2005.

In 2004 Simon Morris presented *Reading as Art* (art work) for the first time in a invited by the curator Andrew

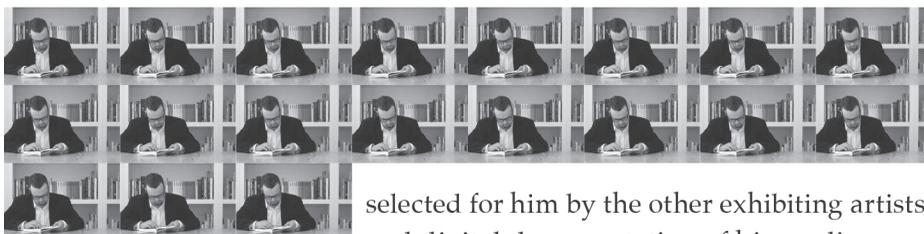


group exhibition in London. When Hunt to respond to W.G. Sebald's



The Rings of Saturn (1995), Morris simply filmed himself reading the book, from beginning to end. His five-hour film was described

by the critic David Barrett as possibly "the ideal work"² in a review for *Art Monthly*. In 2005 Morris was selected by Gustav Metzger to participate in *East International*. For the fifty days of the exhibition, Morris read from books



selected for him by the other exhibiting artists, and digital documentation of his reading was uploaded to a website on a daily basis, which was displayed in the gallery.

Simon Morris' work differs from existing work in this field as it incorporates



durational silent film unedited photographs minutes of reading.



or a continuous stream of documenting up to four Inspired by the practice of

Andy Warhol, and in *Date Paintings*, and Kimsooja's *A*



particular his work *Sleep* (1963), *On Kawara's* known collectively as *Today* (1966–2013) *Needle Woman* (1999), each reading is a

record of time spent cogitating on the words of others. Still images of artists reading are commonplace (see Joseph Kosuth et al.) and films of people reading aloud have been widely documented (see Rémy Markowitsch and Gary Hill),



however little attention has been paid to the essentially private activity of silent reading. In Morris' new work, the intention is to document the activity of reading with the same level of objective scrutiny that Bernd and Hilla Becher applied to industrial buildings in their work. Morris has framed the activity of reading.

In *Reading as Art* (art work), the spectator is given nothing. Apart from the image of a person reading, and the cover of the book, which tells you what they are reading, no further information



is transmitted. For Morris, silent reading contains all the essential principles of a traditional artwork. The spectator or reader is given nothing and from this ambiguous space he or she is left with a space to construct meaning. There is a shift between illusion at times the reader is clearly conscious of

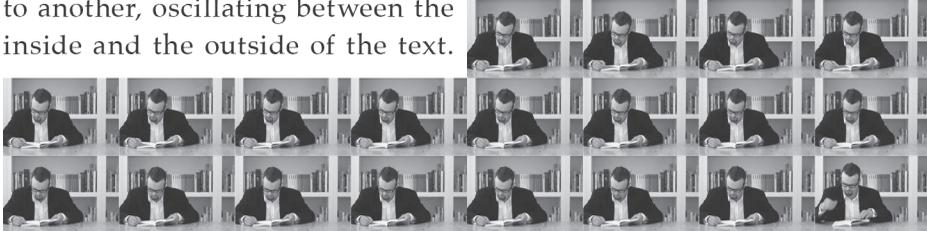


his or her own and reality as being filmed,



while at others he has lost himself in the text. As critics of reader-response theory would say, the reader has succumbed to the trance or the fascination of reading. The art takes place in these moments of slippage, when the artist moves from one register

to another, oscillating between the inside and the outside of the text.



For Morris, these moments of slippage are like entering a piece of music by Yves Klein or La Monte Young. The work can be entered at any moment; there is no beginning and no end, just one continuous stretched-out sound.

During this period of condensation, around 47–48, I created a 'monotone'



symphony whose 'theme' is what I wished my life to be. This symphony, lasting forty minutes

(but that's quite unimportant, we shall see why) is constituted of one single continuous 'sound', stretched out, deprived of its attack and end, which creates a sensation of dizziness, of sensibility whirled outside time. Thus the symphony does not exist even while being there, leaving behind the phenomenology of time, for it has neither been born nor ever died, after existing, however, in the

world of our possibilities of conscious perception: it is audible silence-presence.
– Yves Klein, 'Overcoming the Problematic of Art', Long Live the Immaterial, 1959

Morris frames approximately four minutes of silence-presence for our engagement (two to three images per second). It makes no difference in his reading, at what point the documentation of the activity took place, what was read before or after. What the continuous unedited stream of photographs

allows us to do is to engage with the activity of



reading itself. Shifting in his seat, eyes moving from left to right, blinking, hand playing with the page, on the table, breathing, a finger and forth, the blur of movement



book placed down flat stroking the page back as a page is turned.

As part of the creative process, the artist is effaced in the process of making.



In much the same way, for Maurice Blanchot and

many others, reading involves 'a dissolution of the reader's sense of self'. In Reading as Art (art work), the activity of reading has been framed as art. The



activity of reading has been from Laurence Sterne, to Barth, have drawn attention



presented to be read. Writers Charles Dickens and John to the figure of the reader:

The reader! You, dogged, unisultable, print oriented bastard, it's you I'm addressing, who else, from inside this monstrous fiction. You've read me this far, then? Even this far? For what discreditable motive? How is it you don't go to a movie, watch TV, stare at the wall, play tennis with a friend, make amorous advances to the person



who comes to your mind when I speak of amorous advances? Can nothing surfeit, saturate you, turn you off? Where's your shame?
– John Barth, Readers and Reading, 1995

In Reading as Art (art work), the reader and the reading are the subjects of the work. Reading is art when the act of reading, the moments of slippage, nothingness, inbetweenness, undecidability are presented for our reception. Does Morris succeed? Whether he completes a transcendent reading or is able to make a non-transcendental reading (Foucault), whether any slippages occur at all is of no importance. To create a work of art is to make a raid on the

impossible, to attempt to capture that which cannot be captured in words, in text, in language. Whether he has succeeded by putting the activity of reading



in the frame is of no importance

– the value of the work is in the attempt and desire of the artist to capture the impossible. The significance of this project is that artists are questioning the very idea of what or how we read. Should we read the words in the book or the image of the person reading the words? Both activities are rich in



potential for the reader. Can you imagine a library

of books of different people reading, where you can reach up to the shelf and pick off a book of images of a person reading? Would you not like to have seen how Barthes, Dickens, Foucault, Perec and Sterne read? Would you not like to have seen words being inscribed on their flesh as these print-oriented bastards digested their texts?

Reading as Art: a project by Simon Morris

Text by Dr Thomas Campbell

Photographs by David Green

Design by Jonny Briggs

¹ Georges Perec, 'Reading: A Socio-Physiological Outline', in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, (London: Penguin Books, 1999) pp.175–76.

² "The whole enterprise – filled with esoteric references, opaque connections and happy coincidences – is calculated to force viewers to plunder their own resources. Perhaps the ideal work in the show is by Simon Morris; his response to curator Andrew Hunt's brief was simply to read the book: the artist presents a video, stretching over two tapes, of himself doing just that. How do you deal with an audio book that has visuals instead of sound? You fill in the action with your own flights of fancy. No wonder Sebald was hospitalised." - 'Like Beads on an Abacus Designed to Calculate Infinity', curated by Andy Hunt, Rockwell, London, April 16-May16 2004. Reviewed by David Barrett in *Art Monthly*, June 2004, no.277, pp 21-3. Forty artists respond to the German author WG Sebald's 1995 novel, *The Rings of Saturn*.

³ Yves Klein, 'Overcoming the Problematic of Art', *Long Live the Immaterial*, (New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2000) p.71.

⁴ Andrew Bennett (ed.) *Readers and Reading* (New York: Longman Publishing, 1995) p.188.

⁵ John Barth is quoted in Andrew Bennett (ed.) introduction to *Readers and Reading* (New York: Longman Publishing, 1995) p.1

Ambivalence of the Grid

In a 1975 talk, the artist Carl Andre discussed composing poems using the tool of the typewriter, describing one as “a set of words placed on the page in a grid; the kind of grid that a typewriter makes in a very machinelike way.”¹ He proceeds to detail, very precisely, how he made a specific lattice-like form: “Each word is placed so that the letters are evenly spaced horizontally and vertically. On a type writer the horizontal spacing of the letters is a lot closer than the vertical spaces between the lines. This has been compensated by making two spaces between the letters vertically and three spaces between the letters horizontally ... The letters are distributed very much like grid paper.”²

This process of placing letters on a page is almost hard to describe as “writing,” even as these letters spell out word strings like “ADAMS BRAINTREE EASTERN” and so forth. Instead, Andre repeatedly describes his poetic process as the gathering of a set of materials – words culled from existing texts or recalled from memory, or proper nouns linked to a place or historical event – that are then transferred to the page using a variety of schemas for fragmenting and ordering them.

I do not wish to over-rely on the words of an artist whose articulate remarks already overdetermine readings of his work. But Andre’s description alerts us to three interlinked qualities that underlie his practice: (1) spaces and spacing are every bit as important as letters, (2) the typewriter is an integral tool in the creation of works, and (3) the grid format structures and propels Andre’s work, functioning in the process of making as well as in the resulting form. In a 1972 interview, Andre even credits the rigid spacing of the old-style manual typewriter as generating this system: “The grid system for the poems comes from the fact that I was using a mechanical typewriter to write the poems, and as you know a mechanical typewriter has even letter spacing, as opposed to print which has justified lines with unequal letter spacing. A mechanical typewriter is essentially a grid and you cannot evade that. And so it really came from the typewriter that I used the grid rather than from the grid to the typewriter.”³

Gridded and grid-like forms appear throughout Andre's poetic works of the 1960s, which subject words, letters, punctuation, and other typed marks to all manner of physical arrangements and permutational schemas. This quality is hardly exceptional, and one could quickly point to any number of works of concrete poetry that employ similar structures, some made on typewriters and others using typography or readymade typefaces like Letraset. By eliminating spaces between words and eroding line breaks and paragraph breaks, poems by Ernst Jandl, Hansjörg Mayer, or Gerhard Rühm pushed their linguistic materials to the edge of unreadability, just as other artist-poets abandoned the primacy of the linguistic field altogether, to construct purely visual compositions. For instance, in his early self-published books, the Swiss artist Dieter Roth arranged page after page of typographic marks – letters, circles, commas, dashes – into gridded clusters and blocks, using them in a manner almost interchangeable with the ways he used die-cut holes and grilles. Andre, however, is notable in his stubborn devotion to this practice, and his typed poems were rarely rendered typographically, not simply because so few of them were published before 1969, but more importantly because the visual and material qualities of the typed mark were integral to the work. These qualities were preserved, for the most part, in Andre's *Seven Books of Poetry*, published in December 1969 by Seth Siegelaub and the Dwan Gallery.⁴ The "uniform manuscript edition" is a facsimile, made through offset printing by reproducing Andre's typed sheets as images, using black ink on rag paper. The results are somewhat grainy, resembling Xeroxes; printed on one side only, the pages were bound in multi-ring black binders, then hand-numbered and signed by Andre.⁵

Where does this grid arise in Andre's work? And what clues might that offer for approaching his vast poetic output? Among Andre's first gridded texts are two single-page poems, "green" and "rain," which appear in his book *Passport* (1960/9).⁶ As James Meyer's entry on *Passport* for the Addison Gallery catalogue informs us, the 95-page volume was initially envisioned as an edition of seven, although at the time only one exemplar was made. Assembled in the spring of 1960, the book is a mixed-media collage, incorporating all manner of materials that could be placed on the space of a page, from "fragments of the actual passport and visas from Andre's trip to Europe in 1954" to "strips of gold and silver foil culled from cigarette packages ... along with other objects: photographs, postcards, pages from books."⁷ Near the end, we even find reproduced pages from Frank Stella's 1960 lecture on stripe painting that Andre famously rescued from a waste bin.

If, in Cubist collage, individual fragments function both as obdurate material and as elements in a larger syntactic structure, *Passport* obeys what Meyer

drone."¹⁴ Drones, of course, are only superficially monotonous; their prolonged notes and long-held chords generate complex harmonics and allow us to hear all sorts of subtle changes and deviations. Andre's grey field of "green" positively buzzes with activity. Its massed regularity yields all sorts of patterns and discrepancies: the dark vertical columns made by the hanging tail of the "g" create an illusion of spatial recession and variations in the sharpness and darkness of individual letters disrupt the uniformity of the page, as do the three or four instances in which an error has been made and then corrected by over-typing. As the composer Mark So discerns, "The typed grid and its noise/ rhythms" overlays and interacts with "the xerox matrix and its inherent noise/ rhythms," creating almost harmonic effects: "A whole range of patterns and flows that seemingly come to the surface, come to be discovered in the effects of running the one across the other, revealing on the surface what happens in the 'space' or 'distance' between them."¹⁵ Rather than monotony, what we find is a field of differences.

In its apparent simplicity, "green" opens onto the surprisingly ambivalent space of the grid – in fact, onto a whole series of overlapping grids – in ways that will challenge our critical vocabularies and methods. How, then, can we approach such poems? For starters, we might note how "green" differs from "rain," the only other Andre poem in *Passport*.¹⁶ Although massed repetitions of a single word, the two poems are quite different. While "green" nearly covers the entire page, leaving only the barest margin, "rain" is a compact rectangle suspended within a white field. Arranged in a block of fourteen lines of ten words each, it inaugurates Andre's "sonnets" – the gridded blocks of single-word poems that are later assembled into the book *One Hundred Sonnets* (1963).¹⁷ The most compelling differences between the two poems arise from graphic quirks of their letters. Anchored by the tail of the "g," the block-like mass and visual uniformity of "green" produces an odd curtain-like series of columns, but relatively little semantic indeterminacy. Whereas in "rain," the more equal sizes of the letters – dominated by the noticeably darker "a" and the distended spacing between "a" and "i" – disrupts the intact unity of the word. Its stream of letters allows other possible linguistic units – "a," "in," "rain," "inra," "ainra," "in rain," "rainra" – to appear and disappear.¹⁸

It is important to situate the poems within the larger structure of Andre's first book, a work whose collage structure is abandoned in subsequent efforts – and a volume only retrospectively claimed as poetry. As published in *Passport*, "green" and "rain" are vastly outnumbered by the reproduced graphic materials – pictures, drawings, book pages, maps, diagrams, and handwritten notes – assembled in the 95-page scrapbook. They are subsumed into this larger graphic flow – in ways that do not so much corrode linguistic signs or subordinate them

to a visual matrix as make palpable a shared substrate. They also appear in a specific sequence: “green” appears on page 15, just after an image of a filmstrip and just before a rectangle of cut-out screen; a few pages previously, a page of decorative printed insignia are arranged in a grid-like array. Thus, among the immanent models for a grid-like structure in *Passport* are the filmstrip, a screen, and a book page. The heterogeneity of these examples suggests that the underlying matrix Andre explores is not primarily linguistic, or even primarily visual.

Andre has described poetry as “language mapped onto an extraneous art, and formerly it was language mapped on music. I think it is now language mapped on some aspect of the visual arts.”¹⁹ Around 1960, the artistic models that Andre drew on came from his own early experiments with sculpture and from the modernist abstraction of Frank Stella, Ad Reinhardt, and other painters who surrounded him. What might it mean, then, to “map” language onto the forms of modernist abstraction – particularly, onto the form of the grid? To come to terms with Andre’s poetry, we need to outline a series of different types of grids, which operate according to different principles. Perhaps counter-intuitively, I will proceed backwards, from the modernist grid that seems to be Andre’s most immediate precedent, to other more generative grids that underlie and complicate this model. As the title of a recent book about using grids in architecture and design reminds us, the grid is both “form and process.”²⁰ It is not a static pattern or template, but a way of making things, a way of operating, making decisions, and moving forward.

In her landmark 1978 essay “Grids,” Rosalind Krauss describes the form as “a structure that has remained emblematic of the modernist ambition within the visual arts” – one that, surfacing in prewar cubist painting, becomes “ever more stringent and manifest.”²¹ Probing the almost uncanny “persistence of the grid,” Krauss describes it as static and changeless, yet also generative and obsessive: “No form within the whole of modern aesthetic production has sustained itself so relentlessly while at the same time being so impervious to change.” While “development is precisely what the grid resists,”²² modernist practice generates ever more instances of grids whose serial logics are remarkably tenacious. A simple reductive structure generates seemingly endless variations and permutations – as a friend notes, “Once people start, they rarely stop.” In art history, the paintings of Piet Mondrian after 1919 represent a paradigmatic instance of this modernist grid – classically described by Yve-Alain Bois as a totalizing system, in which “no element is more important than any other, and none must escape integration.”²³ The grid not only allows Mondrian to “unite figure and ground into an inseparable entity,” but to “discover” what are understood as timeless and immutable laws of painting.²⁴

When art historians talk about the “modernist grid,” this is our template – one that, in different hands, has a deep pull on twentieth-century painting, design, and photography. This grid has a series of functions and effects: it generates a set of equivalent elements and a regularized, logical way of organizing them. Its all-over field ostensibly erodes pictorial hierarchy; in a grid, there is no centre, and no difference between figure and ground. And its coordinates render space as uniform, geometric, standardized, and two-dimensional – in Krauss’s terms, this flatness crowds out the dimensions of the real, replacing them with “the lateral spread of a single surface.”²⁵ But rather than producing static sameness, this levelling structurally compels the activation of the entire surface of the painting – permitting different types of marks to exist in the same space. Quite crucially, this surface is neither linguistic nor pictorial, but *operational*.

Surfacing around 1910 in the analytic cubism of Picasso and Braque, the modernist grid signified crisis and collapse. Not only an entire vocabulary of iconic signs and pictorial illusions, but the very surface on which these appear, dissolves into the underlying lattice-like infrastructure of the canvas, revealing “shallow planes set more or less parallel to the picture surface, their slight tilt a matter of patches of light and shade that flicker over the entire field.”²⁶ The analytic cubist system, Bois asserts, “establishes a linear network that scores the entire surface with an intermittent grid: at certain points, identifiable as the edges of described objects ... at others, the edges of planes that, scaffold-like, seem merely to be structuring the space; and at still others, a vertical or horizontal trace that attaches to nothing at all but continues the grid’s repetitive network.”²⁷

In a series of influential essays, Bois and Krauss have argued that this scaffolding emerges precisely when pictorial marks yield to something more like “writing”: a system of arbitrary and conventional signs occupying an overtly flat space of inscription – a shift Bois theorizes as the collapse of the vertical field of vision into the horizontal plane of reading.²⁸ Yet the breakdown of the pictorial field in Cubism does not so much yield vision lapsing into writing, but – as certain of Krauss’s and Bois’s analyses acknowledge – a jumble of indeterminate notations.²⁹ In this transitional moment, different types of marks – pictorial, linguistic, decorative, rhythmic, and random – all potentially occupy the spatial matrix opened up by the grid. And if, in her 1978 essay, Krauss singled out the modernist grid’s apparent exclusion of literature or narrative, the very fact that it emerges precisely when image collapses into language suggests that things are far more complicated.

What becomes palpable across the *Seven Books* is a loose yet rigorous scaffolding that enables Andre to assemble different types of materials – a structure

that need not privilege language or picture. One way to approach his poetry would be to see it as simultaneously inhabiting two incongruous spaces – the typographic grid of the printed page and the painterly grid of modernist abstraction. Each evolves at a different historical moment, out of distinct technical and material conditions. The craft of typography organizes more-or-less linear flows of language into the two-dimensional space of the page, translating temporal succession into a coherent graphic order.

In contrast, modernist abstraction ostensibly suppresses temporal succession, pictorial illusion, and visual hierarchy, to produce simultaneity and equivalence.³⁰ Yet such oppositions immediately break down, since grids by definition comprise both linearity and multi-directionality.³¹ As a result, diffuse and diverse directional paths are built into the grid, implicitly offering spaces in which writing can operate – albeit somewhat differently than we are used to. Grids aren't corrosive to language, but merely to certain stereotypes of it. The smooth linear unfolding of the printed text was always mythical and haphazardly achieved, as much a product of cultural norms of reading as of the formal properties of the page. Despite, for instance, Marshall McLuhan's condemnation of the uniformity, repeatability, and standardization imposed on language by typography, or Derrida's critiques of the repressive effects of so-called phonetic writing, written marks on the page have never obeyed strictly linear or standardized logics. The page is a two-dimensional field, not a strip. While print regulates what is presumed to be a linear flow, it continually offers other possibilities: lists, clusters, columns, constellation, and multiple directions – and has done so long before the typographic experimentation of modern graphic design.

Indeed, if we look at the history of writing in the West, a diffuse lattice-like web arguably precedes linear directional reading. Synthesizing accounts of early proto-writing systems in the ancient Near East, the art historian Hannah Higgins notes that pictographs went from being “randomly scattered across the surface of the tablet to being enclosed in a system of irregular rectangles inscribed around them. The resulting compound images created clustered associations, but did not form what we would call grammatical sentences. Rather, they functioned more like lists.”³² Over time, the “organization of script within a grid” was visually regulated to permit more standardized reading consistent with the needs of early contractual and accounting purposes. While a key technical shift from the pointed stylus to a stamped triangular wedge “led to the disappearance of the incised grid lines, which were no longer necessary,”³³ one could argue that the grid lines did not simply disappear, but were instead internalized and integrated into the very structure of writing – in the cuneiform system “self-organizing sequences of regular shapes on horizontal lines”

moved away from drawing toward the representation of ideas in a standardized script.³⁴

Grids thus harken back to far more basic activities: counting, marking, weaving, and building. For although we think of them as abstract and modern, grids preserve an almost primordial order of keeping track of things, of moving pebbles in a row or keeping a tally – an underlying set of procedures and conceptual matrices that give sense to the tablet, the page, or the spreadsheet.³⁵ The archeologist Denise Schmandt-Besserat has provocatively argued that early cuneiform script derived from archaic counting devices such as marked clay tokens, and from the impressions of tokens stamped onto the clay pouches that held them – a genealogy of marks that imbricate the tactile and the textual, the visible and the bodily.³⁶ And, as Mark So reminds me, we must also consider “the functional reality of the grid. By its nature, the grid is prior, because the grid sets the terms of the field of any work that employs it. One cannot weave without the loom having already been set up (its logic is not inherently visual, but mathematical or algorithmic).”³⁷ The grid is both structure and process: it is not a transparent screen that you look through but something that is worked along, that generates a field of relations and possible meanings, like the way a cloth emerges out of a long interaction with the loom. Countless practices – including musical scores and typed poetry – emerge through sustained interaction with various grids.³⁸ Thus, it is only from the very narrow perspective of modernist painting that one can view the grid as suppressing writing. Instead, following Andre’s lead, we can understand the grid as generative and enabling. And as Andre’s heterogeneous materials suggest, the grid follows a logic akin to that of the archive. It is a place where things can be shelved; manifesting an indifference to quality, it can contain anything.

Influential critical accounts tend to pose the typewriter as the paradigm of the modern, segmented, standardized sign: the typed letter as the repeatable, interchangeable unit – in Friedrich Kittler’s terms, “writing as keystrokes, spacing, and the automatics of discrete block letters.”³⁹ In this classically Heideggerian vision of “the irruption of the mechanism in the realm of the word,” the mass-produced typewriter transforms the fluid autographic pen-and-ink line into “stockpiles of signs”: “a spatialized, numbered and ... standardized supply of signs on a keyboard.”⁴⁰ But the typewriter is actually a combination of *two* systems: (1) individual letters, with their discrete stepping and segmentation, and (2) the ribbon and striking mechanism, which is a “continuous” mechanism that can render the resulting type-strikes darker or lighter, sharper or more blurred, depending on the condition of the ribbon and the force of the fingers on the keys.

This combination surfaces in *Passport*, a work whose collage structure provides a framework that is indifferent to the type of material. As Andre will subsequently pursue, the reproductive technologies of offset printing, Xerox, or photostat likewise accommodate this full spectrum of information, from letters to photographs, diagrams, patterns, and dots. It is in this undifferentiated page space that the first gridded poems emerge. And even as he subsequently abandons pictorial and collaged materials, Andre crucially retains this more general framework or matrix, rather than accept that pre-existing “cut” that is language. Resuming poetry in earnest, he remains fully engaged in this more granular matrix, in which copier dirt or the darkness or lightness of a letter-strike can have as much “weight” as a letter does. Across an array of effects – the uneven edges of letters, the erratic densities of over- and under-inked ribbons, and the blotches and filled-in loops of gummed-up type-heads – Andre embraces the implications of the “all over” surface. As a result, unlike most concrete poets, he adamantly turns his back on the capacities of modern graphic design, with its technical freedoms and seemingly unlimited possibilities of letterforms and graphic arrangements, to instead insist on the already outmoded technology of the mechanical typewriter – precisely because its constraints and limitations manifest this other, more indeterminate substrate.

If the all-encompassing matrix of *Passport* in a sense inaugurates this historical rupture, collecting scraps and detritus of culture that defy any common order save their capacity to be reproduced on the page, *One Hundred Sonnets* (1963) subjects it to rigorous ordering. It is a project of reduction and systematization, consisting of ninety-nine gridded blocks of single-word poems.⁴¹ In this book-length work, Andre assembles a set of core elements – personal pronouns, body parts and fluids, colours, numbers, and natural materials – and then masses each word – I, you, he, she, sun, moon, and so forth – into rectangular blocks of type on separate pages. In content and form, these are building blocks – assembled with such precision that each 2” x 3” typed rectangle neatly overlays the one on the following page. The relentless repetitive forms enforce spatial uniformity onto disparate terms, yet also foreground all the weird subtle things that happen in spacing and inking as they occur and recur and vary in word after word. Expanding from this extreme reduction to a dizzying series of morphological experiments, *Shape and Structure* (1965) is perhaps Andre’s most overtly sculptural book. Thumbing through its pages, we encounter almost endless inventions of typed form: shaped poems, swarms and lists, acrostics, flickering moiré patterns formed by superimposed rows of dots and asterisks, dense fields of overstrikes and overlapping lines, gridded sonnets and almost oppressive fields of marks. Established on an underlying grid matrix – even as it skews and disrupts this – *Shape and Structure* incorporates letters and words into a much larger set of possible marks. Particles of syntax break down from

words to letters to the grainy field of ink on paper. Individual poems simultaneously solidify into images and evaporate, as their forms continually dissolve into a shared material substrate of ink and page. This is *not* an older pictorial relation of figure and ground, or a modernist typology of the mark and the blank page. Instead, mark and underlying substructure are equivalent, not separate – just as, on an electronic screen or monitor, pixels constitute every element of the field.

What I described above as “a loose yet rigorous scaffolding that enables Andre to assemble different types of materials” is most evident in the book-length poem *America Drill* (1963), a complex synthesis of materials and techniques that is perhaps his magnum opus.⁴² Subtitled “Red Cut White Cut Blue Cut / In Memory of Thomas Morton of Merry Mount 1625,” the 48-page book interweaves textual shards drawn from historical documents and related narratives: Ebenezer W. Pierce’s 1878 *Indian History and Genealogy* – Red Cut – Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Indian History and Genealogy Journals* from 1820 to 1841 – White Cut – and Charles Lindbergh’s 1927 bestseller *We* and a 1959 biography of Lindbergh – Blue Cut. After culling emblematic fragments from each source into a series of notebooks, Andre laboriously retyped these onto different-coloured paper stocks, which he then cut into strips and pasted into rows and columns in an almost literally woven form.

Andre constructed a scaffold – vertically stacked columns of capital letters and numbers – into which he intercut horizontal strips of (generally more intact) text rendered in lowercase type. Different degrees of pulverization and continuity generate varying textures and densities – such that the Lindbergh narrative splinters into scraps of language: “RYAN M2 NX 211 ... 9 CYLINDER AIR COOLED RADIAL RYAN M2 NX 211” (the call letters of Lindbergh’s plane), while the Pierce retains the referential and narrative force of names and stories. Only after more than two full pages of the Lindbergh materials – the Blue Cut – does Pierce’s *Indian History and Genealogy* – the Red Cut – commence with “They are men Indians Indians.” Then, on page 7, Emerson – the White Cut – enters: “There is a strange face in the Freshman class whom I should like to know very much,” introducing a narrative of sentiment and longing.

In a 2005 interview, Andre recalled how, having initially finished the three separate texts, he felt they weren’t sufficiently integrated or resonant – leading him to work through multiple schemas to intercut and interweave the three sets of materials – partly inspired, he recalled, by films like D.W. Griffith’s *Intolerance*, with its vast historical scale and complexly intercut storylines.⁴³ Andre’s account renders the book’s armature simultaneously organic and mechanical, describing “Red Cut,” as “the bones” of *America Drill*, “Blue Cut” as “the noise,” and “White Cut” as “the flesh.”⁴⁴ This laterally woven and irresolvable narrative builds over thirty-six dense pages of interlaced texts that continually echo and

interrupt one another. The poem closes with another linguistic set altogether, a strictly arranged grid of 223 capital letters drawn from the last page of *The Great Gatsby*: "He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night." The grid of letters stops the narrative, and ends the poem.

How do we theorize the surfacing of the grid in experimental poetry of the 1960s? And what does it have to say to poetic and artistic work today? As Andre's work suggests, this phenomenon cannot be understood as arresting narrative or repressing affect or subjective expression, much less as turning from verbal means toward visual or "conceptual" ones. Instead, his typed pages and poems offer a more indeterminate space in which words may combine in unpredictable ways, or combine with pictorial marks, patterns, or copier dirt, to assemble another more expansive field. Far from eroding language, this grid represents a transformation of and within language.⁴⁵

Art historians have focused for too long on the neutralizing, equalizing effects of the modernist grid, on how it might erode signification and what might be lost in this transition. To move forward we need to investigate how the grid's material scaffolding opens a vast field of potential marks, textures, and energies, as the page supplants perspective as the new visual lens, the new surface on which things make sense and are made visible. This grid, after all, is never static or fixed. It instead operates more as a game board or a framework that demands response, a transformational structure that continues to propel new movements or paths among a seemingly fixed set of elements.⁴⁶ If in the early twentieth century, one of the overriding goals of radical poetic practice was to liberate language from the grid, in the mid-twentieth century we find an apparently opposing move, to put words or letters back into the grid. In the work of artists and writers like Andre, Dieter Roth, or Emmett Williams, we need to read this move not as a return to order, nor as a repression of the lyric or narrative capacities of language, but as a complex investigation of disciplinary structures and media infrastructures that paradoxically resuscitates and recirculates the undecidability of the mark at an almost primal level where different registers – the proto-linguistic, proto-numeric, and proto-pictorial, as well as the bodily and rhythmic – cannot be fully differentiated or disentangled.

Notes

A version of this essay was presented at the Belkin Art Gallery at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, in February 2012. Although this text was completed

before Andre's 2014 retrospective, I point readers to two recent volumes that provide extensive illustrations of Andre's poetry: Philippe Vergne and Yasmil Raymond, *Carl Andre: Sculpture as Place, 1958–2010* (New York: Dia Art Foundation / Yale University Press, 2014) and Lynn Kost, ed., *Carl Andre: Poems* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2014), as well as Alistair Rider, *Carl Andre: Things in Their Elements* (London: Phaidon, 2012). My deepest thanks to Brandon Lattu, Tashi Wada, and especially Mark So for their discussions and insights, and for the examples of their own work.

- 1 "Transcription of the tape made by Carl Andre for the exhibition of his poem at the Lisson Gallery, London, and the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, July 1975," transcribed and edited by Lynda Morris, p. 1. The talk is published on the audiocassette *Carl Andre* (London: *Audio Arts* 2.2, 1975); my thanks to Lisson Gallery for providing me with the typescript.
- 2 Andre refers to the poem as "my autobiography." From his description it is related to the 10-page poem titled "Autobiography" that appears in *Lyrics and Odes*, but is a different work, since it employs a different spatial framework.
- 3 Paul Cummings, "Taped Interview with Carl Andre," partially reproduced in Carl Andre, *Cuts: Texts 1959–2004*, ed. James Meyer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 212.
- 4 Carl Andre, *Seven Books of Poetry* (New York: Dwan Gallery and Seth Siegelau, 1969): *Passport* (1960), *Shape and Structure* (1960–5), *A Theory of Poetry* (1960–5), *One Hundred Sonnets* (1963), *America Drill* (1963–8), *Three Operas* (1964), and *Lyrics and Odes* (1969); each labelled "one of a set of seven books in a uniform manuscript edition of 36 signed and numbered sets." I have consulted editions in the Museum of Modern Art Library, New York; the Virginia Dwan Collection, New York; and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York; as well as the 2003 colour facsimile edition of *America Drill* (Brussels, Belgium: Les Maîtres de Forme Contemporains / Michèle Didier, 2003). In recent decades Andre has largely chosen to present his poems as drawings, exhibiting their original typed manuscripts; however, the books have an aesthetic and structural integrity that allow us to grasp crucial aspects of Andre's project.
- 5 Based on materials in the Dwan Gallery New York Archives and the Seth Siegelau Papers at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 6 The Addison Gallery catalogue entry describes it thus: "*Passport*, 1960. Bound volume of ninety-five pages of mixed media. Edition 1/7, only 1 executed. Image sizes vary; each sheet approximately 11 x 8½"; in Susan Faxon, Avis Berman, and Jock Reynolds, ed., *Addison Gallery of Art: 65 Years* (Andover, MA: Addison Gallery of Art, 1996), 313.
- 7 James Meyer, "Passport," *ibid.*
- 8 As Meyer outlines, the book is "a prolegomenon" to Andre's future works, which eliminate found objects and materials, and increasingly submerge autobiographical traces and romantic references.
- 9 The poem "green" from *Passport* is reproduced in *Cuts*, 195; it also appeared on the poster for the 1975 exhibition "Carl Andre Poems 1958–1974" at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford.
- 10 Meyer, "Passport," 313. Technically speaking, Andre's "word lattice" effectively suppresses the literary device of parataxis – the joining of unsubordinated or unjoined elements – since the absence of spaces lacks the separation of elements

- that parataxis requires. The gridded poem “green” is a monochrome field, not a sequence of elements.
- 11 Meyer, “Carl Andre: Writer,” in *Cuts*, 14. He elaborates: “In Andre’s most uncompromising planar experiments, the word and the letter are isolated as themselves. The sign, severed from syntactical and metaphorical use, assumes a ponderous density; the word has accrued so much weight that its referent is all but forgotten, its signified, negated. It has nearly (but surely not entirely) lost its capacity to mean” (14–15).
 - 12 Such claims are by no means uncontested. Comparing Andre’s work unfavourably to that of various concrete poets as well as to earlier Modernist poets like Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein, the Canadian critic Jamie Hilder insists on the inexorable referentiality of words in a surprisingly reductive manner: “A grid of the word green still refers to the color green, or a park, or money (but most likely the color green), and repeating it [in] an arbitrarily sized grid does not disrupt that metaphorical axis in any way that differs significantly from the work of Pound and Stein that Andre reveres.” Jamie Hilder, “Designed Words for a Designed World: The International Concrete Poetry Movement, 1955–1971,” PhD thesis (University of British Columbia, 2010), 143.
 - 13 “On Certain Poems and Consecutive Matters, March 3, 1963,” in *12 Dialogues: 1962–1963* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981), 75 (Andre is describing the single word poem “green” here, and not the massed poem). More problematically, in his 2005 text on Andre, Meyer curiously conflates the gridded poem “green” that appears in *Passport* with another quite different work, stating, “In the poem ‘Green’ from the *First Five Poems*, the word green exists in a grid of 764 [sic] identical ‘greens’” (“Carl Andre, Writer,” in *Cuts*, 14) – even though Meyer knows full well that the works that Andre retrospectively termed his “First Five Poems” – consisting of the single words green, five, horn, eye, and sound – were each presented, as Hollis Frampton notes, as “five single lowercase words centered on five pages” (*12 Dialogues*, 75). Andre’s “first five poems” in effect appear twice in his book *A Theory of Poetry* (1960–5): in the opening pages, in a list titled “Anthology of Five Poems,” and later in the book, as single pages interspersed among other poems. There is also the sonnet “green” that appears in *One Hundred Sonnets*, which presents the word 84 times (14 lines of 6 words each) in a more compact block.
 - 14 Alistair Rider, *Carl Andre: Things in Their Elements* (London: Phaidon, 2012), 142.
 - 15 Mark So, email to the author, 30 July 2012.
 - 16 A handful of poems by other authors are collaged in as book pages, and the very structure of *Passport* undermines any clear distinction between a “poem” and, for instance, a list of words or a repeated name.
 - 17 The poem “rain” from *Passport* is reproduced in Lynda Morris, “Carl Andre Poems 1958–1974,” *Studio International* 190.977 (September/October 1975): 161. A more condensed version of “rain” – or rather, a different poem “rain” – appears in *One Hundred Sonnets* in a block of 14 lines of seven words each.
 - 18 The mechanically regularized sonnet form of “rain” – fourteen lines of ten words each – provides the template of horizontal blocks that form Andre’s *One Hundred Sonnets* (1963), though in that book the number of words in each line is determined

- not by word or syllable count but by overall shape, so that each poem comprises an approximately 2" x 3" block.
- 19 Andre, "Transcription," 1975, p. 4.
 - 20 Richard Scherr, *The Grid: Form and Process in Architectural Design* (New York: Universalia Publishers, 2001).
 - 21 Rosalind Krauss, "Grids" (1978), in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 9. Krauss is at pains to differentiate this grid from the perspectival lattice that might initially be seen as its predecessor or conceptual underpinning, insisting that perspective is a science of the real, not a withdrawal from it: "Perspective was the demonstration of the way reality and its representation could be mapped onto one another ... Everything about the grid opposes that relationship, cuts it off from the very beginning." The grid has no such referent: "If it maps anything, it maps the surface of the painting itself" (10).
 - 22 *Ibid.*, 9.
 - 23 Yve-Alain Bois, "The De Stijl Idea," *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 103.
 - 24 *Ibid.*, 103 and 105. Bois later concludes that, in so doing, "everything can be reduced to a common denominator; every figure can be digitalized into a pattern of horizontal versus vertical units and thus disseminated across the surface; and all hierarchy (thus all centrality) can be abolished. The picture's function now becomes the revelation of the world's underlying structure, understood as a reservoir of binary oppositions; but further ... it is also to show how these oppositions can neutralize one another into a timeless equilibrium." Yve-Alain Bois, "1911," in Hal Foster et al., *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 1: 148.
 - 25 Krauss, "Grids," 9.
 - 26 Yve-Alain Bois, "1911," 106.
 - 27 *Ibid.*, 106–7.
 - 28 For Bois, Picasso's 1912 collage *Still Life with Chair Caning* represents "a transitional work, a limit case. It marks the moment when something is about to topple, for in the collapse of the vertical and the horizontal, what Picasso is inscribing is the very possibility of the transformation of painting into writing" and the transformation of "the empirical and vertical space of vision ... into the semiological and possibly horizontal space of reading"; "The Semiology of Cubism," in Lynn Zelevansky, ed., *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium* (New York: Museum of Modern Art / Harry N. Abrams, 1992), 186–7.
 - 29 While Bois and Krauss go to great lengths to present this phenomenon as the emergence of an authentically "semiotic" system, these "marks" are not exactly "signs," as they are unhinged from a semiotic system that would tell us how to read them. Krauss provocatively articulates how, in early works by Picasso, marks like parallel hatching and stippling hover between pictorial means of rendering depth and arbitrary or even decorative patterns drawn from African masks: "Oscillating back and forth in relation to the significance of these striations – the frontal and immutable versus the oblique and contingent ... Picasso seems to be playing with the way the same set of marks can open onto two separate sensory tracks." Krauss, "The Motivation of the Sign," in *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium*, 268–9.

- 30 As Johanna Drucker argues, European typography assumed two differentiated modes: an “unmarked” page of “uniform grey pages” modelled on the Bible, “in which the words on the page ‘appear to speak for themselves’ without the visible intervention of author or printer”; and the “marked typography” of printed Indulgences, which addressed “a reader whose presence was inscribed at the outset by an author in complicity with the graphic tools of a printer.” Even in the early twentieth century, the dominant goal of typography was to “make the text as uniform, as neutral, as accessible and seamless as possible” – with more visual and disjunctive effects reserved for advertisements, posters, and commercial speech. See Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909–1923* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 95–6.
- 31 Scherr, *The Grid*, 18. Scherr proposes that “a grid can be described as a systematic overlapping of two or more linear systems. These systems are usually described as intersecting sets of repetitively, but not necessarily equally spaced parallel and perpendicular lines that cross at regular intervals, forming a network or ‘matrix.’” Yet, as he immediately acknowledges, although linear systems can establish a dominant directionality or sequence, “when overlapped the directionality tends to be neutralized, or can be described as being multi-directional.”
- 32 Hannah Higgins, *The Grid Book* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 34.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 37.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 Variants of the grid can be found in building, in cartography, in urban city planning, and throughout our culture; it generates a system of coordinates that provide a rationalized ordered space, and a means of spatial or temporal organization and control. Thus by associating the form with a set of post-Renaissance models of spatial and temporal projection, we tend to overestimate its modernity. Higgins’s account begins with the brick, but curiously leaves out textiles and weaving, which are arguably older and more direct precedents to the grid – though the early history of textiles remains obscure, due to the impermanence of its materials.
- 36 Denise Schmandt-Besserat, *Before Writing*, vol. 1: *From Counting to Cuneiform* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992).
- 37 Mark So, personal communication, 8 July 2012.
- 38 “What does it mean to be writing within the grid?” So asks. “It entails a process of making, and of making decisions, in time. Poetry written on the typewriter is self-consciously inflected by the grid, and by the capacities of the typewritten grid to record gesture. While this function is already implicit in the page lay out, typing makes it far more precise, and far more within the writer’s control, allowing you to go back over your steps and retrace your steps”; *ibid.*
- 39 Friedrich Kittler: *Film, Gramophone, Typewriter* (1986) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 193. Understanding the typewriter as a byproduct of nineteenth-century military technology – a “discursive machine gun” – Kittler theorizes it as an almost proto-digital technology: “A technology whose basic action ... consists of strikes and triggers proceeds in automated and discrete steps” (191).
- 40 *Ibid.*, 229.
- 41 Pages from *One Hundred Sonnets* are reproduced in *Carl Andre: Poems*, 73–7, and *Carl Andre: Sculpture at Place*, 168–9.

- 42 Pages from *America Drill* are reproduced in *Carl Andre: Things in Their Elements*, 157, 164, 171, and in *Carl Andre: Sculpture at Place*, 180–1.
- 43 Carl Andre, interview with the author, 10 April 2005, New York City.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 As Mark So proposes, “The mapping, rather, is both totally transparent/basicly lossless, and also oblique: language is still all there, continuing unobscured and unabated, carried in full, just now in a wider, less privileging, more open and ambivalent context.” In such work, “another potential poetic disposition of language is revealed: that of language conveyed through the matrix of type, rendered in the matrix of print. Language is not so much dislodged as made to appear as the slippery substance that it is, showing different faces as it moves through different and complex mappings, across the space of multiple grids that have varying native ambivalences with regard to language, producing characteristic surfacings.” So, email to the author, 30 July 2012.
- 46 As Scherr proposes, “The grid is a kind of ‘game board’ that sets the rules of the game and suggests implications of order within a clearly delineated field of limitations, as well as possibilities” (*The Grid*, 22). In a 1977 interview, the poet Emmett Williams describes how in his 1967 book *SWEETHEARTS*, the intensely personal, romantic and sentimental material of the book was all generated from a completely rigid typographic grid: “But just look at the book. The most rigid structure imaginable. All the free variations, and the pure concrete sequences, and the narrative, and the lyricism, the animated sexual metaphors, the erotic flights of fancy – it all flows out of a grid pattern. Everything derived from the eleven letters in the title, a long kinetic poem of several hundred pages flowing out of the title itself. Everything finds its position on the page in an invisible grid obtained by making a square of those eleven letters. The title contains the entire book.” In “An Interview between Emmett Williams & Jan Herman,” *West Coast Poetry Review* 5.2 (1977): 11.

The Concrete, the Conceptual, and the *Galáxias*

Everything is to be disentangled, but nothing deciphered.

Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author"¹

Impervious to readers unfamiliar with the complexities of the Portuguese language, Brazilian concrete poetry was for many decades in the United States characterized as merely an exploration in typesetting. That view has changed drastically in the last decade as poets such as Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin, and scholars such as Marjorie Perloff and Roland Greene, have proposed more complex readings of the concretist program, acknowledging along the way the movement's contribution toward the articulation of a new conceptual poetics. For those readers, approaching concretism has been a careful process of identifying key elements of its program, such as the issue of *knowledge* as a "dynamic factor" raised by Roland Greene in "Inter-American Obversals: Allen Ginsberg and Haroldo de Campos Circa 1960."² Marjorie Perloff seems to concur with Greene when she writes, in "De Campos's *Galáxias* and After," that concrete poetry is "less a matter of spatial form and typographic device than that of 'ideogrammatizing' the verbal units themselves."³

These brave incursions into the concrete zone are commendable in their own right, and in turn instigate renewed interest in a debate that never really went away. Indeed, what Greene keenly observed as "thinking made manifest" in the best examples of concrete poetry points back to symbolism, and also finds echoes in today's quest for a *conceptual* poetics. In the present essay I propose a close reading of Haroldo de Campos's *Galáxias*, a work that Perloff posits as bridging the modernist tradition of James Joyce and Gertrude Stein, on the one hand, and, on the other, the experimental bent of contemporary writers such as Rosemarie Waldrop, Steve McCaffrey, Joan Rataillac, and Kenny Goldsmith. Throughout his career, de Campos continuously grappled with issues related to

style and intertextuality, a search that found a culmination of sorts in *Galáxias*. A careful look through its dense, forboding texture will elucidate some of the main stakes behind the concretist enterprise that has thus far eluded many readers. In the process, a strong sense of kinship with the conceptual program will become apparent.

Style/Stilus

When Haroldo de Campos started releasing the first texts of *Galáxias* late in the 1960s, there was a sense of bewilderment from the part of the public who saw in its excessive style a rupture from the concretist program that the author helped establish only a decade before. Over the years, *Galáxias* has become that inscrutable literary monument that, while attracting the interest of many, continually eludes every attempt of interpretation. An opportunity to productively examine the collection, nevertheless, was provided by the author himself in an address to a group of psychoanalysts in 1985 revolving around the subject of style.

In November 1985, de Campos was invited to address the Biblioteca Freudiana Brasileira, a research group created in 1981 in São Paulo with the goal of promoting the study of Jacques Lacan in Brazil. On that occasion, de Campos delivered the first version of “O *Aphreudisiaco* Lacan na Galáxia de Lalingua,” (“The *Aphreudisiac* Lacan in the Galaxy of Lalanguage”), an essay that he subsequently worked over several times until, in 1998, it was published in its final form in *Correio*, the journal of the Escola Brasileira de Psicanálise.⁴ The idea of the essay was prompted by a meeting in Paris in the summer of 1985 between de Campos, psychoanalyst Joseph Attié, and Judith Miller at the offices of the journal *L’Âne*⁵ during which the three discussed an upcoming issue of the journal to be dedicated to style. On the spur of the moment, de Campos proposed an epigraph to the issue – “Le stylo c’est l’Âne.”

A short, elaborate text grappling with complex psychoanalytical and literary ideas, “The *Aphreudisiac* Lacan in the Galaxy of Lalanguage” provides a valuable roadmap for traversing *Galáxias*. Central to the essay is a concern for “style,” which de Campos addresses from the start by commenting on Lacan’s gloss on Buffon in the “Overture” to the *Écrits*: “Shall we adopt the formulation – the style is the man – if we simply add to it: the man one addresses?”⁶ De Campos adds yet a further gloss on Buffon/Lacan in which *style* is playfully replaced by *stylo* (pen), and *l’homme* by *l’analyste*. In succeeding paragraphs, de Campos traces a succinct diagram of Lacan’s interest in style, drawing parallels between the psychoanalyst’s famously obscurantist style and those of Luis de Góngora, Stéphane Mallarmé, and James Joyce.

In closing his argument, de Campos makes the case for *Galáxias* to be inscribed within that “tradition of rupture” and, addressing its innovative style, suggests a kinship with the idea of the “writerly” text that Roland Barthes developed in *S/Z*: “novelistic without the novel, poetry without the poem, the essay without the dissertation, writing without style, production without product, structuration without structure.” His quotation of Barthes continues:

In this ideal text, the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable (meaning here is never subject to a principle of determination, unless by throwing dice); the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language.⁷

Barthes’s “ideal text,” as a matter of fact, shares many similarities with the mobile-like model that de Campos proposed as early as 1955 in texts such as “The Open Work of Art.” More, perhaps, to the point is the fact that Barthes’s trope of the “starred text” also hints at a much earlier model for de Campos: the sermons of Jesuit priest António Vieira, which indelibly shaped the Brazilian poet’s vision of language.

Verb and Seed

The impact of Vieira’s baroque, metalinguistic vision was first signalled in de Campos’s “The Poem: Theory and Practice,”⁸ a text from 1952 that references the Jesuit’s famous “Sermão da Sexagésima” (“Sermon of the Second Sunday before Ash Wednesday”), delivered at the Royal Chapel in Lisbon in 1655. The expression “star chess” (*xadrez de estrelas*), a figure that Vieira explored in his “Sermão” as a model of the ideal text, haunted de Campos throughout his entire career and was used again in 1976 as the title for his first anthology. In fact, when we consider the titles of many of de Campos’s major works we become aware of the recurrent trope of celestial bodies: *Xadrez de Estrelas*, *Signantia Quasi Coelum*, *Galáxias*, and even his last major work, *A Máquina do Mundo Repensada*.⁹

The object of many essays and dissertations, the “Sermão da Sexagésima” is an illustrious page of Brazilian-Portuguese literature and worth exploring here

for its relevance to our current subject. To start, we must note that Vieira's main argument springs from what he sees as a crisis occurring in language at the time. And the stakes of this crisis are enormous, as the ultimate goal of language for Vieira is its power to convert souls to God ("What thing is the conversion of a soul if not man going inside himself and seeing himself").¹⁰ The crisis, as Vieira saw it, was the convoluted style of "cultism" or "culteranism" (pioneered by Góngora) that had become popular among missionaries.

(Let me pause in my description of Vieira's argument to point out that the opposition Vieira-Góngora problematizes with precision the contrasting forces at play in de Campos' writing, most evidently in the *Galáxias*: clarity versus obscurity, modernity versus the baroque. Although de Campos never directly connected the *Galáxias* to Vieira's sermon, he once maintained that they are essentially a "defence and illustration of the Portuguese language."¹¹ The quotation here is of course from the work of the great Fernando Pessoa,¹² but most importantly, the statement conveys the stakes the *Galáxias* represented to de Campos as he attempted to rally his contemporaries to explore the present possibilities of the Portuguese language.)

To return: Vieira's sermon addressed an audience of mostly Jesuit priests, and it argued that in order to be effective, the priest needed to make his style more "natural." Taking as his point of departure the parable of the sower in Luke 8:5-8 as summed up in verse 11 ("Semen est verbum Dei"), Vieira tells his audience that preaching is like the broadcasting of seeds by a sower. "The style," he says, "must be very easy and natural" (*o estilo há-de ser muito fácil e natural*), "because sowing is an art that has more of nature than of art" (*porque o semear é uma arte que tem mais de natureza que de arte*). He then goes on: "In other arts everything is art ... Not so with sowing. Sowing is an art without art; it falls where it falls" (*Nas outras artes tudo é arte ... O semear não é assim. É uma arte sem arte, caia onde cair*). At this point in the sermon, Vieira inveighs against the "moderns" and pledges allegiance to the "most ancient preacher that ever existed": the sky. He outlines his credo in this way:

Words are stars, sermons are composition, order, harmony and their course. See how the preaching style of the sky works, like the style Christ taught on earth. Both are sowers: the earth sown with wheat, the heavens sown with stars. Preaching ought to be like sowing, and not like making a mosaic or setting tile – ordered, but like the stars are ordered: *Stellae manentes in ordine suo*. Every star is ordered, but it is an order that exerts influence, not an ornate order. Did not God make the sky like a star chess game, just as the preacher makes the sermon as a word chess game?¹³

Barthes's rhetoric sounds no less cosmic and mystical:

The text, in its mass, is comparable to a sky, at once flat and smooth, deep, without edges and without landmarks; like the soothsayer drawing on it with the tip of his staff an imaginary rectangle wherein to consult, according to certain principles, the flight of birds, the commentator traces through the text certain zones of reading, in order to observe therein the migration of meanings, the outcropping of codes, the passage of citations.¹⁴

This section in *S/Z* is subtitled "The Starred Text," and although Barthes's textual operations seem far more intricate than Vieira's vision, a case might be made for a common sense of design, as randomness, or chance, seems to be the basic law of dissemination. "Let us learn from the sky," Vieira proposes, "the sense of design and of words" (*Aprendamos do céu o estilo da disposição, e também o das palavras*). And he continues:

Stars are distinct and clear. Thus ought to be the style of preaching: distinct and clear. And do not fear that [your style when you speak this way] might sound like the low style; stars are very distinct, very clear, and of the highest [order]. Style can be very clear and high, so clear that those who do not know will understand, and so high as to offer something more to those who already know. The rustic finds in the stars directions for farming and the sailor for navigation and the mathematician for his observations and judgment. That is, the rustic and the sailor, who cannot read or write, understand the stars; and the mathematician, who has read all that has been written, can never exhaust that which is in [the stars] to understand. Thus can be your sermon: stars that everyone sees and very few can compass.¹⁵

Galáxias in Formation

Despite claims to the contrary ("*isto não é um livro de viagem*," canto 8), *Galáxias* is indeed a book of voyages.¹⁶ The idea of the book might have come to de Campos sometime in 1959, when, at the age of twenty-nine, and accompanied by his wife Carmen, he left Brazil for the first time to travel through Europe. An autobiographical sketch written in 1985 offers an introduction of sorts for mapping the *Galáxias*:

What has always mattered to me most was travelling. Ever since my first voyage, in 1959, when I left for Europe on a second-class ticket aboard the

Portuguese ship *Vera Cruz* with Carmen, my lifelong companion. We caught a coldish April in Lisbon, travelled by train from Andalusia to Madrid, saw Hemingway and the bullfighter Antonio Ordóñez at the Feria de San Isidro, left Spain for France via Irun, Puente Internacional (in the Basque country, the sculptor Jorge Oteiza put us up). Later, Germany (contacts with Max Bense and his group in Stuttgart, and with Stockhausen at the electronic-music studio in Cologne; a visit to the Hochschule für Gestaltung, in Ulm), Switzerland (meeting with Gomringer in Zurich and Frauenfeld), Austria, Italy. We followed the route of Pound's *Cantos*, starting from Merano, then Tirol di Merano, then Castel Fontana, where E.P.'s daughter Mary de Rachewiltz received us. Finally, E.P. in person and persona (still talking: "i punti luminosi"), in Rapallo, Via Mameli 23, interno 4, on a sunny August Tuesday, at 4 pm (ore 16). We returned to Brazil via Genoa aboard the *Provence*, stopping in Marseille to visit João Cabral, at the time our consul in the region. Then Recife, Salvador, Rio, Santos. Rediscovering Brazil via the world.¹⁷

What, one wonders, did these travels mean to the poet? What was their significance? The first canto, with its emphasis on beginnings and measurement, makes an oblique reference to the "Sermão da Sexagésima" in that the act of "measuring" (*meço aqui este começo e recomeço e remeço e arremesso / e aqui me meço*) brings up the biblical notion of the final Day of Judgment when all acts shall be weighed, *measured*. In the "Sermão," addressing the missionaries on the responsibilities attendant on their travels around the world, Vieira stresses accountability through the trope of measuring: "[Because] on the final day / day of harvest, our sowing will be measured and our steps will be counted" (*porque no dia da Messe hão-nos de medir a sementeira e hão-nos de contar os passos*). The Portuguese word *messe* means "harvest," and the "dia" that Vieira refers to indicates the day of the "conversion of sinners." Thus, there is a parallel here between the poet and the missionary: both going around the world, measuring every shift in language, bringing their style into harmony with nature, the universe, and, by extension, God, in an attempt to reach men's souls. Note that the proximity between the two texts is also achieved at the homophonic level as de Campos's riffs on the (alveolar fricative) sounds of *ç* and *ss* – in *meço* (I measure), *começo* (I start), *recomeço* (I restart), *remeço* (I re-measure), and *arremesso* (I throw) – echo Vieira's *Messe*.

The *Galáxias* are rich in specific references to events experienced by de Campos in his many travels. As the unnumbered pages suggest, the reading of *Galáxias* is not intended to be sequential, and the references to places and people scattered throughout the series create a circular narrative. Most of the "information" dispersed throughout the cantos consists of obscure references to

personal experiences, and those allusions and references can strike the reader as irrelevant, like the tiny rue Budé on the Île St-Louis, in Paris, that is mentioned in Canto 13. Other references, however, memorialize important events for the poet, like “o prédio na via mameli tuesday 4 p.m.” in Canto 33, which evokes a meeting with Ezra Pound in Rapallo. The third canto, which begins with a line from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (“multitudinous seas incarnadine”), deals most likely with his impressions of crossing the Atlantic for the first time, while other cantos suggest his route through European cities – Granada (canto 2), Córdoba (canto 5), Stuttgart (canto 6), the Basque country (canto 12), and so forth. His urge to travel, we must emphasize, should not be seen purely as wanderlust, but rather as a desire to meet and learn from the “great men of his time,” as Pound once urged Hugh Kenner to do. Encoded in these narratives are meetings with Max Bense, Eugen Gomringer, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Octavio Paz, Hélio Oiticica, Marshall McLuhan, and Guimarães Rosa, among others.

Most of the *Galáxias* texts display an expansive tendency, and the myriad references can at times become dizzying. In a few texts, however, the focus is extraordinarily tight, and upon close reading a multilayered and well-informed network becomes apparent. Such is the case of canto 15, known as “Circuladô de fulô,” de Campos’s tribute to the popular art of minstrelsy as practised in the Brazilian north-east. The text, inspired by a song de Campos heard at a state fair possibly on the outskirts of Recife, was written between 21 and 24 February 1965. Its first lines (*circuladô de fulô ao deus ao demodará que deus te guie porque eu não/posso guiá eviva quem já me deu circuladô de fulô e ainda quem falta me dá*) seem to be a direct quotation from the original song, which to my knowledge has never been recorded or printed. There is no information, either, on the song’s author.¹⁸ De Campos’s regard for this kind of literature, as a matter of fact, is both affectionate and intellectualized. In a sense, he is “rediscovering Brazil” via Pound. Consider the fact that the Brazilian troubadours are referred to in their area as *cantadores*, and their performances as *cantoria*. One is reminded that de Campos’s 1960 translation of Pound’s *Cantos* (done in collaboration with Augusto de Campos and Décio Pignatari) was titled *Cantares*, although the word “canto” carries the same meaning in Portuguese.¹⁹ He also compares the handmade instrument used by the *cantador* to a *shamisen*, the classic Japanese instrument used in Kabuki. Pound’s presence is directly invoked by an allusion to *il miglior fabbro*, Eliot’s famous borrowing from Dante for his dedication of *The Waste Land*. Furthermore, the indeterminacy of the expression “*circuladô de fulô*” also brings to mind the quandary regarding the word “Noigandres.”²⁰ Although both “*circuladô*” and “*fulô*” are misspellings, there is no doubt that “*fulô*” means “*flôr*” (flower). But “*circuladô*” can stand either for *circulado*, the past participle of the verb “*circular*,” meaning “surrounded,” or for the noun

“*circulador*,” meaning “the spinner.” Thus, the phrase might be understood as “the one who makes the flowers spin.”²¹

Canto 50 is equally striking, not least for the fact that, together with canto 1, it corresponds to one of the book’s “*formantes*” – the two bookend-texts that “calibrate the interplay of mobile pages, interchangeable to reading, in which each isolated fragment introduces its ‘difference’ but also contains in itself, like a watermark, the image of the entire book.”²²

In a 1984 interview with J.J. de Moraes²³ about *Galáxias*, de Campos commented that the work of Pierre Boulez inspired his idea of opening and closing the collection with *formants*. An avant-garde composer informed by atonalism whose career took off in the early 1950s, Boulez was drawn to the same literary influences as Noigandres, and his idea of a musical movement as *formant* is indebted to Mallarmé’s concept of the poem as a constellation. In canto 3, de Campos pays explicit homage to Boulez by referring to *Pli selon pli*, a series of musical pieces based on poems by Mallarmé composed between 1957 and 1962: *folha e refolha que se dobra e desdobra nele pele sob pele pli selon pli* (“leaf and leaf anew folding and unfolding itself skin on skin pli selon pli”), hinting again at his own textual procedure. The text of *Galáxias*, de Campos observed in the same interview, has much to do with musical composition, whether avant-garde or popular. With its swirl of styles and citations, *Galáxias* finds an equivalent in Alban Berg’s highly complex and textured *Violin Concerto* (1935), which is written in the atonal style of Arnold Schoenberg with quotations from Johann Sebastian Bach and a Carinthian folk song.²⁴ Whether referencing Brazilian troubadours or American pop,²⁵ avant-garde compositions or even plain speech – as in canto 7 – *Galáxias* embraces all the dissonances of the world, which de Campos orchestrates into a manageable object (a book):

palavras maceradas como goma de mascar
resina e acucar nas papilas coisa de fala sacarinando dancarinando
nos labios aflorados nos entrelabios nos entreflorlabios farfalhando

words macerated like chewing gum
resin and sugar in the papillae thing of speech saccharining ballerining
on flowery lips on interlips on interflowerlips rustling
and

murmulho de gorjeio de trauteios de psius
de psilos de bilros de trilos

murmur of cooing of humming of *pssts*
of flutes of bobbins of trilling

and

aquela fala que falha e farfalha que
vela e revela que cala e descala

that speech that fails and rustles that
veils and unveils that mutes and unmutes

While the first *formant* of the *Galáxias* is all about starts and restarts, the final *formant* is about endings. It begins with a nod to Luis de Camões (*musa não mais-não mais*),²⁶ indicating the poet's exhaustion and inability to go on, and ends with a quotation from Dante's *Paradiso*²⁷ (*avrà quasi l'ombra della vera costellazione*) in which the (poet's?) mind attains nirvana (*se emparadisa*) within a "multi-book." In addition, references to Goethe's *Faust* reintroduce Vieira's "*dia da Messe*," bringing to a close the cycle of search (or travelling) initiated in the first *formant*. In this canto, the end of the book collapses with the end of the world (*no fim do mundo o livro fina* ["the book dies at the end of the world"]) and the possibilities of readings are again numerous: is the "*fim do mundo*" the biblical Apocalypse, or is it a geographic metaphor for Latin America? At the moment when the table turns, truth and lies become one (*a mesa vira verdade é o mesmo que mentira*), and, he adds in a beautiful succession of sounds: "*fição fiação tesoura e lira*" ("fiction, threading/trust, scissors and lyre"). As on several occasions throughout *Galáxias*, simple words are carefully chosen so as to defy one-dimensional interpretation, and any translation of *Galáxias* must take into account the high degree of ambiguity that de Campos imparted to the simplest words. "*Fiação*," in this particular position, can be translated equally as "threading" or "trust." The *threading* in this context is in itself an act of *trust*, for in the final hour (*dia da Messe*) one will be measured according to the text(ure) one has produced.

... mas tua alma está salva
tua alma se lava nesse livro que se alva como a estrela mais d'alva
e enquanto some ele te consome enquanto o fecha a chave ele se
multiabre enquanto o fina ele translumina essa linguamorta essa
moura torta esse umbilifio ...

but your soul is saved
your soul washes itself in this book that whitens itself like the palest star
and while you vanish it consumes you while you lock it with a key it
multiopens itself while you end it it transluminates this deadlanguage this
*moura torta*²⁸ this umbilicalcord

In this passage, the wordplay is as intricate as it is revealing. Through slight alterations in letter placement and/or replacement (*salva / alma / lava / alva / estrela d'alva* [the morning star, or Venus]), de Campos sums up in a few lines the stakes of the journey he embarked on in the first canto. In this final hour, after the death of language, the salvation of the soul is the ultimate reward – and here Vieira seems to meet Lacan, for the work on language, and on style, that both men pursued in writing seems to share a common ground.

Threading, or weaving, also signals another major theme in *Galáxias* – that of writing as texture (Barthes's *tessitura*, in *The Pleasure of the Text*).²⁹ The theme of text (or narrative) as threading, weaving, is present from the first canto – “por isso teço” (“thus I weave”); “me teço um livro onde tudo seja fortuito e / forçoso” (“I weave myself a book in which everything is by chance yet forced”) – and this common theme might stand as the leitmotif of the two *formants*. As in Barthes's analogy of the author as a spider that weaves its web (*hyphos*) from a bodily secretion, de Campos's weaving originates from the “umbilifio” (“umbilical-cord”). And as the text (weaving, web) is being produced, the author disappears, consumed in its production (“enquanto some ele te consome”).

The Disruptive Style

What, one might ask, is the style proposed by *Galáxias* – if any – and what is the “defense and illustration of the Portuguese language” it purports to produce? A possible answer would be simply to point to the rich wordplay operating in the texts as a demonstration of the wealth of possibilities in Portuguese. But that assertion does not account for all that *Galáxias* proposes to be. I propose that in weaving his galactic cantos de Campos purposefully embraced disruption as a strategy – just like Vieira, who while preaching randomness, according to António José Saraiva, structured his sermons like an engine, or a chess game. A more productive way to look at *Galáxias* entails an incursion into literary history to appreciate its privileged position at the end of a specific cycle, for *Galáxias* represented a radical departure from Noigandres's strict concretist program. With its multi-language intertextual approach and strong narrative elements, it came at a pivotal moment, when notions of origin, borders, “centre versus periphery” were being challenged by deconstruction theory. Following in the steps of concrete poetry's worldwide acceptance, *Galáxias* departed from a post-colonialist perspective to defiantly propose a text entirely decentred, global, and polyphonic. In this new environment, *Galáxias* reverts the movement of narratives like *Tristes rropiques* or, for that matter, of Vieira's “Sermão.”

As de Campos noted at the end of “Anthropophagous Reason: Dialogue and Difference in Brazilian Culture”:

To write, today, in both Europe and Latin America, will mean, more and more, to rewrite, to re chew. *Oi Barbaroi*. The Vandals, long ago, crossed the borders and are crowding the senate and the agora, as in Cavafy’s poem. Logocentric writers who imagined themselves the privileged beneficiaries of a proud one-way *koine* may now prepare themselves for the increasingly urgent task of acknowledging and redevouring the differential marrow of the new barbarians of the polytopic and polyphonic planetary civilization.³⁰

The disruptive style of *Galáxias* (“polytopic and polyphonic”) enacts precisely this barbarous moment of crossing borders, of playing on the *other’s* field and not following rules. Not quite prose, and not quite a poem, this prose-poem celebrates hybridity on many levels. No longer beholden to the strict modernist legacy that informed concrete poetry, *Galáxias* can be seen as a true post-modern artefact, and as such it inaugurated a new era in Brazilian culture – or counterculture. The very plurality of styles that appeared in Brazil throughout the late 1960s and 1970s and that would later be brought together under the rubric of “*poesia marginal*” owes a debt to *Galáxias*. The highly complex lyric of Waly Salomão’s *Me segura qu’eu vou dar um troço* (1972), for instance, and the increasingly ambitious texts produced by Hélio Oiticica in the 1970s are post-*Galáxias* texts, and perhaps inconceivable without it.³¹

As we progress into the new millennium and new technologies continually challenge writing practices and our notions of geography, *Galáxias* is invested with new significance as we identify in the work of younger generations the same concerns that informed de Campos’s project. The disorienting exploration of syntax in the work of visual artist Kay Rosen, for instance, seems to enact Mallarmé’s epigraph at the start of *Galáxias*: “la fiction affleurer et se dissiper, vite, d’après la mobilité de l’écrit” (“fiction rises to the surface and quickly dissipates, following the variable motion of the writing”), a strategy that seems to be at the core of de Campos’s enterprise. In Rosen, as in de Campos, language does not conform to plot; on the contrary, it unfolds into myriad forms that occasionally group together to suggest fictions undermining our assumption of reader control.

Kenneth Goldsmith’s channelling of radiophonic voices into “uncreative” writing seems the very embodiment of Barthes’s ideal of a stereographic text. The multi-language, densely layered work of Caroline Bergvall, with its intertextual exploration of authors including Chaucer and Dante, also shares with de Campos an affinity for “speaking through the words of others.” Bergvall’s

essay *Middling English*³² as a matter of fact enacts de Campos's barbarous call to "rewrite, rechew" language. In that essay, Bergvall departs from an (an)architectural perspective of language, quickly moving on to consider sound articulations, minding throughout the tension between a set standard and the variations brought forth from the periphery, to finally deliver her "defense and illustration" of the English language.

Notes

- 1 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 53.
- 2 Roland Greene, "Inter-American Obversals: Allen Ginsberg and Haroldo de Campos Circa 1960," in *XUL 5+5*, <http://www.bc.edu/research/xul/5%2B5/greene.htm>. "The dynamic factor is knowledge, Greene writes: "what, and how, does the poem know? While Campos frames his poetics with reference to 'information' and 'language,' knowledge, or thinking made manifest, inscribes a distinctive pattern."
- 3 Marjorie Perloff, "De Campos's *Galáxias* and After," in *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 182.
- 4 Haroldo de Campos, "O Afreudisiaco Lacan na Galáxia de Lalingua," *Correio, Revista da Escola Brasileira de Psicanálise*, no. 18–19.
- 5 The setting for this conversation was the offices of *L'Âne, Le Magazin freudien*, distributed by Éditions du Seuil, Paris. In a footnote, de Campos explains that the title for the journal was given by Lacan himself, punning on the word "analyst" as "âne-à-liste" ("ass with a list"). The journal, however, bears the subtitle: "Analyse nouvelle expérience."
- 6 For a complete English translation of the "Overture," see Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 3–5.
- 7 Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 5–6.
- 8 From the cycle *As Disciplinas*, written in 1952 and published in *Xadrez de Estrelas – percurso textual 1949–1974* (São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1976). Translation: "The Poem proposes itself: system / of rancorous premises / evolution of figures against the wind / star chess." Cf. *Novas: Selected Writings of Haroldo de Campos*, ed. Antonio Sergio Bessa and Odile Cisneros (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 13.
- 9 Even in purely visual terms, and despite the fact that since the "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry," the reference to "writing as constellation" is often attributed to Mallarmé, a case can be made that Vieira's "chess" analogy is more adequate to describe de Campos's poetry. Early concrete poems like the micro-collection "O Âmagô do Ômega," with their vertical and horizontal axes that establish multiple word relations and suggest multiple reading possibilities, resemble a chess board rather than constellations. The high volume of quotations in those poems, furthermore, adds a dialogical element that is at the core of board games.

- 10 In the original: *Que coisa é a conversão de uma alma senão entrar um homem dentro de si e ver-se a si mesmo?*
- 11 In de Campos's original: *num nível essencial, são uma "defesa e ilustração da língua portuguesa."* *Galáxias* (São Paulo: Editora 34, 2004), 119. Text originally written as liner notes for the CD *Isto não é um livro de viagem – 16 fragmentos de galáxias* (Rio de Janeiro, Editora 34, 1992), featuring sixteen cantos read by the author.
- 12 Fernando Pessoa greatly admired Vieira's style and acknowledged his influence in several works. In *Livro do Desassossego*, for instance, writing under the pseudonym of Bernardo Soares, Pessoa admitted that a page by Vieira, in the "cold perfection of its syntactic engineering," caused him to "tremble like a branch in the wind, in the passive delirium of something moved." In that same volume, in a thrilling passage in which he confesses being "nobody ... the prolix commentary of a book yet to be written," Pessoa added this curious "description of an ideal": "the sensibility of Mallarmé within Vieira's style." Cf. Fernando Pessoa, *Livro do Desassossego* (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Brasiliense, 1986), 156–7. Vieira is also the subject of one of the poems in *Mensagem*, 1934, Pessoa's sole collection published in his lifetime. "Defesa e Ilustração da Língua Portuguesa" is an essay by Pessoa published posthumously.
- 13 My translation. In the original: "As palavras são as estrelas, os sermões são a composição, a ordem, a harmonia e o curso dela. Vede como diz o estilo de pregar do céu, com o estilo que Cristo ensinou na terra. Um e outro é semear; a terra semeada de trigo, o céu semeado de estrelas. O pregar há-de ser como quem semeia, e não como quem ladrilha ou azuleja. Ordenado mas como as estrelas: *Stellae manentes in ordine suo*. Todas as estrelas estão por sua ordem; mas é ordem que faz influência, não é ordem que faça labor. Não fez deus o céu em xadrez de estrelas, como os pregadores fazem o sermão em xadrez de palavras." Note that the style proposed by Vieira differs from the "mosaic style" proposed and embraced by Marshall McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*: "The present volume has employed a mosaic pattern of perception and observation up til now." Cf. McLuhan, "The Galaxy Reconfigured, or the Plight of Mass Man in an Individualistic Society," in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 265.
- 14 Barthes, *S/Z*, 14. While Barthes might not have read Vieira's sermons, he was, nonetheless, clearly aware of Jesuit rhetoric. In his essay "Style and Its Image," the relation between content and form is conveyed in terms of an opposition between "Aristotelian (later Jesuit) rhetoric and Platonic (later Pascalian) rhetoric." (Cf. *The Rustle of Language*, 91). If *Galáxias* is indeed the "ideal text" that Barthes asked for, one wonders how it would respond to an analysis based on the system of codes employed in *S/Z*.
- 15 My translation.
- 16 In the first chapter of *Tristes tropiques*, Claude Levi-Strauss inveighs against the trend of travelogues that "fill the bookshops," and goes on to deliver one of the most spectacular expeditionary accounts of the twentieth century. Perhaps as a nod to Levi-Strauss, the eighth canto of *Galáxias* affirms from the start: "This is not a travelogue."
- 17 Haroldo de Campos, *A Educação dos Cinco Sentidos* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1985), 113–14.

- 18 Fortunately we do know enough about that tradition, for the literature on it is extensive, to infer what triggered de Campos's interest. The tradition of troubadours, or minstrels, in the Brazilian north-east is believed to have its roots in the Provençal tradition by way of Portugal and the poet-king Dom Diniz, with his *cantigas de amigo e de amor* (songs of friendship and love). Like their European counterparts in the Middle Ages, the Brazilian troubadours are itinerant performers highly admired and respected by the communities that guarantee their survival. Some of the works of the earlier poets, going back to the seventeenth century, still survive through apocryphal texts that to this day circulate as "*literatura de cordel*" (*cordel* is Portuguese for a rope or yarn, and the expression denotes a kind of book that is displayed in fairs hanging from a cord stretched between two poles or hooks). The music of the *cantadores* is highly determined by the text, which is set to a rigorous meter that values cadence. The original excerpt quoted by de Campos seems to have been written in the popular *sextilha* style, a verse composed of six lines of seven syllables each. The poet himself emulates the *cantador* in those parts of the text that feature a free flow of internal rhymes. But although he mentions one specific style – the *martelo galopado*, or "trotting *martelo*," named after its inventor, Jaime de Martelo, in the second half of the seventeenth century – his free-form style comes closer to the *mourão* ("big Moor"), the style of choice during a *desafio*, or duel between two *cantadores*, for its possibility of wordplay.
- 19 Cf. Ezra Pound, *Cantares*, trans. Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari, and Haroldo de Campos (Rio de Janeiro: Ministério de Educação e Cultura, 1960).
- 20 "Noigandres, eh noigandres, / "Now what the DEFFIL can that mean!" (in Pound, canto 20, l. 32).
- 21 In my translation of this canto, I opted for the first solution, for it calls to mind the image of the *cantador* as a wanderer, immersed in nature, at the mercy of God. For the full translation see *Novas: Selected Writings of Haroldo de Campos*, ed. Antonio Sergio Bessa and Odile Cisneros (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007).
- 22 *Galáxias*, 119.
- 23 Haroldo de Campos, "Do Epos ao Epifânico (Gênese e Elaboração das *Galáxias*)," in *Metalinguagem & Outras Metas*, 4th ed., (Sao Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1992), 269–77.
- 24 Toward the end of the first movement, Berg introduces a theme based on the Carinthian folk song "Ein Vogel auf'm Zwetschenbaum," and later, at the end of the second movement, repeats it. The Bach chorale "Es ist genug," from the cantata *O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort* (BWV 60), introduces the adagio section in the second movement.
- 25 Canto 11, which seems to describe Pompei, cites Connie Francis's 1958 hit *Stupid Cupid*.
- 26 "Não mais, Musa, não mais, que a lira tenho / Destemperada, e a voz enrequecida," *Os Lusíadas*, 10, cxlv ("No more, Muse, no more, my lyre is / out of tune, and my throat is hoarse" [*The Lusíads*, trans. Landeg White (Oxford, UK: Oxford World's Classics, 1997), 226]).
- 27 Dante, *Paradiso*, 13: 19–20.

- 28 The figure of the “Moura Torta,” literally meaning “crippled fairy,” belongs to the Portuguese fabulary and denotes the evil witch who often sets a plot in motion.
- 29 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 64.
- 30 Cf. “Anthropophagous Reason: Dialogue and Difference in Brazilian Culture”, in *Novas: Selected Writings of Haroldo de Campos*, 177.
- 31 For an insightful, well-informed account of Oiticica’s relationship with Haroldo de Campos, and the latter’s influence on Oiticica’s work, see Frederico Coelho, *Livro ou Livro-me – Os Escritos Babilônicos de Hélio Oiticica (1971–1978)* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, 2010). Of special interest to the present subject is Coelho’s commentary on Salomão’s “groovy promotion” – packets with clippings from Brazilian newspapers and art magazines that Salomão mailed to Oiticica in New York in the early 1970s – which gives us insight into the kind of textual operations going on at the time. Although “groovy promotion” was meant solely to convey an unfiltered picture of events going on in Brazil at the time, Salomão’s procedure of selecting, cutting, and layering appealed to Oiticica as a model for the “ideal text.” Style in these works, as in the *Galáxias*, is densely layered, interwoven, and referential.
- 32 Caroline Bergvall, *Middling English* (Southampton, Eng.: John Hansard Gallery, 2011).

★1. *Nota bene*

(pronounced /'noʊtə 'bene/; plural form *notate bene*) is an Italian and Latin phrase meaning “note well.” The phrase first appeared in writing *circa* 1721.♦¹

N.B.★1

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for NOA BIJU♦²

♦1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nota_bene

♦2. Born 28 November 2010.

40. Signing a text that one hasn't written will surely become less remarkable, and the next frontier of propriety will materialize when conceptual writing antagonizes the institutions of poetry by signing for others under texts that they have not written. Jacques Debrot published a number of poems under John Ashbery's name, as well as a fabricated interview (*Readme* 4 [2001]). See the related entry in the present volume for Ted Berrigan and *Issue +1*. [The “present volume” does not refer to the present volume. – Ed.] It is one thing for Duchamp to display a urinal in a gallery, but still another to go into the museum men's room and post an information card next to the urinal claiming it as a Duchamp. In Darren Wershler's *Tapeworm Foundry*, he proposes this: “publish an issue of a magazine without telling it's [*sic*] official editors.”♦³

Culture is a two-way circuit. The urinal takes the piss but also rinses itself clean. The information card in the men's room would usurp the everyday and place it in the realm of cultural artifact, replete with the brand name “Duchamp.” The pirated magazine issue, on the other hand, repurposes an artistic gesture as an everyday commodity. We're talking about the readymade vs. the made-ready. To put subversive, subliminal content into the mainstream is to make it ready for audience consumption. The readymade, conversely, requires that the audience be ready for *it*. Flush.

♦3. Craig Dworkin, “The Fate of Echo,” in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, ed. Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010), liii. Reprinted in this volume, pp. 41–53.

* It will be objected that such art for the masses as folk art was developed under rudimentary conditions of production – and that a good

Why can't the Greenbergs and Adornos, et al., of our cultural unfolding find a place in their quiltworks for magazines and urinals? Shouldn't Adorno have

♦4. Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 18.

deal of folk art is on a high level. Yes, it is – but folk art is not Athene, and it's Athene whom we want: formal culture with its infinity of aspects, its luxuriance, its large comprehension. Besides, we are now told that most of what we consider good in folk culture is the static survival of dead formal, aristocratic, cultures. Our old English ballads, for instance, were not created by the "folk," but by the post-feudal squirearchy of the English countryside, to survive in the mouths of the folk long after those for whom the ballads were composed had gone on to other forms of literature. Unfortunately, until the machine age, culture was the exclusive prerogative of a society that lived by the labor of serfs or slaves. They were the real symbols of culture. For one man to spend time and energy creating or listening to poetry meant that another man had to produce enough to keep himself alive and the former in comfort. In Africa today we find the culture of slave-owning tribes is generally much superior to that of the tribes that possess no slaves.♦⁴

loved the Sex Pistols? (Or, if not, Public Image Ltd.?) Is it because it's Athene we want? Or because the folk haven't the leisure time to make anything with an infinity of aspects, luxuriance, and large comprehension? Perched on one of Clement's (padded) shoulders, I deliver a message from below: These qualities live in their abundance, not in the author's mind or the artist's hand, but in the object as it hurtles forth into the thicket of worldly entanglements. All the formal rigor available to even the most rigorously formal artist cannot limit the work to its de jure frame. (See Jacques Derrida, "Parergon," in *The Truth in Painting* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987].) When one knocks on the neighbor's door, maybe to use the toilet, or to borrow a magazine or a cup of sugar, but also to sneak a peek at the new concrete countertops they're rumored to have installed, one cannot be sure of how the neighbor will come to the recently knocked-upon door: in what state of mind or dress, armed or un-, with or without sugar to spare. Perhaps you have planned your drip – sorry, your *trip* – to the neighbor's door with the utmost care, your attire wholly appropriate and respectful. You have rehearsed the words you will use when the door opens: "Hello Saul [or Pamela, depending on who appears], I hate to trouble you. Goodness knows, you have better things to do on a Thursday evening, but I wonder if you might have a cup of sugar to spare? I'm baking a cinnamon babka to take to my mother's house for Rosh Hashanah." Nevertheless, Saul

or Pamela or the two of them together may find your unannounced appearance at their door to be an unwelcome surprise. Or perhaps the door will minimally rotate on its hinges so as to allow only Saul's face (and nothing more) to fill the newly opened aperture, denying any vantage into the space beyond the carefully positioned head. And yet you will glimpse something, fleetingly and without enough hewn detail to confirm with absolute certainty the identity of this something which, nonetheless, leaves you with a cold, wet sensation across the surface of your thoracic vertebrae, filling you with an unspeakable regret that you had made the journey from your front door to Pamela and Saul's. You reproach yourself, "Couldn't I have just brought fruit for the New Year?" But you know, deep down, that your cinnamon babka is graced with an infinity of aspects, luxuriance, and large comprehension. How could you deny your mother on the High Holy Days? And then it occurs to you (duh!), rather than traipsing across the yard in your sweatpants and slippers, you could have just sent your slave to fetch the sugar, report back on the countertops. Heck, why are you elbow-deep in batter? Shouldn't the slaves be baking the babka?!

1. Ed.: John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 162–74.*⁵

No matter how you slice it, it comes down to language. The name "Duchamp," signifies nothing in itself. The name rides a series of senses in what Searle calls "a loose sort of way."*⁶ "Duchamp" rides its senses as an oxpecker rides a rhinoceros, taking

◆5. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 120.

sustenance from ticks, botfly larvae, and other parasites taking sustenance from the rhinoceros itself. This chain of sustenance-taking results in a loose sort of infinite regress in which one species, one name, one word, nests in another. That species (or name or word) nests, in turn, in another. The oxpecker, for what it's worth, nests in holes in trees or walls, which it lines with hair plucked from its mammalian hosts. So, you see, as "Duchamp" gains – not just sustenance, but also a cozy bed – from its senses, its senses gain sustenance from the man called "Duchamp," from plumbing fixtures, and, perhaps most sustainably of all, from textual references to "Duchamp," and Duchamp, and urinals, and bits of language riding other senses, as "readymade" rides a shopping cart through the aisles of commodities and categories of this senseless thing we call by the name "culture." Thus, Searle appears to be dead wrong when he states:

"[T]he description, 'The man called X' will not do, or at any rate will not do by itself, as a satisfaction of the principle of identification. For if you ask me, 'Whom do you mean by X?' and I answer, 'The man called X,' even if it were true that there is only one man who is called X, I am simply saying that he is the man whom other people refer to by the name 'X.' But if they refer to him by the name 'X' then they must also be prepared to substitute an identifying description for 'X' and if they in their turn substitute 'the man called X,'

◆6. John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 170.

◆7. *Ibid.*

the question is only carried a stage further and cannot go on indefinitely without circularity or infinite regress. My reference to an individual may be parasitic on someone else's but this parasitism cannot be carried on indefinitely if there is to be any reference at all." ♦7

3. London, a *murmur* beneath a fog. ♦8

Should a proper name: "Hugo," for instance, appear in a novel by Robbe-Grillet, it might do so first as the site of a Jewish bakery on the Avenue Victor Hugo in the 16th arrondissement. (Granted, it seems unlikely that Robbe-Grillet would go out of his way to label a bakery as "Jewish," but if, in the midst of the unfolding narrative, a cinnamon babka were purchased from a man turned in three-quarter profile, the reader might justifiably draw such a conclusion.) Later, "Hugo" could be an infirmed boy in Rennes who has never met his father; and still later: a deceptive old man in a novel the boy's father is reading in a garret in Hugo Road, London, N19.

♦8. Victor Hugo, quoted in Roland Barthes, "Objective Literature: Alain Robbe-Grillet," in *In The Labyrinth* by Alain Robbe-Grillet (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 12.

4. "'Reason' in language – oh, what a deceptive old woman! I am afraid we'll never get rid of God because we still have faith in grammar" (Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*). Isn't the "death of God" above all a death of the *final word*, or words as idols that hold us prisoner to words? Thus we rediscover the necessity of a radically new position vis-à-vis language (of a practice beyond the word). Here in any case is how Artaud spoke in order to have done with the "instrument" he wanted

Every word is beyond the word, landing outside itself; riding, nesting, in or on another word. Names, too, nest. From the proper name "Nietzsche," via "Sollers," and "Artaud" we arrive at/in/on "Kim-Cohen." "Barthes," "Robbe-Grillet," and – *voilà!* – "Victor Hugo." Thus the avenues and streets that bear his name. The phenomenon in question may be beyond the word, but not beyond words *tout de suite*. We can't outrun the appeal of words. We slip on the peel of words, landing with a pratfall,

♦9. Phillippe Sollers, "Thought Expresses Signs" (1964), in *Writing and the Experience of Limits*, ed. Philip Barnard, trans. David Hayman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 102.

to employ: "This instrument will not depend on the letters or signs of the alphabet, which are still too close to a figurative and ocular and auditory convention / Which has linked them in terms of a linked thought, and which has linked sense-thought, has linked them in terms of a preventative ideation that had its formal tablets written on the walls of an inverse brain. / Since the human brain is only a double that releases and projects a sound for a sign, a sense for a sound, a sentiment for a sign of being, an idea for a movement."⁹

1. This is the best phrase in the whole book!¹⁰ ●¹

a catcall. The word is always deceptive and old. We readers are, of necessity, always deceived and as exquisitely new as the day we were born.

●1. The phrase ("sequential and nycthemeral") lands outside itself, prompting Perec to step outside his text to comment upon it. Furthermore, the phrase "the phrase" forces the reader to identify the phrase in question. In the English translation – already we can foresee objections – I have landed on "sequential and nycthemeral." But this phrase is part of a larger phrase, "a procedure that is unequivocal, sequential and nycthemeral." One phrase lives parasitically off/on/in the other and whether Perec meant to single out the host phrase or its parasite is now impossible to say. It should be noted that the text in which the phrase appears is titled "The Apartment" and is part of a sequence of texts which each live parasitically off/on/in the subsequent (host) text:

◆10. Georges Perec, "The Apartment," in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, ed. and trans. John Sturrock (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 28.

◆11. <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/nycthemeron#English>

"The Page"
"The Bed"
"The Bedroom"
"The Apartment"
"The Apartment Building"
"The Street"
"The Neighborhood"
"The Town"
"The Country"
"Countries"
"Europe"
"Old Continent"
"New Continent"
"The World"
"Space"

My own parasitism led me to wiktionary.org for the following information:

Noun

nychthemeron
(plural nychthemera or
nychthemérons)

1. A period of one day and one night, a date: in the West, this is a period of 24 consecutive hours.♦¹¹

* In his interesting "Theory of Poetry," Mr. Lascelles Abercrombie wavers between two views of inspiration. One of them takes what seems to me the correct interpretation. In the poem, an inspiration "completely and exquisitely defines itself." At other times, he says the inspiration *is* the poem; "something self-contained and self-sufficient, a complete and entire whole." He says that "each inspiration is something which did not and could not originally exist as words." Doubtless such

After a nycthemeral angling experience, the fishermen gather in the tavern near the river's edge – filmy glasses of thin ale in hand. They speak of the ones they repatriated to their buckets. Then, with a vigor not entirely present in the tales of the actual catch, they speak of the fish unlanded. Their eyes widen. Their breath quickens. Their voices hush in reverence. Human beings dream with a persistent, endless, cloying, yearning, of that-which-is-not-here, that-which-is-not-now. Because, Dear Reader, both here and now appear forever to be

♦12. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1934), 66.

is the case; not even a trigonometric function exists merely as words. But if it is already self-sufficient and self-contained, why does it seek and find words as a medium of expression?♦¹²

3. When the ten commandments of suburban life were nailed to the front of the Nanterre town hall, they provoked a riot and became the starting-point for the whole protest movement. Initially, however, the authorities only took action against the statement, "Thou shalt hate thy town fathers, the mothers."♦¹³

* Translator's note: I have used this word in a slightly French sense (deceptive glamour) to save the pun.♦¹⁴,●²

2. The language environment we're working in could easily have been rendered unique and noncopyable: witness how unobtainable language and images are in Flash-based environments.♦¹⁵,●³

fractured and insufficient. The elsewhere/elsewhen of our dreaming inevitably presents itself as "a complete and entire whole." But let's be clear: this fish does not exist, and if it did, it would take many lifetimes to clean and scale it. Dreams, alas, are made of victories and feasts.

The frame frames. That's how it got its name. What's inside the frame = the site (of art, of life, etc.). What's outside the frame = the parasite (of art, of life, etc.). Yet – M. Derrida, inquires – doesn't the parasite feast upon the host from within? Mustn't the parasite be further inside the frame than the site? Mustn't the outsider be insider than the insider? This would force us to place Nanterre at the Hôtel de Ville. And, as Fournel knows, we very nearly did. God's in the grammar and the grammar's in god. That's not to say grammar *is* god. As should be clear by now, not even god is god. It's time to come clean about our use of language. It's time to wash our mouths out with soap.

●². Author's note: I have saved this pun(ge) in a slightly deceptive (French word) sense to use the glamor.

●³. See www.uniqueandnoncopyable.com

♦¹³. Paul Fournel, "Suburbia," in *Oulipo Laboratory* trans. Harry Matthews (London: Atlas Press, 1995), 6.

♦¹⁴. Francis Ponge, *Soap*, trans. Lane Dunlop (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 1998.

♦¹⁵. Kenneth Goldsmith, "Why Conceptual Writing? Why Now?" in *Against Expression*, ed. Dworkin and Goldsmith, xxii.

Plagiarism: A Response to Thomas Fink

Firstly, I want to thank Tom for his thoughtful and provocative review.¹ I have some queries to direct, so here goes.

Critical reading and rereading of the kind that Tom Fink outlines is useful as a practice, but it's a relatively narrow practice, like footnoting, that is commonly situated in academic or high literature settings: in other words, directed at work that is *meant* to be read and reread. This is part of the inverted mode of what Bourdieu has termed cultural or symbolic capital. So *Heath* is of course about that situation – it either emerges from that situation or else returns to it, and, in a self-serving way, it generates cultural capital by design.

Or else it makes gestures to something else. I wanted *Heath* to function at least partially outside of that rarefied world alluded to above, that is, I wanted reading to be less not more narrow as a practice. I have linked this, in earlier work, to notions of ambience, but here it's directed at an array of reading platforms. I mean is there really a need for such a valorative distinction on two modes of reading or to bring them into an antagonistic (high/low; focused/distracted) position? Who benefits from this? Can we really even make such a hard and fast distinction? I'm not positive. I was interested in pushing at this dichotomy because in my mind it is not a sufficient and necessary condition for providing whatever it is that reading is supposed to provide. I am not sure what reading is supposed to do or how it is supposed to do it. Is *Heath* literature? Is that the only framework that will work for it? I hope not. But of course, that is one of the frameworks that the book seeks to both address and get away from – the second revised edition might highlight this. Perhaps it should be called *Heath/Coursepack*. Of course, with every sort of publication or republication the nature of the material is changed as is the framing of its consumption. And of course, *Heath* has footnotes, but they're not really pointing to something elucidatory, something outside that can explain the text from the inside. They are more like street signs to something outside the text and they are a bit inert. But

maybe this is no different from Eliot's footnotes to *The Waste Land*, which are serious and a joke.

Maybe this is more easily stated this way, with the two statements separated by a /.

Reading *Heath* is HARD. It's hard to parse, it's hard to figure out what it "means." / No, reading *Heath* is EASY. If you just relax a little and let yourself move freely through the text, if you skip over half of it because you already get it, which is what anyone does when they jump from one link to another link.

Of course, and here is the rub, reading *Heath* is difficult if you conceive of the book as the product of a unified sensibility, of "trying" to figure out how it all coheres (this Tom abandons in the first paragraph of his review) rather than as a series of loosely annotated notes to cultural production and reading practices conceived more generally or generically or ambiently. But Tom is correct in indicating that I was trying to move away from sustained, critical reading practices. Here I would add that I was interested in this gesture not because the latter has no use, but because I think text production and reading have changed with recent text distribution practices, and have moved away from this model. Reading and writing have gotten easier to perform in a social space, that is, a kind of reduce reuse recycle revise in the language ecosystem, so I was trying to align or even ally avant-garde practice with what I see is an actual and contemporary sphere of cultural text production that is less hindered by notions of difficulty, perceived autonomy from the market/mass exchange forms, popular formats, and notions of individual ownership vis-à-vis intellectual property, etc. Certain warrants underlie Tom's argument, and *Heath* questions them. The issues alluded to are hardly synonymous, and they impact texts in a complex array of ways. What happens when you bring notions of cultural distribution, social networking, dispersed multiple authorship into the sphere of difficult, serious, academic literature?

So to reiterate, the practice of focused, critical reading is still useful, but under specific conditions and in specific reading formats. In any case, and Tom may or may not agree here, it is often tied to notions of an *individual* performing labor that either results in or is connected to something "original" and to specific kinds of "value" or cultural capital. I don't object to close scrutiny or reading or whatever of material of the kind Tom mentions, but I think this too narrow a way to describe reading and textual processing, and it is liable to weakness when directed at "content" that is jointly produced or produced under socially networked conditions, content that is harder to classify as "original" or pleasurable – as opposed to, say, boring. So I am very interested in what I would term "social reading" on the periphery of one's attention or something inexact like that. And this is probably because I have been distracted as a reader, but

I think all reading is reading with distractions. This is also true of *BlipSoak01*, which was written before most social networking technologies were developed. *BlipSoak01* is very much the literature of distraction, the distraction of crossing a page. Ross Brighton has talked about some of this stuff in his review.² Why not generate avant-garde work that is easy and relaxing and mildly original? Isn't that what most writers do anyway? Jerome McGann has written about expanding the book beyond notions of authorship and into what he calls the bibliographic condition, Matthew Kirschenbaum has called attention to forensic materialism vis-à-vis specific data-storage platforms in relation to processing more generally, and Rachel Malik has written about the horizon of the publishable as an expanded frame for the understanding of text production. I would have to say that I was interested in doing something similar, but within the confines of a single book regarded as a relaxation parameter with a specific set of affordances. The project: relax the avant garde. Why? because the avant garde feels tired in its gestures, feels like it *has* to plagiarize to "make a statement." Or feels like it has to resort to appropriation as something incendiary, as something neo-avant-garde and from an earlier era. But appropriation is no longer avant garde. It's standard practice in and out of the classroom. Is appropriation in "experimental literature" still "experimental"? I don't think so.

I wanted something – maybe it wasn't even a book – that was freely acknowledged to be not an individual product and not laborious. There was a lot of labor employed to produce this text, but most of it wasn't mine – it was outsourced, which is a perfectly legal way of getting someone else to do one's work for one. You pay them for it. You circulate it to generate value. This is particularly true in the cultural sphere. Pepys's labor is enormous vis a vis Project Gutenberg's. And their labor is greater than mine in copying and pasting their version of Pepys's text. Or is it? Thus, outsourcing, which is a practice for transferring labor practices to a place beyond the principal site of production, is one way of recategorizing the kind of labor that is transpiring around the text. What is the nature of that value that is being generated and who is gaining it? It's not so easy to say with Pepys's *Diary*.

I think the more complicated issue here is that between plagiarism and appropriation. I feel that the use of appropriation is clouded by all sorts of neo-Romantic avant-garde practices and ideologies – and involves saying something like "Look at me, I stole something" on the quasi-legal end of the spectrum and "Look at me make something new out of something old" on the other end of the spectrum, though the latter has collapsed somewhat into the former. Appropriation is back in a major way, in the art world and in the poetry world and I started asking myself why. Reading, most reading, is easy and superficial, like appropriation. But I am interested in the manner of appropriation and the

manner of reading. Kaavya Viswanathan was working what would be considered, in an academic context, unoriginal material that had been, according to Tom, “reset” for a different sector of the chick-lit audience. But I think it is interesting that Viswanathan took a prevailing mode and fitted it to a different ethnic group. However, she could have made that gesture more obvious and thus more about manipulating material rather than simply opting for a rather short-sighted and simple-minded financial gain/source of value. But the gesture is interesting. I think it’s too bad that Salinger has tried to repress publication of a book about Holden Caulfield as a 78-year-old. By the same token, Shakespeare could have prevented Stoppard from writing *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*. Really, I like appropriation but it’s only appropriation, it’s only what most people do most of the day anyway. The only reason Viswanathan was prosecuted was because she generated detrimental reliance. If she had done this in an experimental writing circle, if she had announced she was using someone else’s material, and altered the material more in the taking and retrofitting for a different ethnic group, she would not have been subject to media outcry and the book would have been published, probably generating her significant cultural not to mention real capital – within the experimental writing scene and beyond it.

This leads to a recognition: today, appropriation, in the experimental literary and the art world, tends to dramatize itself by calling itself “plagiarism.” This is why I put plagiarism in the title. As Tom points out, it’s a specious claim. And this is not avant-garde appropriation anymore, because it simply isn’t shocking anymore. So here is, I think, my biggest point of disagreement with Tom. *Europe* by John Ashbery was shocking to contemporary readers (I am sure there are many readers out there who *still* think it is an anomaly in the Ashbery canon) and Duchamp’s placing of a urinal at the Society of Independents was shocking and it outraged a lot of individuals. Certainly my students do a lot of it and if it weren’t for Turnitin I wouldn’t know about it. But I am not outraged by it. Appropriation per se is no longer shocking – it is just part of our reading cultural environment where information is exchanged continually and for the most part freely. *Heath* is not meant to be shocking or hard to read. It may not even be literature, at least the type of literature that Tom is lobbying for. It may just be a platform, like the Web, or like an index card, or like a footnote to something *hors texte*. I wanted to project literature, maybe even serious literature, or maybe “less serious” literature, into a larger reading/cultural environment to see what would happen. And the answer is: probably very little!

I think in the end, however, the originality/pleasure nexus still matters to Tom more than it does to me. I’m not against the coupling per se, but I think originality can be modified, as both a concept and as a material constraint, in useful ways. And as I’ve said, I’ve tried to do originality/boredom as a nexus.

I broached this issue in 2003, in the “Preface Duration” for *BlipSoak01*, so I’ve been interested in boredom as it relates to everyday reading practices for quite some time. Ditto with issues having to do with copyright. I am not against copyright protection and Viswanathan’s gesture involves deceit for market gain. But I am happy to have *Heath* rewritten, reused, repurposed, remediated according to the Creative Commons licence. There is a copyleft notation for *Heath*, and this legal notice is binding: work may be used, appropriated, rewritten, as long as the original author is cited, and as long as the person who reuses the material grants the same rights to the next user. This is a relaxed copyright rule, but it is not the absence of copyright, and concepts of plagiarism are still viable under this rubric. Notions of “theft” and “originality” and “authorship” are relative, and *Heath* is about those fluid boundaries. Once a copyright date has expired, what was theft in one year is not, legally speaking, theft the very next year.

Notes

- 1 Thomas Fink’s piece on *plagiarism/outsource* can be found at <http://the-otolith.blogspot.com/2009/06/thomas-fink-tan-lin-plagiarismoutsource.html>.
- 2 <http://ignoretheventriloquists.blogspot.ca/2009/06/some-thoughts-on-tan-lins-blipsoak01.html>.

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