

CONCEPTUAL WRITING:

The L.A. Brand

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“Benevolent area-sneaks get lost in the kitchens and are found to impede the circulation of the knife-cleaning machine.”

The author thanks Lucy Blagg and Joseph Mosconi for their comments on this essay.

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Conceptual Writing : The L.A. Brand

The intensely solitary and private work [of mine] is balanced by the more public pieces or by the work that's made by someone else where I am more or less the producer or director of the piece. In thinking out my plans for *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, I included a secondary or private exercise for myself as a sort of incentive to do it. I had read somewhere that a way to learn about writing is to copy someone else's work. The same as copying old masters. At any rate, the idea of concentrating so specifically on each word, on moving from one word to the next, looking closely at each sentence, appealed to me.

—Allen Ruppersberg, *Books, Inc.*

The term “conceptual writing” has come into vogue to describe a range of writing practices—if by “writing” we mean the circulation of texts under the sign of an “author”—that is increasingly being employed in the production of literature. In its purest form, this writing practice is one of mere transcription, usually from a fluid ephemeral medium—a radio broadcast, a newspaper, web pages, even one's own speech as it's recorded—into a more permanent, and culturally elevated, medium for text: the book. Sometimes it is merely plagiarism and sometimes it is mining the sounds and letters circulating around us that most ignore, to create what are, in the end, signature works of literature. The books that are produced are often quite large, even sculptural, highlighting the comic element inherent in the production of an object that looks, from the outside, like an epic poem or a Thomas Pynchon novel but which, when opened, is nothing but the most bland, vulgar language copied indifferently.

Catch-phrases associated with conceptual writing are “uncreative writing” and the “unboring boring,” both coinages by the movement's most visible figure, Kenneth Goldsmith, a RISD-trained sculptor who forfeited a successful New York art career to devote himself to book projects—not “art books,” mind you, these are not limited editions but readily available on Amazon and from Small Press Distribution—that push toward a horizon at which author means only *information architect*. The author is reduced to a database operator, moving text back and forth, format-

ting it for various media and computer types, and sorting it according to *quantitative* rather than *qualitative* qualities.

As a savvy promulgator of these new artistic values, Goldsmith has a sly, teasing but aggressive way of dismantling an audience's interiorized hierarchy of literary worth, while creating the proper context for his own work's reception. This has led to a position as a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, a reading at the White House, the first poet laureateship at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and an appearance on the Colbert Report dressed in flamingo pink with rabbinical beard. The *context* itself is a key aspect, perhaps the “content,” of conceptual writing, since it is the play on expectations *about* reading, not *while* reading, that provides most of the jolt of the “new.” Goldsmith writes in “Being Boring”:

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 though the day in order to make it to the end. Or my most recent book, *Day*, in which I re-typed a day's copy of the *New York Times* and published it as a 900 page book. Now you know what I do without ever having to have read a word of it.

As Goldsmith suggests, conceptual writing can be the execution by a person of an *algorithm*, followed blindly without intrusion of the creative personality. These are the same algorithms many of us are forced to enact day-to-day in our offices; it is the vulgar activity of the cubicle drone apotheosized to a ritual act. This activity can be scanning, cut-and-pasting, collecting, editing, and other forms of everyday information management we are familiar with on the internet, where some form of plagiarism has become the norm with the rapid shuttling of stories between sites and the promulgation of status updates between pages motored by the click of the “like.”

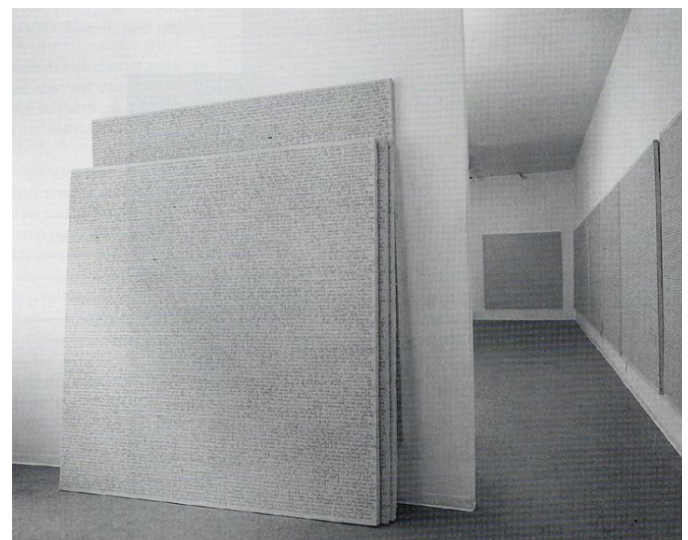
Works of conceptual writing take on something of a social ethics as an underlying narrative obtains of one person's use of time ill-spent outside the mechanics of capitalist economics, beyond the purview of standard spiritual notions of artistic creativity and communion, in the manner of Michel de Certeau's concept in *The Practice of Everyday Life* of "la perruque" [the wig], which "differs from absenteeism in that the worker is officially on the job. La perruque may be as simple a matter as a secretary's writing a love letter on 'company time' or as complex as a cabinetmaker's 'borrowing' a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room... [it is a use of time that is] free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit." Time spent creating these works is transformative of what might be called *dead* time, in which one pursues relaxing hobbies that are not cognitively demanding or effortlessly completes occupational tasks, into *artistic* time, a metamorphosis that is at once liberating—who wouldn't want one's dead time transformed into art?—and an affront to "serious" creative writers.

As its name suggests, conceptual writing has precursors in works of conceptual art, especially those that are especially boring or involve plagiarism. For example, John Baldessari's "I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art," which followed a year after his famous public burning of his early paintings in 1970, consists of the artist repeating this phrase interminably on videotape (he also wrote this phrase on a piece of paper several times over). Allen Ruppersberg's piece, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1974), for which the artist wrote the entirety of Oscar Wilde's novella in felt-tip pen across twenty large canvases—making, as Tim Griffin writes in *Artforum*, "a space for looking into a space for reading"—is another predecessor. Rounding out this trio of Los Angeles text-artists is the little known Guy de Cointet, whose conceptual newspaper *ACRCIT* (1971) was the encryption of several innocuous phrases into sign-systems composed entirely of numbers and invented alphabets. British artist Fiona Banner's *The Nam* (1997), an important predecessor work, is merely a transcription of her verbal descriptions of six fictional movies that were set during the Vietnam War—*Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon* are two of them—articulated as if she herself were watching the war itself unfold.

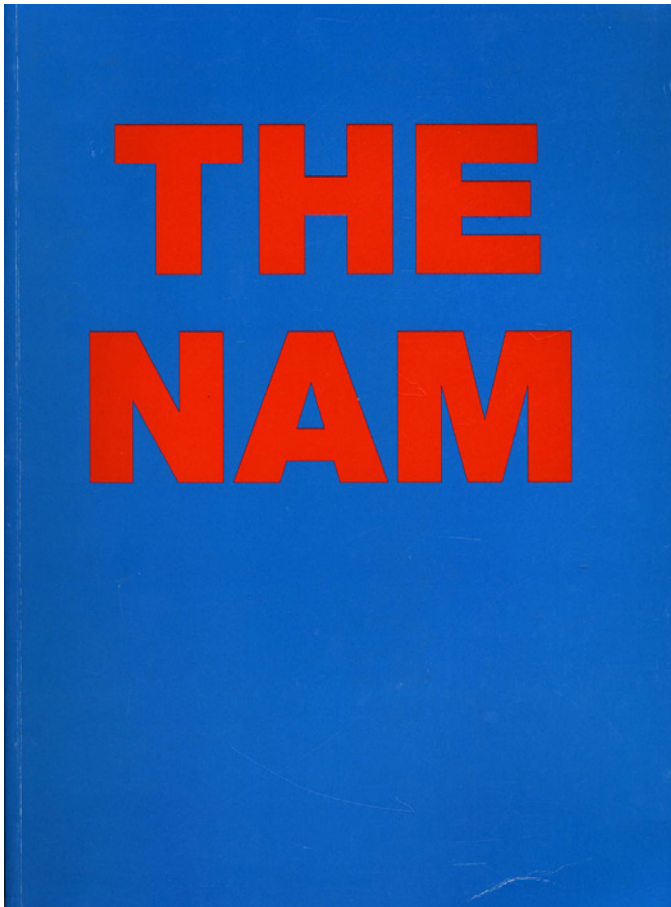
In fact, like many movements in Modernism, notably that of the Surrealists, conceptual writing has conjured a past out of what might otherwise seem an eclectic assem-

blage of unrelated artists. A useful online anthology, "The Ubuweb Anthology of Conceptual Writing," curated by Craig Dworkin in the early 00s, seamlessly meshes works of poetry, fiction, music, gallery art and performance, including work by the Language poet Alan Davies ("a an av es," a series that doesn't use any words that have letters with descenders, like *j* or *g*, or ascenders, like *l* and *t*); "Racter," a series of poems written by a computer that read like Surrealist fortune cookies; Robert Rauschenberg's "Portrait of Iris Clert," a telegram that reads in its entirety: "THIS IS A PORTRAIT OF IRIS CLERT IF I SAY SO"; Gertrude Stein's very short poem called "Five Words In a Line," which reads "Five words in a line"; Joseph Kosuth's variation on the Stein poem, a rendition in red neon of the words "FIVE WORDS IN RED NEON"; Claude Closky's "The first thousand numbers classified in alphabetical order," for which the artist typed out an alphabetical listing of the first thousand numbers; and some of the more extreme, arid and logically executed passages from Samuel Beckett's early novel *Watt*: "Here he moved, to and fro, from the door to the window, from the window to the door; from the window to the door; from the door to the window; from the fire to the bed, from the bed to the fire; from the bed to the fire, from the fire to the bed; from the door to the fire, from the fire to the door; from the fire to the door; from the door to the fire..." etc.

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Allen Ruppersberg, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1974).



Fiona Banner, *The Nam* (1997)

Los Angeles is peculiar in that there is, and has been for some time, lots of activity in experimental poetry and yet relatively little interest in appealing to local or even national lineages or traditions. Literary communities in cities such as New York, San Francisco or Toronto can be obsessed with the legacies of writers living or dead, some of whom have been unfairly ignored—for instance, Barbara Guest, Jack Spicer and bpNichol—and with measuring their generation's worth against a perceived past of greats. Lower East Side writers who regularly attend the St. Mark's Poetry Project seem, to my mind, very much concerned with an almost civic sense of wanting to honor the spirit of the place—to pledge a sort of loyalty to the umpteenth generations of Beats and the New York School. Writers in Los Angeles seem instead concerned with processes of production and distribution—new ways to make text, regardless of what we call them, and new ways to present them—and are not, in general, hankering after a "lineage." Even Kenneth Goldsmith's citing of John Cage, Andy Warhol and Vito Acconci as inspirations,

left-field and provocative as that might be, seems an alien form of context-making to writers in Los Angeles. It's not that these writers don't acknowledge the power and vision of predecessors or that prior literary works don't inform their own, but the mythical air, the aura of *vocation*, that often obtains around the life of a poet doesn't happen here, at least not on a community level.

Another angle on this east/west difference is provided by David Shields, himself born in Los Angeles and author of *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, composed nearly entirely of quotes lifted from other authors. Though he doesn't declare it, the book is itself an argument for forms of conceptual writing:

When Nicholson Baker lived in Berkeley for several years, I contrived to think of him as being related to a group of West Coast writers whose interestingness derives for me principally from the ways in which they process information and write about how they process information (to name but a few, Douglas Coupland, Sallie Tisdale, Bernard Cooper, the late David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Raban, Dave Eggers, William T. Vollman). The West Coast seems somehow to give people the freedom to focus on information and its conduits, its messengers; the East Coast, by contrast, is still to me so much about the old-fashioned minutiae of social strata.

He suggests that East Coast writers are preoccupied by a particularly bourgeois legacy—the negotiation of identity via class markings somewhat indebted to largely imaginary agrarian or aristocratic lineages. This almost perfectly describes writing styles like that of New York School poets like John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara which has been tagged memorably by Timothy Gray as a form of "urban pastoral." Writers on the East Coast negotiate class with their writing; writing is used as a means of social mobility, even as the final goal is not so much money and fame as it is a comfortable place above or beyond the sphere of bourgeois norms. Writers in Los Angeles don't have such concerns; the streets are equally dirty and vulgar for all of us, and no neighborhood such as the Lower East Side or Williamsburg exists where one can covertly *redescribe* oneself like the classic flaneur, metamorphosing amidst the phantasmagoria of class, ethnic or sexual identities.

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Before moving on to discuss some works of conceptual writing by Los Angeles artists, I'd like to expand—in a very impressionistic, unscientific manner—on a few other reasons I feel conceptual writing has taken hold in the city.

There is a *general air of production* in Los Angeles—every coffee shop is filled with people meeting to discuss film, music and video projects, and most of them seem to involve large sums of (often imaginary) money. Though there is also a strong tradition of L.A. performance art—which seems to run in the opposite direction of the industry by being low-tech, self-destructive, and community-oriented, as epitomized by Chris Burden's iconic early work—many gallery art products in Los Angeles are made by competent, dedicated practitioners, with a clear goal and context in mind, meant to be writ large on the landscape once completed. As Mike Davis in his seminal book *City of Quartz* argued, “*noir* everywhere insinuated contempt for a depraved business culture while it simultaneously searched for a critical mode of writing or filmmaking within it.” This is suggestive of the types of tensions artists of many different stripes feel in a city which, in terms of the film industry, hasn't largely changed since the 30s. In a city of billboards and 7-lane traffic there seems to be little time for the modest, querulous, lyrical voice, or the fractured, politicized, avant-garde subjectivity one sees in much post-Language poetry—it's not a city where one can be comfortably small or hesitant. Of course, this doesn't account for the large amount of lyrical poetry that is, in fact, produced here, but I haven't seen any signs of a definitive Los Angeles “style” of lyric poetry beyond that of Bukowski and his crew, the “Meat Poets” who seemed, like the performance artists, to thrive in the space well below that of commercial production, actively negating it by ignoring it.

The *liveliness of the art world* in Los Angeles, now considered the rival of the New York City scene, at least in terms of lucre exchanging hands, is still small and personal enough such that writers can make interventions. Poets might not be concerned with the literary history of the city, but as the flurry of Pacific Standard Time initiatives in 2011-2012 made clear, the art world, if not the artists themselves, is obsessed with putting L.A. on the map.

Writers such as Mathew Timmons, creator of the conceptual Insert Blanc Press, and those associated with Les Figues Press such as Christine Wertheim have made deep

inroads in the gallery culture, in some ways to the detriment of building a classically defined, which is to say insular, “poetry” community. Because of the distinctly sensationalistic nature of Los Angeles performance art, combined with the celebrity culture for which the city is famous, poets and writers such as Kate Durbin, Andrew Choate and Vanessa Place have made their readings into events themselves beyond the, by contrast, informal, sober recitations behind a microphone standard for readings.

The relative *lack of major poetic figures* who did their writing here, and the relative lack of celebration of those who did, also seems partly responsible for the move to conceptual writing. As I mentioned, in New York City and other cities in the Northeast—or even the South, such as a Nashville or Atlanta—poets, even minor poets, will be celebrated as a mark of substance for the local population, probably because these cities were established back when poetry still had a hold on the culture—the city “arrived” when they produced a significant poet. In Los Angeles, many of the more promising poetic careers were either cut short—by suicide in the case of Nora May French (1881-1907), drugs in the case of Stuart Perkoff (1930-1974)—or were seriously curtailed due to some bizarre occurrence. The formalist poet Henri Coulette's second book, *The Family Goldschmitt* (1971), for example, was accidentally destroyed by his publisher, Scribner's, and never reprinted. Coulette ended up sliding into alcoholism and didn't publish a third book in his lifetime. Other native L.A. poets like Jayne Cortez, Dennis Cooper, David Trinidad and Kim Rosenfield simply left the city. In the past fifty years, several poets have decided to stay or move here and to become very accomplished—Paul Vangelisti, Will Alexander, David St. John, the late Wanda Coleman and Amy Gerstler are a few names that come to mind—and so one wonders what lies in store for the future. But even these figures don't have a hold on the experimental poetry community in the way that John Ashbery or Bernadette Mayer, for example, do in New York.

The recent *trend of relational aesthetics*, artworks that accentuate the very act of joining together or communicating, seems natural for a city—often referred to as a conglomeration of villages—that is more or less divided against itself due to the great distances one has to travel just to attend a literary event, go to work or pay a visit to a friend. I'm borrowing the term “relational aesthetics” from Nicholas Bourriaud, who writes that it is

a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space. [T]he role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever scale chosen by the artist.

Once again, the subject, and by extension the lyrical subject, is contested; the background or the network assumes the foreground where the central character, the writer, once thrived. For my purposes, I could place under the relational aesthetics rubric any number of publishing, fund-raising and participatory writing projects that I've attended in Los Angeles at galleries such as LACE or in the backyards of small press publishers. An emblematic online venture, Mathew Timmons' sound poem *The Arc of Noise*, involved callers reading the score to the poem into voicemail as Timmons turned the pages in a video posted online; Timmons then mixed down the various voices of the callers into an abstract chorus of participants who never met each other. Given that there's no pedestrian artistic "quarter" or neighborhood where organic interactions take place, without Facebook and Google maps, it is quite easy never to run into another writer from the community for months; because everyone has to drive home, after-reading parties and bar hopping rarely extend beyond a few relatively sober hours. It's worth noting, in this context, that one of the first major poetry publications in Los Angeles was a journal called *Trace* (1952-1970) edited by James Boyer May which didn't publish poetry so much as chart and critique small press publications in the U.S. and elsewhere.

A strong influence on the experimental writing community is the *CalArts MFA program* which offers a degree in "writing" and not distinct genres. In fact, students are encouraged to create works between genres and even to incorporate language from critical theory and art discourse into their works. The program's webpage states: "Moving away from established models of both 'fine writing' and 'academic writing,' the Program does not draw hard distinctions between 'creative' and 'critical' modes. All students are expected to attend closely to questions of form and aesthetics, as well as to the historical and critical contexts of literary work." One of the several CalArts conferences held at REDCAT added a word

and maybe a genre, Noulipo, an updating of the interests of the French writing group the Oulipo, to the critical vocabulary on postmodern poetics. The relatively young group of creative writing professors at CalArts generally work between genres—Maggie Nelson, for example, has published a novel, a book of poems, a mixed-genre essay and a critical work—and it is far more likely for CalArts students to remain in Los Angeles after graduating than it is for other programs in the area. Professors like Matias Viegner and Christine Wertheim regularly attend literary events while, in their own practices, they hover somewhere between the art and literary worlds, the former by his collaborations with the art collective Fallen Fruit, the latter by working with her sister Margaret co-directing the Institute For Figuring, which "curates exhibitions and seminars on the intersections of art, science and mathematics."

There is something about the geography of Los Angeles which *lacks a proper civic center* that encourages something that I call the "cult of absence." This idea finds its inspiration in Roland Barthes' writing about the layout of Japanese cities in *Empire of Signs*, which he posits as being the most empty points on the geography, as opposed to American and European cities in which the center is the fullest.

Conforming to Western philosophy, which regards each center as the seat of all truth, our town centers are always full. They are places where the values of civilization are collected and condensed: values of spirituality (with churches), power (with offices), money (with banks), goods (with department stores) and words (with the 'agora': cafes and walks). Going downtown means encountering social "truth," taking part in the sublime richness of "reality." The city I'm referring to (Tokyo) presents this amazing paradox: it does have a center, but this center is empty. The whole city revolves around a place that is both forbidden and indifferent, an abode masked by vegetation, protected by moats, inhabited by an Emperor whom no one ever sees: literally, no one knows who does ever see him... Its center is no more than an evaporated ideal whose existence is not meant to radiate any kind of power, but to offer its own empty center to all urban movement as a form of support, by forcing perpetual traffic detours. Thus, it appears as an image that unfurls again and again in endless circles, around an empty core.

While it's probably true that most American cities have no proper "center," many like New York or Philadelphia have public places, "agora" in Barthes' term, where the classes and races mingle. This suggests an urbanist foundation for the common trope that Los Angeles identity has no history, and that people come here to wipe out their pasts. It's not for nothing that Reyner Banham in his *Los Angeles: The Four Ecologies* named the greater part of the city "the plains of the Id," where "Los Angeles is least distinctively itself. One of the reasons why the great plains of Id are so daunting is that this is where Los Angeles is most like other cities: Anywheresville/Nowheresville." This emptiness, void of the ethical demands of a conventional realism, allows the imagination to expand effortlessly and limitlessly into it. In *Notes on Conceptualisms*, Los Angeles poet Vanessa Place and New York poet Robert Fitterman write (noting Lacan): "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." The subject, that inviolable locus of the conventional lyric, is recognized as the "subject"—an ironic double—only to disappear in a hall of texts.

Lastly, added to this could be something about the *cult of violence* in L.A., whether in its legacy of gang activity from the 20s to today, the punk and hardcore scenes in the 70s/80s, or the Chris Burden-inflected wing of the performance art scene. In the case of conceptual writing, a certain cognitive violence adheres in works that are predicated not on traditional expressions of non-conformity—the counter-culture, the articulation of progressive values—but on an a-conformity that simply acknowledges no center.

All of this is, of course, speculation, and I don't hope to produce a sociological theory about why groups of writers, here or elsewhere, write the way they do. I'm convinced, however, that cities, even or particularly outside of the influence of New York, develop their own peculiar literary values even if they can only be detected as *traces*, perhaps never to have terms applied to them like "L.A. Noir" or "New York School." If they are "avant-garde" cultures, they often don't translate into money or even a national reputation and can foster local phenomena that are completely unique. My best example is that of the attention poets in Toronto pay to visual and sound poetry

(which in the United States are considered minor genres), particularly their own local heroes such as bpNichol and The Four Horsemen, as well as to the rare poetry book trade. It seemed, to me, that every poet in Toronto was a collector rather than merely purchaser of books much as nearly every poet I seem to meet in Los Angeles is also a publisher.

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Probably the most well-known work of conceptual writing from Los Angeles is Vanessa Place's *Statement of Facts*, the first of her trilogy of works *Tragodia* which all derive from the texts she writes as an attorney for the state of California. Place's clients are generally men who are appealing a sentence for sexual crimes; as a result, much of *Statement of Facts* describes in clinical, grotesque detail the testimonies of victims in these trials. The texture of this writing is at once visceral and euphemistic to an uncanny degree, full of lawyerly jargon such as referring to her client as "appellant" for the duration of the document.

A "statement of facts" is a text that simply states the properties of a case without the involvement of any sort of argument; that is, there is a deliberate, and indeed required, retreat not only from moralistic reasoning but emotional affect. Place's book has caused much controversy; it belongs to a sort of sub-tradition of conceptual writing, which now includes Kenneth Goldsmith's *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, that seems to take what has been called (by Stephen Colbert, of all people) a "vampiric" approach to horrific personal and historical events. When Place reads from *Statement of Facts*, dressed in her standard costume of professional black, she deliberately suppresses any sort of emotional response to the events being related, leaving the audience much with what the reader is left when opening the book: no sign posts signaling what sort of "reader response" is expected. In this way, it seems to resemble films in the Dogma 95 tradition in which musical cues—Wagnerian swells in Spielberg, dissonant and twelve-tonish discord in Hitchcock—are not permitted, leaving the viewer only with the raw action to which to respond.

During the interview, Ava said the first incident with appellant occurred during the first week of vacation after the second grade, which would have been the end of June, 2000. Ava told police she was sitting on

the couch when appellant put his hand in her pants and his finger against her private part; she said it felt “like hammers.” (RT 2119-2120, 2147) Ava said appellant touched her approximately ten more times on the couch that summer; about every time she visited. Once, appellant touched her vagina with his penis; during late July or early August, he put his private part “in a little way” until she felt “like stuff inside of mine, like water.” They were in the kitchen at the time. (RT 2120B2124, 2142, 2148, 2154)

Statement of Facts has been compared to Charles Reznikoff’s *Testimony* and *Holocaust*, both of which are works of poetry—they utilize line breaks, for example—which derive their texts from court cases concerning horrific disasters in the workplace in the former; courtroom accounts of the concentration camps in the latter. Reznikoff chose to not include the judgments in any of these trials and merely included, in somewhat edited form, the “facts” much like Place. But another lineage might be the works of Los Angeles poets who seem to gravitate toward, without casting judgment on, tales of eccentric, even criminal, human behavior such as by Charles Bukowski and Dennis Cooper; the latter of whom wrote many poems early in his career expressing a desire for having sex with or even raping young boys. But while the fictional aspect of Cooper’s poems was always apparent—he went on to become a well known novelist in the California gothic genre, something of a spin-off from the “Brat Pack” novels of Brett Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney—the absence of any possibility for a satirical element in *Statement of Facts* is both unsettling and, in a singular way, unconscionable. Along with starting Vanessa Place Inc, her own “trans-national corporation whose sole mission is to design and manufacture objects to meet [your] poetic needs,” Place most recently published *Boycott*, a détournement of fifteen iconic feminist texts in which all references to women were changed to references to men.

On the opposite end of the conceptual spectrum is the book of lyric poems, *Your Country is Great*, by poet and publisher Ara Shirinyan which celebrates the “greatness” of every country on the planet, small and large. In many ways, the book can also be seen as part of a related movement in experimental poetry, Flarf, which derives much of its contents from the strange, vulgar, goofy shit that flies around the internet. But whereas much Flarf can read like Dada or Language poetry with a more frenetic,

VANESSA PLACE

victim if she didn't cooperate. The victim had a rash on her neck for a month and a half from the choking, experienced a return of seizures she'd had when younger, and became pregnant as a result of the rape and had the child. Appellant went to prison for this offense. (RT 4:343-347, 5:663-664)

The victim of the 1982 sodomy conviction was the fourteen-year-old son of appellant's live-in girlfriend: appellant had been out on parole for six months when he began anally sodomizing the boy. There were multiple incidents of appellant overpowering the boy, sometimes pushing his head into a pillow to muffle his cries. Appellant also threatened the boy. Once, appellant sodomized the boy in the back seat of a car while appellant's brother was driving. On another occasion, appellant drove the boy to a secluded lighthouse and sodomized him. The boy was terrorized by the offenses, and subsequently went into counseling. (RT 4:347-349)

After determining appellant was convicted of the requisite offenses, Dr. Owen examined appellant's sexual and criminal history, relying upon The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders for the consensus opinion of what constitutes a mental disorder. The DSM-IV is published by the American Psychiatric Association, is regularly updated, and is “the accepted manual” in the psychiatric profession. According to Dr. Owen, a “diagnosis” refers to a medical condition/disorder of a pathological nature. The SVP law does not require a DSM diagnosis, just a “diagnosable disorder,” though all agreed-upon diagnoses are in the DSM. (RT 4:349-351, 4:402-404)

Dr. Owen diagnosed appellant with Paraphilia, Not Otherwise Specified (NOS), nonconsenting persons, and personality disorder with narcissistic antisocial features. According to Dr. Owen, paraphilia is “in the book,” on page 566; a rapist is also given as an example in the DSM casebook, though the example isolates arousal triggered by lack of consent,² and the manual is the greater authority. Paraphilia is a condition that lasts a minimum of six months and involves behaviors, fantasies or urges towards, in appellant's case, nonconsenting persons. There is a “thinking element” to the disorder; appellant has a problem with entitlement, and seeing women as sexual objects. Appellant has an emotional problem: shallow emotions, aggressiveness, and callousness, and behavioral problems. Appellant has seventeen years of behavioral problems; the requisite six month diagnostic

² Dr. Owen felt appellant was aroused by lack of consent because he would rape though he had an available consensual partner. He did not believe the fact appellant asked for consent was relevant. (RT 5:674-675)

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Vanessa Place, from *Statement of Facts*, *Tragodia*.

ebullient governing spirit, *Your Country is Great* is composed entirely of sentences that begin or contain within them the phrase “[country name] is great.” Editing is kept to a minimum such that even misspellings are included; consequently, because each of the sentences is taken from a different website, the affect switches dramatically between them:

Brazil is great; amazing food, intelligent people and great weather. The most important thing is to know your environment because there is a lot of crime.

Brazil is great exporter of ores of iron and its concentrates, airplanes, chemical soy, folders wooden, automobiles, footwear, orange juice, coffee etc.

Brazil is great so far:
All countries are great,

just some places are better for me.
But one man's heaven,
is another man's hell.

Brazil is great for cheap bikinis that look like a
million dollars.

Brazil is great! There are so many cool things
to do here. I hope you like it as much as I do,
even though Brazil is very different than home.

bRAZil iS greAt bUt EuRpEaN CuonTrYs rE AlSo
bEtteR hA. iTHeNk EnGIAnD oR nEiTheRIAnD
HoLDS THE TroPhY BITTInG brAZil iN FiNAl aS
eNGIAnD HaS AlSo

Brazil is great!
And the people are friendly,
fun, and very welcoming!
I am working in the Bioengineering Division at the
InCor Heart Institution.

This seems Ashberian in drawing a subtle humor from the most mundane of observations, invoking Surrealism not from the operations of the unconscious but from the way we give over to our natural inclination, in an effort to communicate, to gravitate toward banalities. *Your Country is Great* is, to this extent, dialogic, even heteroglossic; it has a positive spirit in that it celebrates globalization and thrives on positive interpersonal relations. Consequently, it dethrones the United States as the only subject of interest to an American poet even as it is quite impossible for Shirinyan to have visited all or even most of these countries.

A subtle subtext to the use of the word “great” as a hinge word is the double-usage, in both positive and negative valences, of the word in standard American speech; you could, for example, really mean something is quite excellent by uttering “that’s great!” but express disapproval by murmuring “oh, great!” when beset by some minor misfortune. Shirinyan’s poetry, due to the programmatic nature of its composition, avoids the latter but sarcasm lurks like Polonius behind the arras. *Your Country is Great*, consequently, develops on the long history of parataxis—organization in the manner of a list—in American poetry starting with Whitman and fully exploited by the Language poets, particularly those who practiced what Ron

Silliman has dubbed “the new sentence.” But like much of conceptual writing, Shirinyan’s book is devoted to full accessibility, its data spilling down the page from several origins unknown but largely, in that special way, uninteresting.

Another well-known work of conceptual writing from L.A. is *Credit* by writer, artist and publisher Mathew Timmons. *Credit* was conceived to be the most expensive book one could offer on the print-on-demand website Lulu; for this reason, it is 800 pages in full color (though most of the pages are in black and white), measuring 8.5 by 11 inches, and only available in hardcover, priced at \$199. As for content, *Credit* is composed entirely of scans of snail mail from credit card companies imploring the impecunious Timmons to sign up for an account; along with high resolution, color scans of the envelopes and internal documentation are OCRs (optical character recognition) of the texts of the letters and envelopes. Some of the text is “redacted” to hide details of Timmons’ own financial situation at the time; because Timmons doesn’t correct the OCRs of the advertisements, much of the text of *Credit* is made up of gibberish that the computer put in place of words it didn’t recognize.

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■ % Intro APR

■ Annual Fee

See inside for details.

PRSRF STD us POSTAGE PAID CARD SERVICES

If there is a somatic element to this book, as there often is in conceptual literature (such as Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Soliloquy*, for which he transcribed every word he spoke for an entire week), it is in the very abject nature of scanning and recording each rejected credit card offer for the length of time it took to create 800 pages of material. Unlike Goldsmith’s work, in which the actor/artist is often a central figure, contributing to the myth of the artist as stoic automaton, *Credit* figures the artist as embattled by the onslaught of largely anonymous, and no doubt algorithmically determined, mailings from financial institutions with which we, the readers, know he should have no truck. Timmons, who is also a sound poet, has performed readings of the book in a breakneck speed as if emphasizing or exaggerating the very junk-like nature of the textual activity that underlies the nanosecond-long transactions of major financial institutions.



Mathew Timmons, from *Credit*.

As with *Statement of Facts*, *Credit* offers a bird's eye view of the operations of bureaucracy, but in this case it is a bureaucracy with which we are all, unfortunately, familiar; we are hardly voyeurs on the misfortunes of others so much as implicated in the very dynamics of a form of institutional oppression. (The recession put an end to these ridiculous mailings though I've noted an uptick in such offers recently.) Timmons has published many works that could be considered conceptual writing, such as *The New Poetics*, a series of prose manifestoes which derive from web text and announce the arrival of a plethora of new schools of thought: *The New Art*, *The New Blood*, *The New Christianity*, etc.

Timmons' Insert Blanc Press recently published *Fright Catalog* by Joseph Mosconi, a sequence of 91 very short poems printed in high-gloss, magazine format with full color pages, taking his cue from Los Angeles painter Ed

Ruscha, who is part of a whole sub-genre of L.A. artists—Allen Ruppersberg, William Levitt, Guy de Cointet, William Poundstone, John Baldessari and Raymond Pettibon among them—who make text a prominent part of their decidedly low-brow pop aesthetics. While the poems, for all of their Dada whimsy bordering on the opacities of Language Poetry, are conventionally “written,” the color scheme of each page of *Fright Catalog* was determined by an online color theme generator. The text rests, in a large non-serif font, in the center of each page, not unlike several of Ruscha's paintings, especially those published in his book *They Called Her Styrene*, in which single words or short phrases—“Legs,” “Things,” “The End,” “Spattering Flak,” are a few random examples—are rendered in absurdly sumptuous style in pastel. Occasionally, Mosconi's poems almost seem lifted from the words of everyday life—“PREFERRING HUMAN SKIN OVER ANIMAL FUR” runs one of them—while in other cases they are more determinably convulsive in the best Surrealist tradition.

What the color schemes, center justification and large format style seem to inject in the poems is a new level of affect that wouldn't otherwise obtain; Mosconi is aware of this as he writes in a very short preface to the book: “Every color theme addresses your feelings and is employed for certain moral ends.” The target, if there is a target, to this satirical design is the seduction of color; a sort of visual Musak, in any number of catalogs seeking to entice us to buy a lot of ephemeral, preternaturally useless, stuff. But something else is going on here, as the large text seems to allude to public signage, even to propaganda posters or the mural tradition of the Latin American community in Los Angeles. Mosconi seems to have an addiction to large typefaces; his previous book, *Galvanized Iron on the Citizens' Band*, similarly employed large text, but this time in a conventional serif font in black with left justification. These books are especially fun to read on public transportation as one is always aware that the text could be read from the other side of the bus or train. Mosconi's books create the opportunity for a spontaneous agora out of what is usually considered a private, cerebral event, the act of reading.

Tweaking the public and private in a different way is Kate Durbin, a poet who identifies as a performance and visual artist as much as she does a writer. Durbin maintains a lively YouTube presence with a channel containing elaborate video selfies such as “iPrincess,” a Ryan Trecartin-

AN EPIPHANIC VOMITING OF BLOOD

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Joseph Mosconi, from *Fright Catalog*.

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esque self-portrait in which we see the author video herself in the bathroom mirror as she dons a brassiere made of children's stickers, green lipstick, a pink turban and layers of costume jewelry. Thus attired, Durbin then recites, in a bratty Valley girl voice, a series of what sounds like Facebook status updates, tweets and other forms of short-form social networking texts about the body, love, self-image and celebrity. Founder of the website *Gaga Stigmata*, Durbin's obsession with celebrity was manifest in her first book, *Ravenous Audience*, which featured a convincing imaginary interview with Marilyn Monroe in which the actress is depicted as sassily manipulative of her public image, and a vivid retelling of the life of silent film star Clara Bow whose thick Brooklyn accent deterred many fans when the talkies hit (but who in fact continued to be very successful).

Ravenous Audience was also largely inspired by the films of Catherine Breillat, the French director known for her graphic, clinical studies of adolescent female sexuality and violence of men against women. Many of these poems—which often take their titles after the films they are responding to, such as *Romance* and *Fat Girl*—can be considered a form of *close viewing*, in that Durbin takes the films as opportunities to meditate on her own fears and desires while synthesizing her interior shadowplay of emotions with the film itself. The poems are often tissues of images and dialogue in which the subjectivity of the author is discernible largely as an organizer or respondent; the writing is powerful in a traditional way, exploring a wide range of poetics forms, but for the most part conceals the lyrical “I,” the revealed, vulnerable author most readers of poetry yearn for.

In her second book, *E! Entertainment*, Durbin maintains this practice of close viewing while deleting her authorial role nearly entirely. Most of the chapters, with titles like “Wives Shows,” “Kim’s Fairytale Wedding,” “Anna Nicole Show” and “Dynasty,” are transcriptions of the events and dialogue of reality TV shows involving female celebrities rendered with an artless simplicity and obsessive devotion to what, in this Möbius strip of “reality” and “fiction,” can only be called the “facts”:

Sister Kylie lies on a beige couch, one flip-flop dangling off her foot. She scrolls through her iPhone.

“It’s just too quiet over here for me,” says

Mom, picking up the Blackberry and looking at it.

“Rarrm!” roars Sister Kylie, making a claw motion.

“Kim!” shouts a woman’s voice.

“Yeah!” says Kim’s voice, far away.

“There you are,” says a woman’s voice.

Mom looks up in our direction, raises her manicured eyebrows.

“Guys, I could not wake up. Like literally my eyes are closed,” says Kim, suddenly materializing at the dining room table. In the center of the table is a giant gold champagne bottle, along with little black and white cakes on the silver cake tree. There is a silver coffee pot and white porcelain sugar and creamer holders.

Kim’s hair hangs, wet. She isn’t wearing makeup. She has on a black silk robe and she looks wide.

“Good morning,” says a man in a suit, carrying a giant, tiered bouquet of white roses into the room. The bouquet sits in a thing like a wedding cake.

“Ooh,” says Mom.

“Oh,” says Sister Kendall.

As in Fiona Banner’s *The Nam*, we are presented here with an artificial reality conveyed journalistically, but whereas Banner chose lively, provocative historical material of which she gave an engaged, *cinéma vérité*-style account, Durbin positions herself more modestly, as the invisible, private consumer of what—to many of us, at least—are largely vacuous, or “nutritionless” in Goldsmith’s phrase, events. Unlike the Breillat poems that depict adolescence as full of pain and a sense of incompleteness, the plastic realities of *E! Entertainment* subsume doubt and longing in the facile presentation of fairytale lifestyles.

Several other books by Los Angeles writers could easily fit into this discussion if only for certain strong conceptual elements in their writing and organization. Andrew Maxwell’s book of aphorisms, *Peeping Mot*, for example, metatags its entries with titles like OBJECTIONS and EXTRACTS making the book something like a paper database. Harryette Mullen’s widely acclaimed *Sleeping with the Dictionary* is an anthology of Oulipian poetic forms, while the individual chapters of Sesshu Foster’s *World Ball Notebook* each engage in unique, highly formal language games while maintaining a loyalty to describing

the realities of East Los Angeles. Aaron Kunin's *The Sore Throat & Other Poems* limits itself to a 200-word vocabulary which the poet garnered from his own involuntary hand signals, while Douglas Kearney's *The Black Automaton* is a visual smorgasbord that, like Mosconi's *Fright Catalog*, re-envision the page as a public wall effaced by Dada propaganda. Christine Wertheim's *+|me'S-pace* is an elaborately typeset 'pataphysical essay on the "atomic" elements of language, while Matias Viegner's *2500 Random Things About Me Too* is exactly that, conveyed entirely in 25-element lists, some of which he initially posted to Facebook. Mark Danielewski's *Only Revolutions*, a sequel to his popular *House of Leaves*, is an elaborately constrained novel that is 360 pages long, each page spread containing exactly 360 words, half running across the top (90 on each page) conveying the perspective of the hero Sam, half upside down along the bottom conveying that of the heroine, Hailey. More conventional conceptual writing— if conventions are, indeed, settling into place—include Danielle Adair's *From JBAD, Lessons Learned*, a collection of phrases gathered during a brief stint as an embedded journalist in Jalalabad, and Harold Abramowitz and Dan Richert's (*!x==[33]*) *Book 1 Volume 1 by .UNFO*, which is a reformatting into 33 syllable lines of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, a 776 page book that raises the allegory of pure production inherent in conceptual writing to gruesome levels.

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[Cool] is the shadow ethos of knowledge work. It is the "unknowing" or unproductive, knowledge work by which those in the pipeline from the academy to the corporation "gesture" toward an identity recompensing them for work in the age of identity management. Whether watching cool graphics on the Web or cool dinosaurs in that Spielberg film allegorizing the fate of knowledge workers in the age of global competition (where the real action occurs in the out-of-control computer control room behind the leisure theme park), knowledge workers are never far from the cubicle, where only the style of their work lets them dream they are more than they "know."
—Alan Liu, *The Laws of Cool*

These works seem to exemplify, to varying degrees, what I think is becoming a sort of "L.A. Brand" of conceptual writing, perhaps an information-age analog to the first generation of L.A. "cool" associated with jazz and hard-edge abstraction.

Each of these works valorizes production, even "high" production, as an end in itself, eschewing the trappings normally associated with the grassroots underground such as the mimeo machine. Each deletes or minimizes conventional subjectivity even as, for the most part, they wish to tell stories or even gesture toward lyric poetry. Each seems to address on some level a breakdown of the private/public divide, and occasionally gestures toward the absence of civic spaces that are common to other cities: Shirinyan by displacing his own country from the center of the world, Place by taking us into the darkest corners of human immorality, Mosconi by blowing up his font size so that even reading from a magazine becomes a public act, Timmons by making a public show of a very private, largely unproductive, if not somewhat insane, activity and Durbin by disappearing entirely into the TV even as her "reality" shows depict events and neighborhoods just a few miles from her home. And though most of these works trouble some ethical dimension, even violently so, none of these works display a moral edge; that is, they don't want to shame or seduce you into changing your life, but rather put you face to face with tons of raw, often controversial, occasionally crippling boring, linguistic and sensual data with the decisions for action left entirely up to you. Finally, each work seems to derive some inspiration from the city's longish tradition in the textual and visual arts extending back to that ur-product of conceptual writing, Allen Ruppersberg's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, while largely ignoring, to my mind, the native tradition in poetry.



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