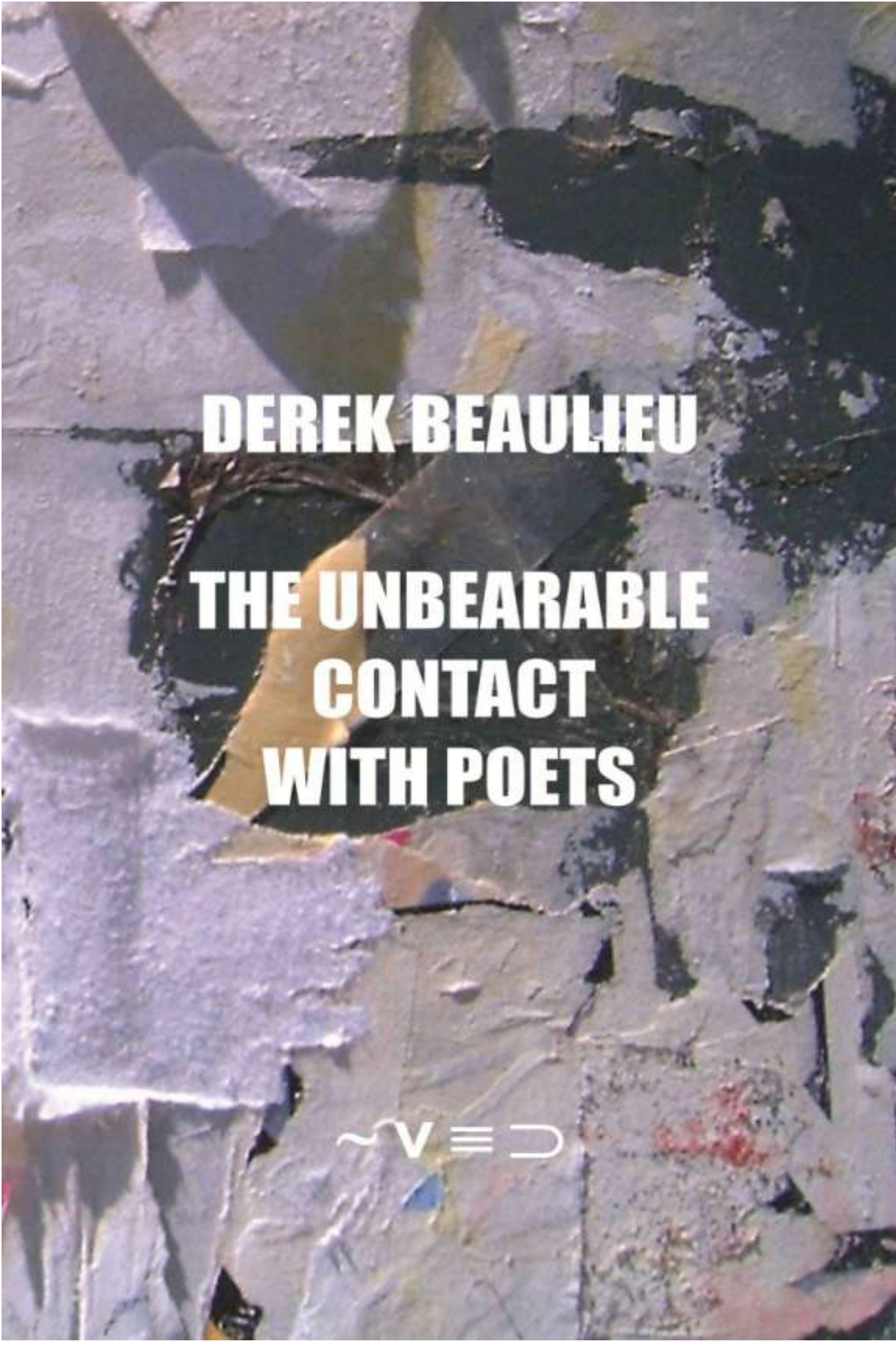
DEREK BEAULIEU
THE UNBEARABLE
CONTACT
WITH POETS

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***if p then q classics***

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"The earth herself can no longer suffer
the unbearable contact with poets."
— Guillaume Apollinaire

For Madeleine

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**That's not writing**

"That's not writing, that's typewriting."
— Truman Capote on Jack Kerouac

"That's not writing, that's plumbing."
— Samuel Beckett on William S. Burroughs

That's not writing, that's typing.
That's not writing, that's someone else typing.
That's not writing, that's googling.
That's not writing, that's pasting.
That's not writing, that's blogging.
That's not writing, that's wasted, unproductive, tweaking time.
That's not writing, that's stupid.
That's not writing, that's a coloring book.
That's not writing, that's coming up with ideas.
That's not writing, that's waiting.
That's not writing, that's mad scribble.
That's not writing, that's printing and lettering.
That's not writing, that's tape-recording
That's not writing, that's word-processing.
That's not writing, that's following the herd.
That's not writing, that's copying and pasting.
That's not writing, that's directing.
That's not writing, that's using high "polluting" words to confuse readers.
That's not writing, that's aggregating, and there are already plenty of aggregators out there.
That's not writing, that's printing.
That's not writing, that's art.

That's not writing, that's Tourette's.

That's not writing, that's posing.

That's not writing, that's button-mashing, and anyone can do that.

That's not writing, that's vandalism.

That's not writing, that's acting.

That's not writing, that's blabbing.

That's not writing, that's hiking.

That's not writing, that's just a knife he's using to eat pie with.

That's not writing, that's bullying.

That's not writing, that's dentistry.

That's not writing, that's just endless blathering.

That's not writing, that's yelling.

That's not writing, that's butchery!

That's not writing, that's a fortune cookie!

That's not writing, that's emoting.

That's not writing, that's just dressing it up after.

That's not writing, that's just playing around.

That's not writing, that's daydreaming.

That's not writing, that's showing off.

That's not writing, that's keyboarding.

That's not writing, that's calligraphy.

That's not writing, that's mindless pasting.

That's not writing, that's an action flick.

That's not writing, that's a puddle.

That's not writing, that's a tragedy.

That's not writing, that's assembly line mass production.

That's not writing, that's transcribing.

That's not writing, that's computer-generated text.

That's not typing, that's data entry.

# transcend transcribe transfigure transform transgress: contemporary concrete poetry by women

if poetry is going to reclaim even a shred of relevancy for a contemporary audience then poets must become competitive for their readership and viewership as graphic design advertising and contemporary design culture expands to redefine and rewrite how we understand communication poetry has become ruefully ensconced in the traditional if as brion gysin argued **writing is fifty years behind painting** then poetry is even further behind contemporary design the vast majority of poets are trapped in the 20th (if not the 19th) century hopelessly reiterating tired tropes mcdonalds golden arches the nike swoosh and the apple logo best represent the contemporary descendants of the modernist poem poet lew welch famously wrote raids ubiquitous advertising slogan **raid kills bugs dead** as a copywriter at advertising firm foote cone and belding in 1966 los angeles-based poet vanessa place argues that

> today we are of an age that understands corporations are people too and poetry is the stuff of placards. or vice versa.

the stuff of poetrycraftsmanship and handiworkas opposed to the industry of advertising and business relegates poetry to a role out of touch with the driving economies of the culture advertisers and graphic designers use the fragments of language to fully realize emotional social and political meansand in doing so have left poets with only the most rudimentary tools in doing the same concrete poetrythe 20th centurys first truly international poetic formwas founded in the late

1950s by a cadre of poets who were captivated by the blending of modernist poetic tropes with the cool efficient use of language found in contemporary advertising campaigns these early efforts reek of a controlled **mad men** aesthetic like the patriarchal androcentric environment of amcs drama concrete poetry was dominated by key personalities who issued manifestos and decrees and reveled in san-serif explorations of the evocative nature of type (much as this essay is reproduced in futura and echoes hansjorg mayers idiosyncratic typography) kenneth goldsmith founder of **ubuweb** the premiere online repository of the avant-garde argues that

> early concrete poems are rarely illusionistic; instead, unadorned sans-serif language inhabits the plane of the white page.

goldsmith continues evoking art critic clement greenberg and describes the aesthetic of concrete poetry in the 1950s

> as greenberg says, [the] shapes flatten and spread in the dense, two-dimensional atmosphere. in doing so, the emotional temperature is intentionally kept cool, controlled and rational.

discussion and criticism of concrete poetry continues to center on male figures like eugen gomringer hansjцrg mayer haroldo and augusto de campos dйcio pignatari all of whose personalities and practices dominate the discoursesuggesting that women were relegated to minor or merely occasional roles there are notable exemptions to this male dominance the most exemplary early female concrete poet is mary ellen solt solt is best known as editor of **concrete poetry: a world view** (1968) a major international anthology of concrete poetry and related poetic statements solts **flowers in concrete**

(1966) and **the people mover: a demonstration poem** (1978) assert her voice as antonio bessa argues

> not by simply emulating [her male counterparts], but by bringing up themes and concerns close to her own life: the flowers in her garden [] her husband [] and her children.

but the themes and concerns that bessa asserts sadly seem to reify sexist gender roles relegating women to the subjects of flowers spousal dedication and child-rearing concrete poet haroldo de campos posited concrete poetry as **a notion of literature not as craftsmanship but [...] as an industrial process** where the poem is a **prototype** rather than the **typical handiwork of artistic artistry** this formulation categorizes solts work as **craftsmanship** and **handiwork** isolated from the **industry** of male concrete poets tellingly only 4 of the 80 contributors to **concrete poetry: a world view** are women including solt

*

contemporary concrete poets fiona banner jen bervin and erica baum work against the traditional notions of feminine writing and trouble the line between craftsmanship handiwork and industry on friday october 11 2012 patrons of denvers museum of contemporary art attended a moment of sartorial calm before the weekends festivities beganthe vernissage of **postscript: writing after conceptual art** the largest exhibit ever staged at the MCA **postscript: writing after conceptual art** was the first major exhibition of conceptual writingthe 21st centurys first truly international poetic formand text-based art and included internationally-renowned text artists and writers building upon the tenets and dicta of conceptual art and con-

crete poetry that evening patrons and members of the MCA were granted a private early viewing of **postscript: writing after conceptual art** (which toured to torontos illustrious power plant contemporary art gallery in 2013 and michigan state universitys prestigious eli and edythe broad art museum in 2014) a few pieces were still being unpacked and the final touches were being placed on the installation but the feeling in the air was one of expectation and excitement curators andrea andersson and nora burnett abrams contextualized the exhibition explained their curatorial mandate and hosted a guided tour punctuated by impromptu presentations by several participants in the exhibition as andersson and abrams guided us through the exhibition guests had their first opportunity to see exemplary work by fiona banner jen bervin and erica baum turner prize nominee fiona banner aided by several assistants was still constructing her epic **1066** and thus took only a moment away from the exhausting process to speak to the eager audience **1066** builds upon banners previous texts **top gun** (1993) and **the nam** pieces she considers **still-films** **top gun** now in the tate moderns permanent collection is a handwritten subjective account of the cinematic action in the tom cruise film of the same name **the nam** (published in a now exceedingly-rare edition by frith street books in 1997 but thankfully excerpted in craig dworkin and kenneth goldsmiths **against expression: an anthology of conceptual writing**) extends banners textual practice by subjectively describing the action of several hollywood films about the vietnam war over the course of a thousand pages banner writes through **apocalypse now** **the deer hunter** **hamburger hill** **full metal jacket** **born on the fourth of july** and **platoon**

creating an inundation of description

> they haul him up off the bed, hook him up. cmon captain, lets take a shower! hes heavy like a corpse. they talk him along, cmon captain, mind how you go, the merest hint of amusement in their voices. the officer says, just stand him underneath this tap. he turns it on, a jet of water spurts down onto willard. he screams out, like it really hurts. but it turns into, is nothing compared to, the continuous beat of helicopter blades, wiping like crazy and coming down onto you.

the text continues unabated creating in fiona banners description **a tracing rather than a re-presentation** with **1066** banner shifts her gaze from hollywood depictions of the vietnam war to an 11th century depiction of the battle of hastings the bayeux tapestry is a 230-foot long embroidered depiction of events leading up to the norman conquest of england and thus fits well within banners ongoing engagement with the weapons and depictions of war **1066** like banners **top gun** and **the nam** consists entirely of textual description of the action depicted in another media in this case the medieval embroidery of the bayeux tapestry much as john cage wrote through other authors texts creating new compositions banners writing-through of the bayeux tapestrya veritable **still film** in and of itselfcreates a new text by pointing and selecting banner and her assistants painted every letter in **1066** in a rough-hewn italic typeface that echoes the invading and repelling lean of english and french forces across the tapestrys depicted landscape the overwritten palimpsest foregrounds the act of writing through the processual act of constant recreation that comes with reading and looking charles dickens

sniffed at the bayeux tapestry as

> certainly the work of amateurs; very feeble amateurs at the beginning and very heedless some of them too.

today the bayeux tapestry is widely studied reproduced and considered by comic book theorist scott mccloud as one of the earliest european examples of sequential art and as such as a forerunner of the modern comic book the scrolls captions in english-inflected latin provide textual context for contemporary viewers much as comic book caption boxes or motion picture title cards

> HIC VVILLELM DUX ALLOQUITUR SUIS MILITIBUS UT PREPARARENT SE VIRILITER ET SAPIENTER AD PRELIUM CONTRA ANGLORUM EXERCITUM / HIC CECIDERUNT LEVVINE ET GYRTD FRATRES HAROLDI REGIS
>
> [here duke william speaks to his knights to prepare themselves manfully and wisely for the battle against the army of the english / here fell dead leofwine and gyrth, brothers of king harold]

eschewing the propaganda of the original scroll banners **tracing rather than a re-presentation** is both intimate and monumental one of the main tenets of conceptual writing is the act of selection; here banner asserts transcription and textual tracing as writerly acts the original tapestry displays similar acts of pointing (**here duke william here fell dead**) presented in a highly personalized formevery figure every piece of text is sewn by hand lending an importance to every gesture depicted banners depiction of the bayeux tapestry is also an act of pointing: she decides which figures to describe which actions to relate and what language to use

> the guys down on the ground, arrow in the side of his

face. another takes one in the hand, cries like a beast as he pulls it out.

banners account of the images on the tapestry also suggest her **arsewoman in wonderland** (2001) in which she screen-printed a billboard-sized description of porn actors performances in the film of the same name every bead of sweat every spasm of muscle every time an actor **crie[d] like a beast** is textually represented banners description engages directly with the action depicted not as captioning but as a subjective description of events **1066** confronts the categorization of both handwriting and embroidery as craftsmanship and handiwork banner implicates both into the most industrious of economies the military jen bervin another contributor to **postscript: writing after conceptual art**came to literary prominence with **nets** (2004) in which she erases the majority of the words in shakespeares sonnets in order to create fragile poems of beautiful telegraph-like brevity from the remains shakespeares 2nd sonnet is for example transformed merely by occluding unnecessary words into **a weed of small worth / asked / to be new made** once again the narrative of men as primary figures is erased as bervin asserts **a weed of small worth** in the canonical work of shakespeare the **weed of small worth / asked / to be new made** is an ongoing concern in bervins work as she harvests minor or overlooked poetic gestures emerging from the literary ground of other writers work her melancholic art focuses on creation through absence bervin writes through the whole of literature and creates a text that is **open porous possiblea divergent elsewhere** inspired by modernist fiber artist anni albers bervin uses the typewriter to compose weaving diagrams bervin

places herself in a poetic lineage starting with albers use of the typewriter for weaving patterns instead of the poetic theories of american modernist poets like charles olson (a colleague of albers at black mountain college) and robert creeley olson and creeley contemporaries with gomringer the de campos brothers and pignatari suggest the poetic use of the typewriter to measure and chart the breath line much as composers use the stave and bars of sheet music the typewriter in the hands of albers and bervin is no longer an office machine used to create and measure the male voice bervin silences the office and the male poetic breath line in favor of the grid created by the warp and weft of weaving asserting the text in textile bervin writes that she **typed these works on a brother correctronic 50 typewriter** and continues

> i think of them as scores to be performed on a loom or with needle and thread. all of them were made following intensive time spent weaving cloth structures on the loom but refer back to draft notation, the preweaving diagrams a weaver creates or consults. they were inspired by anni albers typewriter studies from black mountain college (the impetus for my desire to study weaving). it was quickly apparent to me that her profound understanding of cloth structure gave her a unique perspective on the gridded space the typewriter offers.

bervins assertion that the typewriter creates scores for performance also makes weaving a readerly and writerly act since weaving patterns can be executed entirely on a writing machine extending her typewriter-driven work bervin also has an ongoing engagement with emily dickinsons manuscripts

and correspondence bervins work in **postscript** is excerpted from a series of quilt-sized fiber responses to emily dickinsons poetry manuscripts notoriously reclusive and agoraphobic dickinson created a series of fascicles (hand-sewn packets of manuscript pages) that featured not only her handwritten poems but also her idiosyncratic amendments insertions and editorial marks bervin uses these marks as inspiration for her large-scale embroidered works; each piece transforms dickinsons palimpsests of crosses marginalia tics and textual insertions into fragile marks formed from thousands of individual stitches and placed in testament to the hand-sewing that dickinson herself did when compiling her fascicles dickinsons **uvre** was formed with poems and letters her fascicles and her own physical absence bervin erases dickinsons poems in favor of dickinsons private editorial marksthe marks that werent exposed in correspondence bervins fragile stitches echo the thread that held dickinsons own books together and stood as a privateand unknown until after her deathtestament to her poetic craft bervin in **nets** in her typewriter weaving patterns and especially in her responses to dickinson creates melancholic testaments to poetry secluding the original author in favor of erasure private marks and maps for creation **postscript: writing after conceptual art** contributor erica baum also poeticizes our minor gestures baum transforms a reading actthe motion of dog-earing a books pageinto a writerly one baums **dog ear** (2011) consists of a series of photographs each of which lushly reproduces the image of the folded corner of a pulp novel by dog-earing a page a reader employs the pages of a book as a new tool not only does each page impart the text of the written work it also

can be used to mark the readers progress through that very text gently flipping through any used book reveals the ephemeral record of the previous ownersnotes underlining marginalia bookmarks (accidental or intended)and the dog-eared corner creasing each of these remnants marks the readers progress through the book; they map the imposition of life outside the novel on to the writing inside the novel with **dog ear** baum documents how each memory-assisting fold that the reader places within a book becomes a generative act creating a new latent text a uniting concern of **post-script: writing after conceptual art** is the engagement with the materiality of text and writing that the information we receive and filter generate and propagate has a physical presence beyond the semantic baums engagement with the physicality of text is unique within the purview of the exhibition as she engages not only with the page but also with how readers manipulate and destroy books while reading **dog ear** not only documents how the place-holding fold affects the book it also proves how the folding creates something new to read baums poems echo and extend the ideas of canadian artist brion gysin and his notorious colleague william s. burroughs in the 1950s gysin and burroughs rediscovered the compositional techniques of dadaist poet tristan tzara (the author of **how to make a dadaist poem** in 1920) in what they dubbed **cut-up** and **fold-in** writing a **fold-in** poem burroughs argues is created when the author

> place[s] a page of one text folded down the middle on a page of another text (my own or someone elses)the composite text is read across half from one text and half from the other.

gysin and burroughs collaborations are most famously documented in **the cut-up method of brion gysin** (1961) and **the third mind** (1978) gysin and burroughs like tzara before them proposed a democratic form of poetic composition anyone can pick up a pair of scissors or fold a page of the newspaper to create poetrybut baum extends that idea from a form that anyone **could** do to something that everyone **does** do dog-earing books is a ubiquitous habit by aestheticizing that minor gesturethe folding of a pages corner to mark a pause in readingshe asserts that the conceptual artistic act is an act of choosing the resultant texts in baums dog-eared pages can be read in multiple directions piling up like robert smithsons **a heap of language** and each direction releases a text unintended by the original author **dog ear** consists of reader-generated poems that use the destructive / productive folding of a page to both destroy (the original text is obscured) and produce (as the over-leaved text is revealed) a text that did not previously exist craig dworkin in his introduction to **the ubuweb anthology of conceptual writing** argues that conceptual writingas typified by **postscript** and baums **dog ear** is

> not so much writing in which the idea is more important than anything else as a writing in which the idea cannot be separated from the writing itself: in which the instance of writing is inextricably intertwined with the idea of writing: the material practice of *ecriture*.

baums **index** series (2000) extends her artistic focus on the materiality of the book to the typographic materiality of the indices of anonymous volumes of non-fiction each piece in **index** isolates and magnifies a series of entries from a books

index and each revels in the poetic juxtapositions of seemingly random text when placed in isolation the indexical nature of the text fades in preference of a new uncanny meaning viewers are left to imagine the potential volume that might include

> resolution of the week, 313, 314
> results, concrete, 271286
> reverie, 92, 154, 163, 172

imagined texts point to a self-help book promising profound reveries from dedicated attempts to stick to change-making resolutions; the life-changing effects of **results, concrete**but simultaneously that inference is locked within the readers imagination released only through the imposition of humanist poetic tropes on three indexical entries another excerpt from **index** provides a list of poetic strategies that embody her own investigative problematizing compositional techniques as well as those of her colleagues banner and bervin

> transcend, 399.
> transcribe, 271.
> transfigure, 801.
> transform, 801.
> transgress, 549.

each of these indexical instructionstranscend transcribe transfigure transform transgresspoints to a poetic direction exemplified in concrete poetry in conceptual writing and in the **oeuvres** of banner bervin and baum herself fiona banner jen bervin and erica baum represent the very best of contemporary concrete poetry and each assert a space within a tradition that discards the fallacy of craftsmanship and handiwork as antithetical to industrious poetics

*

judith copithorne has published over 40 books chapbooks and ephemeral items and has sustained a visual poetry practice for over 45 years beginning her exploration of concrete poetry in 1961 copithorne was deeply integrated in the communities around bill bissetts **blewointment** magazine and vancouvers sound gallery motion studio and intermedia copithornes early visual poetryas typified by her **release** (1969) **runes** (1970) and **arrangements** (1973)are a braided combination of drawing and writing these early books are **hand drawn** as the colophon of **runes** explains **poem-drawings** (as **release** is subtitled) occupying the liminal space between poetry and drawing writing and sketching her exemplary work from the 1960s and 1970s integrates a diaristic practice (especially in **arrangements**) that documents a domestic space centered on meditation and community 1969s **release** consists of a series of wisp-like ethereal hand-drawn texts that move through gestural fragments and slights of handwriting accumulated into florid yogic texts that move between mandala and map the suggestion that her pieces are drawn and not written and are hyphenated poem-drawings speaks to a textual hybridity which places looking on the same plane as reading with **arrangements** **runes** and **release** copithorne creates a visual poetry of looking and reading the domestic and the community judith copithornes work isnt limited to the hand-drawn poem-drawings of the 1960s and 1970s however she has also written several books of prose and textual poetry for example: **hearts tide** (prose 1972) **a light character** (poetry 1985) **carbon dioxide** (poetry 1992) and numerous other editions of visual poetry **horizon** (1992) displays a beautiful

engagement with typewriter stencil and photocopier degeneration to create a suite of wavering banners of textual detritus recently she has embraced digital means of composition and has had work featured through ditch and intermedia these digitally composed pieces reflect copithornes newer style in crisp mandalas of oversaturated textsdigital stained glass windows that are beautifully dependent on the saturated colours of the computer screen while still echoing the handmade

*

in caroline bergvalls **goan atom** (2001) **fig** (2005) and **meddle english** (2011) clarity is struck by a poly-linguistic instability as **speech fluency is an articulatory feat** that **presupposes the smooth functioning of speakings motor skills** each sound becomes a joint a hinge where meaning can be redirected an and / or node of exchange bergvall embraces the instability of translation and dialect in order to create a series of poems that operate as a poly-sexual stuttering space with each poem the reader becomes aware of the movements occurring in her mouth and the way that the muscles articulate difference each slide of the tongue around the palate each voice glottal becomes a moment of spoken strangeness under bergvalls hand english is no longer stable (as if it ever was) but embraces the poly-national voices of english as a second language english as taught and learned and english as enforced expectation

> i live in a time where english has exploded way beyond the national. its being constantly recreated or decreated in the chaos of international english, its regionalized by the making-do inventiveness of postcolonial anglo-patois, and there are even written similari-

ties with middle english in the general crisis of spelling that comprehensive education is currently going through. to use middle english opens up my poetics to a more historicized, diachronic understanding of words.

*

i first encountered cecilie bjɯrges jordheim in oslo in 2010 after brief discussions online she had been in the audience for a series of talks by kenneth goldsmith the year before and their correspondence lead to cecilie and i deciding that her work would be featured as part of the visual poetry section at **ubu** born in bergen norway jordheim is a recent graduate of the oslo national academy of the arts working primarily in the media of visual scores her work has a significant amount of crossover into visual poetry while christian marclay also works with found and manipulated musical scores as an artistic media crafting graphic representations of the language of musical notation jordheims work is more closely aligned with an eco-poetic mindset marclays scores develop from found consumer goods strategically broken records and vandalized posters (for example 2010s **prкt-a-porter** and 2009s **zoom zoom**) while jordheim creates musical scores from ecological lines and fragments jordheims **partitur** (produced in an edition of 57 signed copies by glemmeboka 2010) is a 147-page score for violin that uses the mountain range around vesterelen norway to suggest a performance with **partitur** jordheim sees the horizon line as a readable poetic line one which cannot only be read it can also be performed jordheims proposed reading practices generate musical scores compositions for violin cello and vocal performance which

create eerie pataphysical evocations of place and landscape jordheim also treats the literary landscape as she does the natural reading is an act of looking and scoring in **the new concrete: visual poetry in the 21st century** she evokes architectural drawings of a cityscape by mapping the lyrics to starships insipid 1980s pop song **we built this city** the schmaltz of the contemporary musical landscape is transformed into an anonymous cityscape as devoid of character as the original song 2008s **barcodes** jordheims student work is a 16mm film (transferred to video and now to youtube) that consists entirely of manipulated barcodes using compositional strategies similar to those of norman mclaren jordheim glued each barcode on to the films image and sound tracks the film

> then make[s] sound as it passes the photoelectric cell in the film projector and shows a direct connection between the sound and the image. what you see is what you hear. by having glued on a barcode in different sizes, it plays in a range of two octaves, approx. from low to high c. the density of the lines decides the pitch the more lines per frame, the higher pitch.

jordheims translation of ecologies (both natural and artificial) into musical score suggests the readability and performability of any line much as the late bob cobbing famously would see coffee cup rings mud puddles and bark as scores for potential sound poetry performance her 10-point manifesto **how does it sound?** summarizes her artistic / poetic concerns and forwards a series of talking points which interrogate the intersection between conceptualism musical score and writing the landscape

how does it sound?

1. why would one produce the sound of a mountain?
2. what is it that tells me that this horizon should be documented? will it not be there forever?
3. is it an attempt to describe something eternal and solid that has been there for ages, long before man managed to put its knowledge of the mountain into systems like language, drawings, maps, geological and geographical methods?
4. isnt art the desire to shape and describe something that cannot be grasped, and doesnt this apply to all academic disciplines?
5. where is the relationship between art and science at this point, and how do human factors and inaccuracies come to question when the premises are added and selected by ourselves? is it choice or chance?
6. has modern man lost its ability to combine factual knowledge in, i.e. mathematics, with an intuitive sensitivity to the basic correlations?
7. what challenges and constraints does the notational system provide us?
8. where lies the need to systematize and represent nature? is music always a mime of nature or is it an abstract autonomous form?
9. is there an isomorphic relation (a similitude) between nature and language; the shape of the mountains and the sound of it?
10. and how does it sound?

*

alison turnbulls **spring snowa translation** (2002) is a page by page response to the colour palette of yukio mishimas **spring snow** as soon as i encountered the book i was both anxious and thrilled with **spring snowa translation** turnbull reads mishimas original not for plot for character or for any other traditional reading trope instead she reads simply to record the occurrence of more than 600 colour words she then lists each of these words by page number and chapter the published edition takes the cataloguing even further by presenting a chart of 12 blocks on each pageeach swatch representing a different colour from mishimas original in the order it occurred reading here is not a search for a narrative-driven epiphanic moment it is simply a charting of encounter with the text on the page mishimas **spring snow** is loosened from significationthe words no longer point at a larger narrative they point only at colour turnbulls translation of **spring snow** focuses not on the narrative nor on the problems of moving from one written language to anothershe treats the language itself to a filtering embodying becketts defense of joyces **work in progress**: **[h]ere is direct expressionpages and pages of it** the colours through repetition build a suspense and crescendo which is loosened from traditional narrative derrida writing on blanchot asked

> how can one text, assuming its unity, give or present another to be read, without touching it, without saying anything about it, practically without referring to it?

each page of **spring snow** is a completely unique diagrammatic representation of the occurrences of certain words by reducing reading and language into a paragrammatical statis-

tical analysis content is subsumed into graphical representation of how language covers a page turnbulls translation is not such much a single translation as a workbook for further translationsone can imagine what other narratives could form around the occurrence of those particular hues scattered in that particular order barthes argued that

> the text requires that one try to abolish (or at the very least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading, in no way by intensifying the projection of the reader into the work but by joining them in a single signifying practice.

the emphasis here is on latency turnbull unlocks mishimas text as only one of a series of potentialitiesa single volume in a borgesian library of texts swaying around anchored chroma

*

emma kays **worldview** (1999) successfully negotiates the schism between the humanist drive and the conceptual compositional strategy where language is assembled not written **worldview** is nothing less than kays exhaustive history of the world from the big bang to the year 1999 written entirely from memory **worldview** is highly personal but rather than dwell on experience and the inherent ability of language to represent meaning kay writes in the flattened infallible tone of a high school textbook kay recites the history of the world not through import or sociological subject matter but purely through the idiosyncrasies of her own faulty memory **worldview** spends only the first 75 (of 230) pages of the history of the world until the 20th century the remainder on the encyclopedic recitation of history drawn primarily from the artists lifetime all with a flawless tone of cultural authority

a sample section of the index to **worldview** reveals kays own selective sense of history

HIV, 156, 181
holland, 45, 57
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holyfield, evander, 197

**worldview** is a maddening text as it testifies that a contemporary artist could actually conceive of a world where aerosmith (132) and archimedes (16) have the same historical credence kays text is both encyclopedic in purview and centered on the fallibility of personal recollection **worldview**s non-interventionalist practice is typical of much conceptual writing as the filter between the ordinary and the extraordinary becomes a theoretical one kay accrues language and representation in a way that foregrounds the materiality and accumulation of text but also documents memory materiality here is not one of humanist poeticthe stuff of poetrybut rather one that is developed through the sheer mass of the extraordinary ordinary

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monica aasprongs **soldatmarkedet** is a section of an ongoing project (2003-07) of the same name aasprongs 160page collection is a cross-section of her computer-generated digital output aasprong a norwegian has created a computer algorithm that randomly scatters spaces within a page covered with the letter t while the description sounds rather banal the output resembles aerial photographs of the movements of

populations around public squares which is no coincidence aasprongs poetry attempts to respond to a public square in berlin from the mid1770s titled the soldatmarkedet (in german the gendarmenmarkt) breaking the word into its smallest units of composition reassembling them as paal bjelke andersen writes

> in long series and geometrical, iconic or seemingly random shapes. but [] integrated in these works characterized by an extreme dispersion and discontinuity, there is a more semantically based study of the connotations of the title word, its referential qualities, a drifting through its historical, social and imaginative surroundings

this manifestation of **soldatmarkedet** consists entirely of the lower-case t and spaces and within those elements aasprong has created a text that occupies the public space of geography and architecture of the page

*

digital and visual poets aspire to create writing that embraces both a poetic sensitivity and a mastery of graphic design and cutting edge technology they aim to create poetry that can deftly mimic the best advertising logos television commercials and credit-rolls from hollywood films sadly those same poets dont realize that to accomplish this poetic feat they must master multiple fields their work must be as poetically strong as it is technologicallythey must be aware of the poetic possibilities of the tools they have in front of them and allow those tools to reconfigure how poetry operates much too often those attempts are puerile introductory sketches that do nothing but undermine the poets credibility as both a crafter

of page-based poems and a manipulator of digital technology **between page and screen** changes the game on the surface amaranth borsuk and brad bouses slim 44-page volume is a collection of 16 simple QR-codes manipulating between 5 and 12 white squares on a black 8 x 8 grid each piece is a playful engagement with the poetic possibilities of suprematism echoing malevichs **black square** (1915) the visual poems in **between page and screen** are beautifully minimal explorations of a poetics beyond semantics the book and the QR-code poems inside are only half of the reading experience when the reader accesses www.betweenpageandscreen.com the books full potential is realized once **between page and screen** is opened and each QR-code poem is exposed to the camera embedded in the readers computer what appears on the screen is unlike any other reading experience each QR-code releases a seemingly 3D poem that digitally hovers over the books pages on the computer screen wavering as the reader moves the pages the reader sees themselves and the book reflected back to them but on the screen the pages are augmented by a moving rotating text which digitally leaps into being the poems themselves are epistolary poems between p and s a negotiation of the spaces between lovers and the spaces between analogue and digital

dear s,
a screen is a shield but also a veil
its sheer and can be shorn. theres a
neat gap between these covers, a gate
agape, through which youve slipped
your tang. paper cuts too,
swordsmith. lets name this pagan

pageant, these rows of lines or vines
that link us together.

p

**between page and screen** lives in the liminal spaces the ineffable combination of page and screen it foreshadows a future for the book that looks beyond e-readers kindles and kobos to a textuality that combines page and screen that is neither and both

*

in her first book of poetry **poets and killers: a life in advertising** (2010) helen hajnoczky reports a single mans life from delivery to death living a modest 60 years this anonymous figures biography is formed entirely by the advertising slogans of the products he purchased in the years they were bought thus the childhood of hajnoczkys everyman figure is elucidated entirely with slogans and ad campaigns from the 1940s without any editorial intervention this lack of an editorial hand is what makes hajnoczkys work so uncanny every phrase every sentence of **poets and killers** was lifted directly from print advertisinghajnoczky has not written a wordnor has she had need helen hajnoczkys restrained tightly-focused poems explore the modern milieu where individuality is defined by consumerism from cradle to grave our individual narratives are written not by our actions but by our purchases our identities are tied to the products we purchase the labels we wear and the information we filter

from our conception to our burial, from pre-natal vitamins to coffins, we are consumers. advertising saturates our world, coating everything from magazines to

bus stops, staircases to cereal boxes, all in an effort to preserve and augment our consumer culture.

**poets and killers** playfully investigates what it means to be **an individual in a world where we are all sold the same individuality** and the possibilities for a **non-utilitarian humanity** which **potentially exists between the lines of advertising copy** as the characters life unfolds we must decide whether he falls within the realm of poet killer or a member of the category just as laden with poetic possibility: an average person the chronology of **poets and killers** follows both the protagonists aging and the intricacies of the modern day-to-day but also how our relationship with advertising has grown advertising hasaccording to hajnoczkybecome increasingly insidious moving from overt to subtle interplays within our formulations of self-definition self-awareness and self-debasement

> advertising copy no longer directly asserts that not using its product will result in a catastrophic tragedy, but carefully manipulates the reader into thinking they desire the product advertised.

in **poets and killers: a life in advertising** readers follow the protagonists growth simultaneously with the growth of advertising

*

finnish-swedish berlin-based poet cia rinne revels in the clinamen and the paragram the playful moment brought about by the minimal change in typographical difference for a canadian readership the paragram evokes bpnichols 9-volume **martyrology** most especially **book 5** (1982) as typified in **chain 3**

> puns break
>
> words fall apart

[...]

when i let the letters shift sur face

is just a place on which im ages drift

rinne uses typographical differencethe movement of phonemes the insertion of spaces the aural pun the homonymto allow for quiet moments of poetic discovery rinne investigates the typewriter as a compositional tool exploring how the typewriters fixed-width typefaces allow for poetic play within the implied grid of the line and page **notes for soloists** (2009) and **zaroum** (2001) are both ruefully out of print but available online through **ubuweb**s visual poetry section reissued as **zaroum** (2011) and complimented by the digital project **archives zaroum** **notes for soloists** was expanded into a beautiful collaborative sound piece with sebastian eskildsen entitled **sounds for soloists** (2011) as nichol continues in **chain 3**

this multiplication

attention to a visual duration

comic stripping of the bared phrase

the pain inside the language speaks

ekes out meaning phase by phase

make my way thru the maze of streets & messages

reading as i go

creating narratives by attention to a flow of signs)

both **notes for soloists** and **zaroum** are multilingual texts slipping from english to german to french each in a minimal moment of poetic exploration each echo yoko onos **grapefruit** (1964) as zen koan-like meditations of poetic emptiness in an interview with 3am magazine rinne argues that she attempts to **keep some sort of simplicity or minimalism in the writing and visual expression and in the way the final object is**

**produced** much as onos **grapefruit** includes

line piece i
draw a line.
erase the line.
line piece ii
erase lines.
line piece iii
draw a line with yourself.
go on drawing until you disappear.
1964 spring

rinnes multilingual engagement with absence and silence is most poetic when seen in light with her artistic investigation with marginalized communities her collaborations with photographer joakim eskildsen has resulted in a series of exceptional volumes including **the roma journeys** (2007) which documents the marginalization of roma throughout europe rinnes fracturing of language seems on the surface engaged in the dance of the clinamen within languages

> playing with the homophone qualities of different languages, or stripping the words of their usual context so they become something other than mere means of communication

(as rinne herself argues in the **3:am magazine** interview) rinnes paragrammatic explorations however are quiet meditations on how language ostracizes and marginalizes the other the spaces and silences in **zaroum** and **notes for soloists** point at the absence in the midst of the play

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berlins natalie czech creates limit case pieces that point to the end of erasure texts each piece a seemingly impossible con-

juring of texts within texts czechs ***je nai rien a dire. seulement a montrer. / ich habe nichts zu sagen. nur zu zeigen. / i have nothing to say. only to show.*** (2012) is an awe-inspiring book of literary conjuring **i have nothing to say. only to show** places text-based visual poems within larger textual fields embedding them into the margin-to-margin written from which they assert themselves inspired by frank oharas 1950s poem **a small bouquet** czech invited seven authors to write a background text in which oharas poem could be seamlessly embedded the seven radically different resultant texts share one traitwithin each piece oharas poem is perfectly uncannily hidden each photograph represents the new texts with oharas poem roughly highlighted; a small bouquet hidden in a larger poetic field czech has also commissioned friends to write the background text of one of the most famous concrete poems apollinaires classic calligramme **il pleut** rains down the page in a now clichйd trope; under czechs tutelage her colleagues craft pieces of prose in french in german and englisheach of which contain the letters of **il pleut** in the same textual position as the original czech then photographs each piece as if it were part of an entire volume a dream book where a single page contains the material for any given poem **hidden poems** the middle third of **i have nothing to say. only to show** is the most astonishing czech has scoured an unfathomable number of magazines and popular culture scraps and has foundin a mind-blowing act of literary archaeology evidence of famous modernist poems embedded in larger blocks of texts like fossilized dinosaur feathers preserved in the crush of shale czech simply highlights the uncanny occurrence of entire poems photographs them in situ and exhib-

its these bravado acts of poetic discovery as troubling the line between poetic and photographic documentation in **a hidden poem by e.e. cummings #2** czech discovers cummings 1961 poem

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weirdly embedded within the text of a life-magazine era article whose headline reads in part **FAR AWAY THE HUGE BOMB EXPLODE [...] / INSURED, UNLIKELY ENOUGH TOWARD [...]** not only is the article and accompanying photograph an uncanny commentary on the poem but cummings original is somehow entirely extantwith line breaks and spacing intactwithin the article itself a single example of this seemingly impossible task is enough to incite jealousy and wonder at the audacity of czechs find what makes **hidden poems** even more impossible is that czechs ability to find repeated poems by creeley brinkmann khlebnikov lax kerouac and ohara each also embedded within the cultural fabric of non-poetic media

*

these contemporary concrete and conceptual poets trouble the poetic discourses of de campos cage gysin and burroughs through the gendered exploration of concrete poetry beyond classical san serif typography contemporary conceptual poetry is defined by its material use of languagelanguage which stretches beyond gender into new structures based on readability and legibility trace and evidence each of these poets transcribe difference in reading constructing reading and writing through a new geography of transgressive meaning-making by mining the non-semantic and the non-traditional each of these poets are able to transfigure writing which transforms difference and enables an alternative to the normative concrete and conceptual poetry can no longer be considered a male-dominated field

**A Box of Nothing**

"Clearly we are beginning to get nowhere."
—John Cage

On April 7, 2011 I sent The Bury Museum and Archives an empty box.

I purchased the box for $5 and received skeptical looks from the UPS employees when I requested to send the box—devoid of any content—to Bury.

UPS also instructed me that they would not ship an "empty box" and that they needed the contents of the box to fit within one of their predetermined categories. We agreed to enclose within the box a single sheet of blank A4 paper. With this content—as unwritten as it was—UPS could now categorize the contents of the box as "documents" and could continue to process the application for transportation.

Their consternation was compounded with my request to insure the box and its contents to a value of $52,000; roughly the same measly amount as the yearly wage of an arts worker in the UK.

UPS, not unexpectedly, would only insure the parcel for $3,000, and even then at a fee that was beyond affordability. In effect they would not guarantee the safety of a box of "nothing" and refused to insure the safety of "artwork" (even an empty box). For insurance of the amount I requested I would have to seek a rider from an independent insurance provider.

I was then asked to complete a "Parcel Shipping Order" form that included checkboxes that inquired "Are the contents of the parcel breakable?" (Yes) and "Are the contents of the Parcel replaceable?" (No)

Upon my completion of the form, I was invoiced a shipping cost of $175 and the box was assigned a tracking number and a series of bar-

codes and QR Codes to expedite the box of nothing as it cleared various processing centres and Canadian and British Customs.

These barcodes and QR Codes are included in The Bury Museum and Archives' exhibition *The History of Tradestamps*. Tradestamps were the hand-printed labels that the cotton industry used to indicate the contents of their shipping bundles in order to appeal to their (often illiterate) purchasers. The tradestamps often depicted scenes, emblems, animals or figures and the industry employed hundreds of designers to create these trade marks as an early form of branding.

The resultant barcode is the symbol of nothing. In light of the current UK administration's draconian cutbacks and their lack of willingness to insure the growth of social programs and the arts, John Cage's aphorism, "Nothing more than nothing may be said" seems highly apt.

**All Work and No Play Makes Jack a Dull Boy**

It is all too tantalizing to document, assemble and continue Jack Torrance's manuscript from Stanley Kubrick's 1980 film *The Shining*. Conceptually, recreating Torrance's manuscript playfully concretizes the fictional output of a fictional character. Only a few pages of the manuscript are revealed in *The Shining*, but every page consists wholly and entirely of the phrase "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy" repeated ad infinitum over a presumably several-hundred-page manuscript.[1] Wendy Torrance (as performed by Shelley Duvall), in the filmic reveal of Torrance's creative masterpiece, emotionally collapses as she finally realizes the extent of her husband's crumbling sanity. Under the mental anguish of this Sisyphean task of nonlinearity, Jack Torrance's grip on reality is weakened, much as readers reject the strain of such a non-traditional manuscript. This key scene was Kubrick's invention rather than Stephen King's, the novel's author.

Torrance's text is a placeholder for the role of the author and the futility of the creation of original work. First appearing in James Howell's *Proverbs in English, Italian, French and Spanish* (1659), Torrance's proverb has

[1] It is worth nothing that this key phrase is only used in the American release of *The Shining*. Kubrick—notorious for his exhaustive filmmaking—substituted different phrases for international releases. In the Italian version of the film Kubrick uses the phrase "Il mattino ha l'oro in bocca" (He who wakes up early meets a golden day); in the German version, Torrance types "Was Du heute kannst besorgen, das verschiebe nicht auf Morgen" (Never put off 'til tomorrow what you can do today). In the Spanish version of the film Kubrick uses the phrase "No por mucho madrugar amanece más temprano" (Rising early will not make dawn sooner); in the French version Torrance types "Un 'Tiens' vaut mieux que deux 'Tu l'auras'" (A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush).

a little-known second line (as included in Maria Edgeworth's 1825 novel *Harry and Lucy Concluded*):

> All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy,
> All play and no work makes Jack a mere toy.

The first line of the proverb, as expanded in the full manuscript of *All Work and No Play Makes Jack a Dull Boy* suggests that novels formed entirely from the materiality of "work" without the "play" of narrative are inherently "dull" both to the reader and the author, refuting Cagean ideas of repetition and reiteration. The second line, however, counters this position by arguing that texts, which are inherently playful, are, in fact, nothing more than poetic playthings—mere toys. For conceptual writers, however, the resultant text, if chosen and constructed well, will eschew the "dull" and the "boring" alike. In terms of contemporary poetics, *All Work and No Play makes Jack a Dull Boy* is ultimately a lesson for conceptual poets. A text should be written, as Craig Dworkin postulates, not in terms of "whether it could have been done better (the question of the workshop), but whether it could conceivably have been done otherwise." Unshackled from the plot of the film, the page-based representation of Torrance's cinematic failed "novel" is a meta-textual commentary on the interplay between text and page, between confessionalism and conceptualism, procedurality and intentionality. While Kubrick's *The Shining* (and King's novel) suggests that Torrance's insanity was the result of alcoholism and the influence of the Overlook Hotel itself, *All Work* presents an obsessive text that documents how the interplay between linearity and nonlinearity sent the author—and Wendy, the reader—into a mental tailspin.

The temptation to recreate this manuscript was too much for Phil Beuhler, Jean Keller and the anonymous author published by Gengotti Editore each of which struggle with the poetic potentialities of

Torrance's text. Each of the three versions suffers from ungainly editorial and design decisions that hamper the text's ability to mimic Torrance's edition. This literary varia recast Torrance's cinematic efforts in a different light, each displaying a series of decision by the editors and publishers that inform the poetics of the "original." Of most interest in the Gengotti Editore 128-page version is the inclusion of the standard legal boilerplate:

> [t]his book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events of locales or persons living or deadis [sic] entirely coincidental

Here authorship and plot become a series of nested boxes. The only "name" or "character" in the novel is "Jack" and the only "incidents" which occur are the implied work and play in which he participates. The boilerplate also defines for the reader that this text does qualify as a "work of fiction" thus setting aside any question of its genre-defying Beckettian minimalism.

Jean Keller's 120-page *The Overlook Manuscript* suggests, in an editorial statement, that Keller found this version of Torrance's manuscript in the basement of an abandoned Swiss nursing home where Torrance supposedly worked in 1979. This back-story extrapolation is entirely Keller's with no support found in with King or Kubrick. Keller intervenes in Torrance's manuscript for 4 pages signaled by the inclusion of the French phrase *Un «Tiens» vaut mieux que deux «Tu l'auras»* and the replacement of "Jack" with "Jean," an indicator of Keller's own authorial participation.

Phil Beuhler's version of the text is the most developed, faithful and widely publicized of the 3 recreations and his text is the best candidate for further discussion of the poetics of Torrance's manuscript. *All Work* problematizes the interplay between text and author. The manu-

script is no longer the fictional output of a fictional character; it has become as "real" as any other novel (and protected by the same legal framework in the Gengotti Editore version). Metaphorically, Torrance achieves presence only through the publication of his novel, just as writers only occupy the role of writer when they publish. Writers are only writers when they write; when they cease to write, they cease to exist.

The labour of writing defines a writer's existence despite Torrance's dictum that "all work and no play" will denigrate the writer into a "dull boy." Paradoxically, *All Work* consists entirely of the repetition of a single sentence without any explicit discussion of the traditional tropes of fiction: characterization, narrative, dialogue and conflict. *All Work* is a documentation of process; the evidence of an obsessive writing practice which reduces writing to the *act of writing*. The lack of narrative, character and dialogue (the "[n]ames, characters, places and incidents" of the legal boilerplate) makes *All Work* about material—the accumulation of text on a page. A novel is anything that takes the form of a novel regardless of the content.

Beuhler chooses to construct only the first few manuscript pages from *The Shining* with obsessive detail, retaining every typographic error and idiosyncratic variation but, sadly, he only maintains that neurotic level of detail for the first few pages. After the introduction of such an obsessive practice, Beuhler erratically maintains the pages from *The Shining* without indicators of Torrance's writing practice (errant capitalization, mistyped letters and erroneous indentation), thus turning his manuscript into less documentation than translation. This version, much like the Gengotti Editore and Keller versions, of *All Work* is thus a series of permutations of the original sentence that suggest the source text without quoting it directly.

Beuhler's *All Work and No Play makes Jack a Dull Boy* succeeds despite this erratic execution as a manual of potential compositional struc-

tures—a pataphysical encyclopaedia of textual manipulation in concrete poetry. *All Work and No Play makes Jack a Dull Boy* not only rebuilds Torrance's fictional text, it also channels a whole host of poetry such as Charles Bernstein's *Veil*, dom sylvester houédard and John Riddell's typewriter-based visual poetry and Aram Saroyan's minimalist work.

The novel is presented as typed manuscript in a fixed-width typeface but strangely breaks this conceit for a 10-page section which—while cleanly aping Saroyan's minimalist poetry by including only a single word on each page—appears to be typeset, instead of typed, thus breaking the illusion of a reconstructed manuscript.

Ironically, Torrance's *All Work and No Play makes Jack a Dull Boy* manuscript is more indicative of contemporary poetic & prosaic output than one would first expect. The gall to call oneself a writer (and especially a poet), with all the inherent cultural baggage, causes even more pause during those times when one isn't writing, when life has other plans, when one is between projects, or during that most-frightening period of "writer's block." What do we do with the moments when we aren't writing? Are you a writer if you're not writing at all; when your poetic output consists of obsessive baseball tossing and the obsessive retyping of a single phrase? Can *not writing* be a literary act? Can we consider that an author is adding to her oeuvre by ceasing to write? These recreations of *All Work and No Play makes Jack a Dull Boy* level fictional authors with factual ones and undermine the reality of all authors.

**Poetic Representations of the Holocaust**

Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony: The United States 1885-1890 Recitative* (New Directions, 1965) and *Holocaust* (Black Sparrow, 1975) are lyrical precursors to a series of Conceptual and Concrete engagements with the Holocaust. As part of a reading at Sir George Williams University, Reznikoff performed *Testimony*'s "Domestic Scenes I", "Boys and Girls 5" and "untitled" each of which he contextualizes by saying that they:

> are all based on law cases. Ah…I don't know what…whether that'll excuse their ferocity, but apparently something like that once happened. The names are different. The facts are the same.

Reznikoff was called to the bar but never practiced law, yet he lifts language directly from cases in the public record such as this excerpt from "Domestic Scenes I":

> He punched up the fire
> And returned with an armload of wood
> And the child,
> And put the dead child into the fire.
> She said: "O John, don't!"
> He did not reply
> But turned to her and smiled.

In a 1969 interview on *Testimony*, Reznikoff explains that:

> *Testimony* may be explained by T. S. Eliot's "objective correlative," as I understand it. Something happens and it expresses something that you feel, not necessarily because of *those* facts,

> but because of entirely different facts that give you the same kind of feeling.

T.S.Eliot in "Hamlet and his Problems" argues that:

> a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events […] shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.

This poetic invocation of external fact—the concrete used to evoke the abstract—seems a basic compositional strategy (and one that I regularly teach in creative writing classes) but one which is taken to the extreme by Reznokoff's inheritors who adhere to the tenets of conceptual writing (as instead of using language to invoke an emotional response through poetic diction, the poets I'm interested in here simply move language from one container to another, allowing the language as a set of objects, the thingness of the words, as a set of facts do the heavy lifting). Reznikoff continues that:

> Now, in reading law, if the cases state any facts, they're just a sentence or two; but, occasionally, you'll find the facts gone into in detail, sometimes to explain or defend the judge's position. Still the facts have a function of their own—psychological, sociological, and perhaps even poetical. In *Testimony* the speakers whose words I use are all giving testimony about what they actually lived through. The testimony is that of a witness in court—not a statement of what he felt, but of what he saw or heard. What I wanted to do was to create by selection, arrangement, and the rhythm of the words used as a mood or feeling. I could

> have picked any period because the same thing is happening today that was happening in 1885.

Reznikoff's compositional strategy for *Testimony* is not direct transferal, the touchless moving of text from one site to another as promoted by Conceptual writing (or the appearance there-of, as much Conceptual writing still exhibits the hand of the author). *Testimony* was constructed through distillation, editing and omission as Reznikoff explains:

> I throw out an awful lot to achieve my purpose. It's not a complete picture of the United States at any time, by any means. It's only a part of what happened, a reality that I felt as a reader and could not portray adequately in any other way.

Reznikoff argues that in distillation *Testimony* omits aspects of the American experience, but these omissions, in my opinion are much more interesting not for what was omitted in commentary on American society but rather what was omitted from the original source texts in an act of poetic editing.

Paul Auster argues that "It would be difficult for a poet to make himself more invisible than Reznikoff does in [*Testimony*]" and that Reznikoff attempts to:

> allow events to speak for themselves, to choose the exact detail that will say everything and thereby allow as much as possible to remain unsaid. This kind of restraint paradoxically requires an openness of spirit that is available to very few: an ability to accept the given, to remain a witness of human behaviour and not succumb to the temptation of becoming a judge.

Reznikoff applies the poetic gesture of *Testimony* to the 15-volume American governmental publication *Trials of War Criminals Before the Nuremberg Military Tribunals Under Control Council Law No. 10* (currently available for download as PDFs from the American Government) with *Holocaust* (1975) which documents the trials of "lesser war criminals". *Holocaust*'s poetic tone is very similar to *Testimony* but with a greater reliance on footnotes for contextualization and rationalization.

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Poetic engagements with the Holocaust must overcome the argument that language cannot portray the inhumanity of the Nazis' actions. Poetry must challenge its traditionally humanist pose in order to respond to the dehumanizing Shoah. Poetry can either concentrate on the highly personal—which runs the risk of reducing the scale of the events—touching the reader with the retelling of individual testimony, or it can try and reform language to find a new means of expressing the inexpressible.

Heimrad Bäcker (1925–2003) renounced his former membership of the Hitler Youth and the Nazi Party after World War II. He spent the remainder of his life as a poet, editor and intellectual as a means of confronting his own involvement in how the Nazis used language itself as a means of propagating the Holocaust. Bäcker was a member of the Hitler Youth's Press and Photography Office before he worked as editor of the Austrian avant-garde press *Neue Texte*. His Hitler Youth employment exposed him to the anaesthetized prose of the Nazi's intricate documentation of their Final Solution.

With *nachschrift* (1986) Bäcker poetically argues that the best way to engage with the language of the Holocaust is to present it baldly, without editorializing and without personal intercession. *nachschrift* is available in English translation as *transcript* (Dalkey Archive, 2010, translated by Patrick Greaney and Vincent Kling).

*transcript* is a collection of page after mostly empty page, interrupted by brief, aphoristic (strictly documented) quotations from internal Nazi memoranda, private letters and reports presented in the banal, toneless language of bureaucracy. Bäcker referred to his style as *dokumentarische dichtung* (documentary poetry) and where he revised the original text, every detail is acknowledged in eerie echo of the precision of the source authors.

Bäcker created *transcript* supposedly without knowledge of Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony* and *Holocaust*. While Reznikoff mines testimony for the stuff of poetry—prosaic sentences with poetic line breaks that testify to traumatic experience—Bäcker rejects the testimony in favour of the corporate. *transcript* is as emotionally engaging as any confession or testimony. The vast majority of *transcript* could be excerpted from any obsessively-documented corporation pleading for increased shipments where "the times on the train schedule correspond to the hours of the day 0-24" when "it is very difficult at the moment to keep the liquidation figure at the level maintained up to now".

As a forerunner of contemporary conceptual poetry, *transcript* displays how potent and emotional the corporate can be—and how language simultaneously veil and unveils. Bäcker's involvement in the Nazi party is implicitly the subject of *transcript*. His sentence is the Sisyphean task of sifting and resifting banal archival primary documentation in search of the poetic in the unspeakable.

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Robert Fitterman's *Holocaust Museum* uses the caption and the label to draw attention to the absent, the eradicated and the missing. *Holocaust Museum* builds on the work of Reznikoff's *Holocaust* and Bäcker's *transcript*; but while those two volumes sift primary documentation, *Holocaust Museum* is generationally—and physically—removed from the events of the Holocaust.

With *Holocaust Museum* Fitterman transcribes the labels given to archival photographs in the online collection of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum eliding the photographs entirely. The isolated captions work as contemplative, haiku-like poetic moments, each haunted by the spectres of both the historical events that follow, but also the reader's imaginative evocation of the number of photographs that fit that description. Many of the opening captions are quotidian descriptions ("Portrait of a Jewish boy dressed in his school uniform." or "A young Polish cobbler looks out his window in Poland.") that presage the calmly horrific description in the chapters entitled (in reference to Reznikoff's chapter titles) "Zyklon B Canisters," "Gas Chambers" and "Mass Graves."

Fitterman includes the catalogue numbers from the Holocaust Museum in each caption—"Young women sew in the workshop of master seamstress. Rochel Szulkin. [Photograph #42288]." I originally felt that this diffused the power of each poetic image; an editorial choice which didn't seem to support the project. Upon further reading, Fitterman's compositional inclusion uncannily echoes the tattooing of Auschwitz prisoners and imposes a visual foreshadowing in every caption. Even the most innocuous line, as exemplified by "Portrait of Imre Rosner as a young child" shifts in tone when that line closes with "[Photograph #27419]" as the preservation of the museum's catalogue information reminds the reader that the portrait requires archiving and memorializing—and the number itself visually suggests the very reason for that memorializing.

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Swedish poet and sound-artist Åke Hodell's *Orderbuch* (Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1965) and *CA 36715(J)* (Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1966) are fascinating addenda to the set of conceptual engagements with the Holocaust. Each small concrete poetry chapbook—*CA 36715(J)* is 38 pages and *Orderbuch* is 42 pages—creates fictional docu-

ments which eerily reflect Bäcker's source documents. *Orderbuch* is a listing of hundreds of fictional prisoner numbers each annotated with a single word which include the entries "soap," "lampshade," "mulch" and "unuseable." This series of prisoner numbers are systematically crossed out, marching the reader closer and closer to a graphic conclusion. The opening and closing number in *Orderbuch* is *CA 36715(J)*, the title of Hodell's other concrete poetry text. *CA 36715(J)* poses as the fictional diary of a camp prisoner, but the diaristic entries by that prisoner are written in asemic handwriting. Each entry resembles text, points to potential readings, but those readings are occluded by the limitations of the handwritten—the text suggest what could be said if language was sufficient. As the text proceeds entries become increasingly frenetic and conclude with slicks of ink and splashes of unformed scribbles. *Orderbuch* and *CA 36715(J)* both suggest the inability of poetry to adroitly confront the language of the Holocaust through the creation of faux archival documents that point to ineffable experience.

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Charles Reznikoff originally made his living writing encyclopaedic law entries for the publishing firm *Corpus Juris*. During the day he would write law, in the evening he would relocate excerpts from law cases, shaping them into what would become the 2 volumes of *Testimony: The United States (1885-1915): Recitative.*

Los Angeles-based Conceptual poet Vanessa Place—who is an appellate criminal defense attorney specializing in violent sexual predators—uses similar compositional strategies to Reznikoff in her *Tragodia 1: Statement of Facts* (Blanc, 2010). While Reznikoff avoids statements of facts in favour of testimony (which gives his volume its title), Place avoids testimony in favour of statement of facts (and thus titles her collection). *Statement of Facts* operates very similarly to both *transcript* and Holocaust—but without the authorial interventions. As part of her day job Place is

responsible for the drafting of "factual information without argument" for the appeals of violent sexual offenders. With *Statement of Fact* Place relocates these briefs to the arena of poetry by simply changing the names and any information necessary to protect identities—all of her writing does:

> not violate any formal ethical standards or professional codes of conduct: all appellate briefs are matters of public record [and] could be found or read by anyone, as are the transcripts of the trials themselves.

The statements of facts that constitute *Statement of Facts* do not break any ethical codes, but much like the source documents of Bäcker's *transcript*, challenge the reader to incorporate unspeakable violation into poetics. By moving language that is in daily use in the court, is publicly archived and accessible to the general public into the realm of poetry, Place's *Statement of Fact* moves through the compositional strategies that Reznikoff explores into non-poeticized trauma.

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes referred to trauma as "a news photo without a caption." Barthes argues that the photograph cannot be isolated from the event that it portrays. We do not see the photograph; we only see the image portrayed *on* the photograph. The language of the archive is the language of news photograph captions. The photograph represents events without representing itself, an event portrayed without a means of discussing or categorizing. Each of these texts, building on Reznikoff's example, reverses this dictum and proves that trauma is a series of captions *without* news photographs.

**You're out of Excuses**

17 years ago I published my first chapbook. I produced a collaborative edition with a then friend in Brampton, Ontario, *William S. Burroughs: Ghost of Steel* in an edition of 26 signed copies. Each page was designed and laid out in MSPublisher, printed at home, folded and inserted into hand-printed covers and sewn using needle and thread. Most copies were given away, I haven't seen one in years.

That same format—printed at home, folded and assembled by hand, sewn and given away—has remained my modus operandi ever since. *William S. Burroughs: Ghost of Steel* was the first of 268 editions that I published through the housepress imprint, followed by over 250 more under No Press.

For seventeen years I've averaged a publication every two weeks—each one made by hand as a means of distributing the news to a evolving community of readers.

The Calgarian writing community has had a fluctuating relationship with small press publishing but I am surprised there aren't more of them. In my opinion writing is a public act, we must learn (even the most introverted of us) to share our work with a readership. See our work as worth sharing, our voices as worth hearing. It doesn't have to be a huge public gesture; it could 10 copies among friends. Share.

There are a growing number of online print-on-demand publishers like Lulu and Blurb, and many photocopy shops which will do collation and binding—but those are far from the only options. Anyone who has a desktop printer or access to a photocopier (or a typewriter, or a silkscreen or rubberstamp letters or any number of intriguing possibilities) can produce her own work. Paper, printer, stapler, scissors.

A challenge to my peers: publish your own work. Start a small press. Find the material that your colleagues are making that impresses

you and publish it in pamphlets, in leaflets, in chapbooks and broadsides, posters and ephemera. It is all too easy to rely on other people to do the work for you—to allow the means of distribution to remain with book publishers, magazines and journals. Small press builds community through gifts and exchange, through consideration and generosity, through the creative interplay and dialogue with each other's work.

Small press publishing allows authors to present their work in a way that physically responds to the content—texture, size, shape, colour and binding all become aesthetic decisions that the author herself can shape. The internet is rife with instructions on how to hand-bind books. Make stuff, hand it out, talk to people. You're out of excuses.

**Type Cast: Darren Wershler Can't Type**

Whilst reading Darren Wershler's *The Iron Whim: A Fragmented History of the Typewriter*, I looked up from the page to see, on the end table beside my chesterfield, my old Underwood No. 5 typewriter. When I originally spotted the machine at a rummage sale, I knew I had to own it, even though I didn't understand why. It just had something to do with what a writer was supposed to be.

In *The Iron Whim*, Wershler argues that the typewriter not only defines how we write, but also what we write, who does the writing, and how we look upon writing itself.

Despite the fact that typewriters have become an antiquated mode of communication, replaced by personal computers, they are still icons of the writing life, part of the romantic sepia-toned image of the struggling author ensconced at his desk, surrounded by gray smoke, discarded drafts and frustration. The typewriter however, is just as clearly associated with typing pools, secretarial positions and even speed-typing competitions. It is these images, and what Wershler describes as the "haunted" relationship between machine, dictator and "amanuensis" (the person who receives the dictation and does the actual typing, receiving transcription from the dictator), that is the focus of *The Iron Whim*.

As the Winnipeg-born writer, critic, editor and poet explains in the book, inventors had tried to create a writing machine for more than 200 years. Those efforts eventually culminated in Christopher Latham Sholes' invention of what we today recognize as the typewriter in 1866. Since that date, for the past 140 years, the typewriter has had a striking effect on how authors approach writing. This is where *The Iron Whim* comes in. Wershler focuses not so much on the history of the typewriter itself, but on the history of typewriting.

Wershler, who teaches communication studies at Concordia University, is the author or co-author of nine books, which include *the tapeworm foundry*, a book of poetry nominated for the Trillium Award in 2000, and five books on Internet technology and culture. With fellow poet Christian Bök, he co-authored the infamous *Virus 23 Meme*, which they posted on Andy Hawks' *Future culture* mailing list in 1993.

Clearly, Wershler is a computer man. He was drawn to write about the history of the typewriter and typewriting because of what he feels is a "disconnection" between us and the typewriter. While we feel an "incredible nostalgia for the typewriter," very few people "recognize typewriting when they see it and, in fact, very few people even own a typewriter." The typewriter as a tool has been completely replaced by the personal computer, and its very form is antiquated. Instead, he argues, we have an "intellectual and emotional investment in it as the symbol of writing."

Collectors have brought their hunt for old typewriters—like the one I have on my end table—online. Strangely enough though, Wershler says:

> a typewriter is only valuable if it doesn't look like a typewriter. The late-19th century, strange things are what collectors go nuts for. It's always struck me as odd and improbable that people are invested in this. Writers that still use typewriters are deliberately contrarian. It's a world of computers.

Writing *The Iron Whim*, which is based on his doctoral dissertation at York University, enabled Wershler to understand how nostalgia "looks back on the way that we no longer write and says that it was the correct way." As an example, he says:

> we are blinded to the media technology that is organizing how we are writing now, we only recognize that influence after the technology is gone.

Not only is the typewriter indicative of our dependence on, and blindness to, technology, it has always reflected and defined gender roles in the workplace. Wershler explains that:

> the Industrial Revolution brought a massive amount of paper-work memos, bills of lading, invoices for the goods that are circulating. No longer were rows of clerks on stools sufficient. Women started to enter to workforce in a very complex way. Typewriting is associated with the suffragette movement and the independent woman, but on the other hand, this figure is either alien and cold or a new sex-toy for the male office workers of the world. Originally, the typewriter sales companies sold the typist with the typewriter: she was part of the package. This contradictory packaging of the typewriter with the typist in the case of the suffragette caused G.K. Chesterton to quip that "women refused to be dictated to and went out and became stenographers."

It is also ironic that the 1930's romantic image of a journalist sitting long into the night, with his suspenders down and a bottle of bourbon in the desk drawer, has come to represent unalienated, direct, honest writing. Only a few decades earlier, the typewriter was not seen as the symbol of writing; the pen was the direct mode of communication; typing was seen as an inferior mechanical process. Of Kerouac's *On The Road* Truman Capote famously scoffed "that isn't writing at all, it's typing."

As Wershler and I spoke over the telephone, we recreated the dictator-transcriber role. I frantically attempted to type our conversation on the computer keyboard and like Wershler found that:

> I can't type—I've never been able, I've never taken a typing class. I've tried to teach myself ever since the third grade, and now I'm an insanely fast hunt-and-peck two-finger typist.

Like so many writers today, however, Wershler is hunting and pecking on digital technology that not only records but links him to information from anywhere in the world. Wershler closed our interview saying:

> My own writing is structured around the computer. Not only do I write on a computer, it's a network computer and can access the Internet and the hundreds of feeds that come into my path at any given moment. These are the terms under which I write now—it would be difficult to consider it any other way.

**Visuality and Conceptualism**

Instead of Pound's "MAKE IT NEW," I look to Land artist Robert Smithson, Conceptual artist Sol LeWitt and Pop artists Andy Warhol and Jasper Johns for their rallying slogans. Johns' 1964 notebook instruction to "[t]ake an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it. Do something else to it" forms the backbone of my response to the contemporary bulk of language.

There are few conceptual writers who engage with the non-semantic, visual implications of language. Most look at what Robert Smithson in 1966 referred to as the "heap of language" and focus on the words themselves with little consideration for the page's graphic potential. With my books *flatland: a romance of many dimensions* and *Local Colour* I focus not on semantic content but on the physical arrangement of source texts embodying Smithson's "[l]anguage to be looked at and/or things to be read."

*flatland: a romance of many dimensions* is a page-by-page translation of Edwin Abbott Abbott's 1884 novel of the same name. Abbott's novel is an allegorical critique of the British class system and the lack of education for women in the late 19th Century. It has remained in print for over a century and recounts the tale of "A.Square," a conscious two-dimensional quadrangle who inhabits "Flatland," a two-dimensional world, occupied entirely by polygons. A.Square is visited by a sphere, a denizen of a three-dimensional world who presents the blasphemous doctrine of higher dimensions. The sphere chaperones A.Square on a Dickensian tour of a series of different worlds including "Pointland," "Lineland," "Flatland" and "Spaceland" and theorizes of fourth- and fifth-dimensional planes of existence. My translation applies the cold logic of Flatland's denizens and a procedurality that openly embraces Conceptualism.

With "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" (1967) Conceptual artist Sol

LeWitt postulates a new "grammar" for construction. "Form," says LeWitt, is "of very limited importance" in terms of itself, but it becomes the "grammar for the total work." LeWitt argues that Conceptual art requires that "the basic unit be deliberately uninteresting" as to allow the form to be merely a unit for composition:

> [t]o work with a plan that is preset is one way of avoiding subjectivity. It also obviates the necessity of designing each work in turn. The plan would design the work. [...T]he artist [should] select the basic form and rules that would govern the solution of the problem. After that the fewer decisions made in the course of completing the work, the better. This eliminates the arbitrary, the capricious, and the subjective as much as possible.

With "Sentences on Conceptual Art" (1969) LeWitt postulates, in 35 numbered statements, a new means for production that removes the artist's subjectivity, replacing it with a dedication to process:

> 27. The concept of a work of art may involve the matter of the piece or the process in which it is made.
> 28. Once the idea of the piece is established in the artist's mind and the final form is decided, the process is carried out blindly. There are many side effects that the artist cannot imagine. These may be used as ideas for new works.
> 29. The process is mechanical and should not be tampered with. It should run its course.

My translation of *flatland: a romance of many dimensions* (as published by York's information as material press and now available digitally through UBUWeb), applies LeWitt's procedurality to reading and map-

ping. Over a year I mapped the occurrence of each unique letter on the first line of each page of the 1991 Princeton University Press edition of Abbott's *Flatland*. As Marjorie Perloff writes in the afterword to *flatland*:

> On the very last page of the novella, the original reads,
> That is the hope of my brighter moments. Alas, it is not always.
> Deleting the duplicate letters results in:
> Tha is e op f my br g r n l w
> Beaulieu then draws a line from the 1st appearance of the *T* on the 1st line of text to its appearance on the second line, the third line, and so on to the end of the textblock. And so on, following that initial *h*, *a*, and so on. It is, undoubtedly, a labour-intensive exercise [....] But, what [...] is the point?

The "point" is, as LeWitt theorizes, to establish a procedural reading practice and to follow that reading practice mechanically though the entirety of a single volume. I was dedicated to LeWitt's advice that:

> [o]nce the idea of the piece is established in the artist's mind and the final form is decided, the process is carried out blindly.

and "[t]he process is mechanical and should not be tampered with. It should run its course." The process for creating *flatland*, by hand, with light-table, onionskin paper, ruler and pen, resulted in a series of diagrams that contain no repetition and no discernable information; they are purely "an exercise in sameness and difference."

According to Perloff, reading, with *flatland*, is not a matter of gathering information, gaining knowledge or amusement; it is the graphing and charting of progress though a temporal object:

> [*r*]*eading*, in this context, means to look closely at what is in front of you, so that you become familiar with the circuit of differentials presented.

In constructing *flatland* my role was more of draftsman than writer. My role was not to apply *creative* inspiration but to employ *uncreative* solutions. As LeWitt claims:

> [t]he draftsman and the wall enter a dialogue. The draftsman becomes bored but later through this meaningless activity finds peace or misery.

With each radically different page, *flatland* unfurls EKGs, pulsating stock reports that offer nothing to the potential investor. According to Perloff, *flatland* is coldly unreadable, occupied with charting appearance and:

> [n]ot with conveying information or making meanings in the usual way, but with the relationship of an Oulippean constraint to *difference*—to the non-identity of nominals Duchamp called the *infra-thin*.

Foregrounding statistical analysis and diagramming over semantic content, *flatland* is, as Goldsmith argues, "[c]older and more clinical than Dworkin, and minus the sensuality of Stein," a "completely unreadable work, yet one based entirely on language."

*

*Local Colour* built upon my explorations of the combining of Concrete poetry and Conceptual writing. *flatland: a romance of many dimensions* is a black and white charting of alphabetic occurrence, applying an awareness of the flatness of the page to the description of the fictional "Flatland." With *Local Colour* I apply similar reading techniques on Paul

Auster's 1986 novella *Ghosts*. Written as the second installment of *The New York Trilogy* (*City of Glass*, 1985*; Ghosts*, 1986; *The Locked Room*, 1986), *Ghosts* concerns the exploits of Blue, a private detective who becomes embroiled in the exploits and interaction between White and Black and the challenges of writing a novel. As *Ghosts* unfolds and Blue becomes more aware of the case for which he has been hired, the novel becomes increasingly obsessive and trapped within a vocabulary of proper names:

> First of all there is Blue. Later there is White, and then there is Black, and before the beginning there is Brown. Brown broke him in, Brown taught him the ropes, and when Brown grew old Blue took over. That is how it begins.

*Local Colour* is the result of a strict, constrained, reading of *Ghosts* based not on plot, character-development or a readerly urge to solve the mystery of the novel, but rather, like *flatland*, on the occurrence of words—as material objects—on the page. Auster's *Ghosts* is as preoccupied with the clockwork machinations of detective fiction as it is with the evocation of the streets and locales of Brooklyn Heights and Manhattan (with ongoing references to Walt Whitman's previous residence on Orange Street). *Local Colour* coolly applies Auster's logic to the text itself. Once again, reading is a cartographic feat; *Local Colour* maps the location of each chromatic word in *Ghosts*. As an example, isolating only the colour words from the open paragraph of *Ghosts* (above), the text reads:

Blue White
Black Brown Brown
Brown Brown
Blue

Reading within this constraint results in a text that abandons the purely descriptive, plot-driven, narratives dependent on representation, dialogue and all the hallmarks of traditional prose. What remains are words treated as widgets and ciphers, glowing linguistic pixels that represent the "local color" which haunt, like ghosts, the novel from behind the cathode ray tubes of narrative. Upon excising *Ghosts* of all non-chromatic text, I replaced the remaining words with polygons that visually represent the semantic content of each word. *Local Colour* is a novel without words, yet one that translates and transforms—geographically and semantically—the content of Auster's *Ghosts* into another form; it is a novel emptied of all the signals of a novel, dusted with isolated pixels still broadcasting in to the void.

*

*Local Colour* was originally published through Finnish critic Leevi Lehto's ntamo press in 2008. Once that edition lapsed out of print it was re-issued online as a downloadable PDF through American critic Craig Dworkin's Eclipse website in 2010. This digital reissue has fostered a readership that was simply unrealizable with the print edition.

When I tell my creative writing students at the Alberta College of Art + Design that the best means of promoting their work is to participate within a network of distribution it can seem counter-intuitive that they should give their work away. Using an extended metaphor, I describe publishing practices and assertions of copyright as being akin to contemporary zoos. Throughout the world zoos are struggling to maintain attendance rates which allow economic sustainability. Zoos require that visitors come to them, pay a fee and view the animals from a safe distance. The animals are kept behind bars (figurative or literal) and are out of contact; they are mere displays. I playfully propose that in order for zoos (and, by metaphorical extension, authors) to assert a new relevance they should release a breeding pair of underfed animals upon the general

populace once a month. Each month this breeding pair would wreak havoc on the city. The population would want to learn everything they could about the rampaging animals. The animals meanwhile would devour passersby, breed and evolve unexpectedly. These animals would be joined by other competitive—and equally aggressive—members of the evolutionary food chain (a pride of lions and a dale of hippopotami for example). In other courses my students are taught to "professionalize", to build marketability, and to treat their work with a sense of exclusivity. I completely disagree. By treating their work like my metaphorical zoos, they will allow their art to metastasize in unpredictable and exciting means, interacting with the digital landscape in ways that are truly contemporary. With these releases in to the contemporary 'wild,' zoos and zookeepers would be a radically new, and slightly dangerous, resource. The best way of creating an audience for contemporary poetics is to release work online, giving the audience unfettered access to the text's future.

*Local Colour* exemplifies this stance. Only once I released *Local Colour* online did it truly begin to embody its potentiality as a conceptually collaborative text. In 2012, Ola Ståhl and Carl Lindh (Malmö, Sweden) reissued *Local Colour* though their Publication Studio Malmö / In Edit Mode Press. Produced in an edition of 200 copies, *Local Colour: Ghosts, Variations* treats *Local Colour* as the initiating point for a series of rewritings, collaborations, reinterpretations and creative feedback that explore what Ståhl calls:

> [t]he tension [...] between the textual narrative and the graphical mark, and the opening it seems to provide toward a realm of intermediality and experimentation.

*Local Colour: Ghosts, Variations* is a collection of unbound folios, perfect-bound miniature books, leaflets and compact discs. Gathered with

a printed paper band (itself also a response to the source text), *Local Colour: Ghosts, Variations* includes a new edition of *Local Colour* and responses by seventeen international authors, poets and sound artists. *Local Colour*—in the Publication Studio Malmö / In Edit Mode Press edition—is a permissive node which allows the generation of further interpretations and an international discussion of the potentiality of conceptual writing. Editor Ola Ståhl states that he was most intrigued by:

> the way in which *Local Colour* seems to split Auster's narrative text open, deterritorializing it by rendering it graphical and freeing it up, by the same gesture, to a potential excess of meaning.

*

On the rare occasions that I perform sections from *Local Colour* I draw inspiration from Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd's performance of *Prix Nobel* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1960) and by Kenneth Goldsmith's performance of *Gertrude Stein on Punctuation* (Newton: Abaton Books, 1999). Both authors perform devoid of emotion and rely on a voicing of graphed, measured empty space. These two reading styles inspired me to view *Local Colour*, both in publication and in performance, as what composer Brain Eno referred to as "ambient."

In the liner notes to his 1978 album *Music for Airports / Ambient 1*, Eno proposes music "as an atmosphere, or a surrounding influence: a tint". Ambient music should be heard but not necessarily listened to. Eno contrasts ambient music with muzak and argues that:

> [w]hereas the extant canned music companies proceed from the basis of regularizing environments by blanketing their acoustic and atmospheric idiosyncrasies, Ambient Music is intended to enhance these. Whereas conventional background music is pro-

> duced by stripping away all sense of doubt and uncertainty (and thus all genuine interest) from the music, Ambient Music retains these qualities. And whereas [muzak's] intention is to "brighten" the environment by adding stimulus to it (thus supposedly alleviating the tedium of routine tasks and leveling out the natural ups and downs of the body rhythms) Ambient Music is intended to induce calm and a space to think.

Eno's formulation builds upon Erik Satie's theorizing of "furniture music." Frustrated by music in public spaces which was too assertive, distracting diners and gallery attendees from appreciating their own conversations, Satie proposed music:

> that would be a part of the surrounding noises and that would take them onto account. I see it as melodious, as masking the clatter of knives and forks without drowning it completely, without imposing itself. It would fill up the awkward silences that occasionally descend on guests. It would spare them the usual banalities. Moreover, it would neutralize the street noises that indiscreetly force themselves into the pictures.

Satie's proposal suggests music is meant to blot out extraneous noise (though this begs an intervention by Cage and his formulation of silence) creating a "neutralized" palate that fills up the "awkward silences." Satie's "furniture music" would remain effortlessly in the background, an inoffensive relaxing wash rendering all spaces prepared for discussion and thought. Poetry should not assert anything at all; it should be nothing but smooth and undistinguished commentary on the textual landscape within which we reside.

With *Local Colour*, I propose a form of writing that takes Eno's formation of ambient music as "a tint" literally. Dispensing with words (and integrating Concrete poetry into its prosody), *Local Colour* is weightless and pristine, unmarked by language, consisting solely of tinted rectangles.

Eno promotes an ambient aesthetic that creates "space to think" and "enhance[s] the mood." I prefer an ambient writing which is closer to the materiality of Concrete poetry and to statements by Robert Smithson. Smithson famously argues that "[m]y sense of language is that it is matter and not ideas—i.e. 'printed matter'" and that:

> [l]anguage should find itself in the physical world and not end up locked in an idea in somebody's head [...] writing should generate ideas in to matter and not the other way around.

Smithson supports the poetic prioritization of the material of language through his infamous "heap of language." Eno looks to an ambient stylistics in order to create a flattened, peaceful, artistic space designed to enhance such ethereal ideas as "mood," "calm" and "a space to think." I would rather suggest that an Ambient poetic should be more reflective of the modern milieu, emphasizing the overwhelming graphic textual ecology.

*

Both *Local Colour* and *flatland: a romance of many dimensions* are poetic translations, and as Robert Frost famously stated, "poetry is what gets lost in translation." In both volumes, my translation ignores the mimesis of meaning. These two volumes embrace Conceptual poetry's methods of appropriation and Ambient poetic's stylistics of using chain restaurants and other flat-pack public spaces. Instead of pointing at the wash of language that inhabits public space (the *what* and the *how much*) *Local Colour*

focuses on the geographic layout of that information (the *where*). With *Local Colour*, all semantic content is "lost" in favour of chromatic markers. These rectangles, created with MSPaint (the digital equivalent a house-painter's roller: a blunt digital instrument not known for subtlety), replace text with swatches, linguistic content with a measured patch of colour. I extend Eno's insistence that ambient music:

> must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular

by formulating a text that does not enforce any particular reading.

*

The combining of the sensibilities of Concrete poetry and Conceptual writing, explored in *flatland: a romance of many dimensions* and *Local Colour*, coupled with the possibilities of graphic translation was predated by my painting suite "The Newspaper" (2004).

With *The Newspaper* I crafted a translation of an extant text, but instead of treating a piece of fiction I translated a single, "valueless", average edition of *The Calgary Herald*. I did not choose to interpret the newspaper of a historically important day (such as September 11, 2001 or Barack Obama's first election). Instead, I picked a singularly uninteresting day: July 18, 2002.

Over the course of two years I redrew every page from the July 18, 2002 edition of *The Calgary Herald* as a suite of 124 paintings. I didn't read the newspaper as a means of gleaning the news of the day—I read simply to categorize and sort, free of the need to report or editorialize. Nothing of note happened that day, other than the fact that thousands of newspapers were written, printed, distributed, sold, read and discarded. The newspaper is, in Smithson's words, merely "printed matter."

I tabulated the content of each article in to eight categories and assigned each a colour. That day's newspaper consisted of thirty international news articles (assigned the colour red) and nine national news articles (yellow), eleven provincial news articles (brown) and twelve local news (pink). There were twenty-eight entertainment stories (blue), thirty-two sports articles (green), nineteen business stories (violet) and ten health articles (orange). Each different article within each category was painted in a differing shade of the assigned hue; thirty differing shades of red, nine differing shades of yellow and so on. That day's paper consisted of 151 different articles. And over 125 different advertisements—and 36 full pages of advertising inserts—which were represented by four differing shades of grey. *The Newspaper* is an indictment of how we package and parse information. Like Kenneth Goldsmith's *Day* (2003) in which he retyped the contents of a single day's *New York Times* and Nancy Chunn's *Front Pages* (1997) in which she rubberstamped and collaged over the front page of every *New York Times* for a year, "The Newspaper" artistically exposes that, in the words of Marshall McLuhan:

> the newspaper […] structures ordinary unawareness in patterns which correspond to the most sophisticated maneuvers of mathematical physics and modern painting.

McLuhan continues to argue that any given newspaper page is a "symbolist mosaic" that "upset[s] book culture and the book page profoundly." *The Newspaper* removes all text from every page. What remains is a prolonged examination of the newspaper's form and our habits of reading. With *The Newspaper* form and content become interwoven—the shape, size and arrangement of columns and text blocks are brought forward in the visual mix while the content of each article is reflected simply as a

block of assigned colour. The viewer's eye tracks by colour not by content. McLuhan suggests that reading the newspaper is an exercise in simultaneous fractured narratives and is in direct contradiction to that of normalized book reading:

> [t]he format of the book page offers a linear, not a picturesque perspective. It fosters a single tone and attitude between a writer, reader, subject, whereas the newspaper breaks up the linearity and singleness of tone and perspective, offering many book pages at the same moment.

*The Newspaper* reads against "linearity and singleness of tone" in an attempt to move Conceptual writing—as cast through the lens of Concrete poetry—to a discussion of scale. Very few contemporary Concrete poets challenge scale as a compositional concern. Both *flatland* and *Local Colour* engage with the problems of a visual novel (or visual long poem). *The Newspaper* moves from the traditionally literary book to the gallery, shifting from reading to viewing. Too many Concrete poets restrict their thinking to A4 (or letter-sized) pages instead of the potentialities of the undefined dimensions of the canvas. By limiting themselves to the A4 page, Concrete poets and Conceptual writers limit their engagement to only to the most traditional definitions of a writing / reading space.

**"An endless, polyglot failure party": Robert Fitterman's *now we are friends*.**

Founded in 2009, Truck Books is "a small press specializing in contemporary experimental writing in the avant-garde tradition" which focuses on "works that focus on a variety of objects from vernacular languages to social and information systems, production systems and capital flows." They have published 5 books to date each of which is available as a free PDF or as a printed edition sold on a sliding scale.

Their editorial mandate focussing on "social and information systems" belies their dedication to conceptual writing siphoned from the gushing falls of the internet into 7" by 7" square-bound editions of bottled information.

Robert Fitterman's latest volume, *now we are friends* (Truck Books, 2010), builds upon his previous volumes in the *Metropolis* series, most particularly his *Sprawl: Metropolis 30A* (Make Now, 2010). In each volume, Fitterman has placed increasing distance between his work and the traditionally poetic in favour of the language of malls, consumer sites, discussions groups, Facebook and blogs as he mines our daily language.

Fitterman's oeuvre has been dedicated to defining the new poetic pastoral as the suburban mall (and, in later volumes, the Internet). For, as Sidney exclaimed:

> Does not the pleasantness of [the internet] carry in itself sufficient reward for any time lost in it, or for any such danger that might ensue? Do you not see how everything conspires together to make this place a heavenly dwelling?

With *now we are friends* Fitterman has turned to populating that new Arcadia with his own brand of lazing shepherd constructed from the same corporate language he used to sculpt the shepherds' fields

In October 1969 Vito Acconci performed "Following Piece" in which he chose a series of strangers, followed them through their daily activities and transcribed their movements. *now we are friends* picks up on this with Fitterman following a single random person across the digital fields of the internet, allowing the personal flotsam of a single person's life accumulate into a rhizomatic biography.

Fitterman chose, at random, the euphonious name "Ben Kessler" as the basis for his poetic exploration of online identity and tracks Kessler through his Twitter feed, his "my 10 favorite iPhone Apps of 2008" post, his Tweetdeck reviews and any other online flotsam of Kessler's public internet profile. As Fitterman continues to mine into Kessler's public internet appearances, the manuscript begins to envelope "other" Ben Kesslers. When ego surfing, or responding to Google Alerts, how many of us have had the uncanny moment of reading an entry about another internet denizen with the same name as ours? Just as our individuality has become performed through online testimonies, archives photographs and abandoned dating site profiles, so has Ben Kessler become intriguing only as one of a platoon of identically-named laptop-wielding internet-addicted individuals who feel their skills are best used commenting on which fictional character from a video game or comic book they would most like to eat a sandwich with.

Ben Kessler's identity begins to blur when this flotilla of Kesslers interrupt the narrative by discussing "keeping Faith in times of transition", the pratfalls of being a "freelance permaculture teacher" and warning that:

> designers who strive for success should prepare themselves for the challenges of doing creative work in the middle of an endless, polyglot failure party.

That "endless, polyglot failure party" (which ominously describes many of the literary salons and poetic endeavours happening today) becomes weirdly overpopulated with the further introduction of a choir of "ben's friends" and "ben's friend's friends" each of them listing their favourite films, their online biographies, their "five things other should know about [them]."

As a coda to the text, Steve Zultanski has "followed" Robert Fitterman through information provided by Fitterman's own family. Listed are his favourite colognes, a list of his ex-girlfriends, information on his parents and brother, dedications and inscriptions Fitterman wrote in books given as gifts, his pet's veterinarian report and mundane notes left to his wife, poet Kim Rosenfield. Zultanski also interviews Fitterman's daughter Coco (who provides a screenshot of Fitterman's computer desktop).

What dates Acconci's "Following Piece" as a cultural antique is its dependence on physical space. On the net we have online profiles that we have long since abandoned and "friends" we've never interacted with. Acconci's transcription of a single follower in a single social space has been superceded now that Facebook has made us each the cult leader of our own band of followers—with "friends" who follow our movements and respond to every flickering change in our "relationship status" in a single social space. Fitterman gathers the diverse portraits of a single digital everyman, Ben Kessler, and presents to us a digital Willy Loman.

*now we are friends* Ben Kesslers us all. Fitterman exposes the digital flatness of the language of our friendships, our relationships, our job and hobbies, our passions and interests. The details of our lives, as mundane

as they may be are not only constantly observed, they are constantly recorded—we are constantly on display, hoping we'll hear that *now we are friends*.

To learn more about and interact with me, why not say hi? You can find me on Facebook, Twitter, FriendFeed and Linkedin.

**A Future for the Novel (2011)**

*After Alain Robbe-Grillet*

I.

It seems hardly reasonable at first glance to suppose that an entirely new literature might one day—now, for instance—be possible. The many attempts made these last thirty years to drag literature out of its ruts have resulted at best, in no more than isolated works. And—we are often told—none of these works, whatever its interest, has gained the adherence of a public comparable to that of the bourgeois novel. The only conception of the novel to have currency today is, in fact, that of Dickens.

Or that of Charlotte Brontë. Already sacrosanct in her day, psychological analysis constituted the basis of all prose: it governed the conception of the book, the description of the characters, the development of its plot. A "good" novel, ever since, has remained the study of a passion—or of a conflict of passions, or of an absence of passion—in a given milieu. Most of our contemporary novelists of the traditional sort—those, that is, who manage to gain the approval of their readers—could insert long passages from *Jane Eyre* or *Great Expectations* into their own books without awakening the suspicions of the enormous public which devours whatever they turn out. They would merely need to change a phrase here and there, simplify certain constructions, afford an occasional glimpse of their own "manner" by means of a word, a daring image, the rhythm of a sentence …. But all acknowledge, without seeing anything peculiar about it, that their own preoccupations as writers date back several centuries.

What is so surprising about this, after all? The raw material—the English language—has undergone only very slight modifications for three hundred years; and if society has been gradually transformed, if industrial techniques have made considerable progress, our intellectual civilization has remained much the same. We live by essentially the same habits and

the same prohibitions—moral, alimentary, religious, sexual, hygienic, etc. And of course there is always the human "heart," which as everyone knows is eternal. There's nothing new under the sun, it's all been said before, we've come on the scene too late, etc., etc.

The risk of such rebuffs is merely increased if one dares claim that this new literature is not only possible in the future, but is already being written, and that it will represent—in its fulfillment—a revolution more complete than those which in the past produced such movements as romanticism or naturalism.

There is, of course, something ridiculous about such a promise as "Now things are going to be different!" How will they be different? In what direction will they change? And, especially, why are they going to change now?

The art of literature, however, has fallen into such a state of stagnation—a lassitude acknowledged and discussed by the whole of critical opinion—that it is hard to imagine such an art can survive for long without some radical change. To many, the solution seems simple enough: such a change being impossible, the art of the literature is dying. This is far from certain. History will reveal, in a few decades, whether the various fits and starts that have been recorded are signs of a death agony or of a rebirth.

## II.

In any case, we must make no mistake as to the difficulties such a revolution will encounter. They are considerable. The entire caste system of our literary life (from publisher to the humblest reader, including bookseller and critic) has no choice but to oppose the unknown form that is attempting to establish itself. The minds best disposed to the idea of a necessary transformation, those most willing to countenance and even welcome the values of the experiment, remain, nonetheless, the heirs of a tradition. A new form will always seem more or less an absence of any

form at all, since it is unconsciously judged by reference to the consecrated forms. A Canadian critic dismisses contemporary craft as "certified by use of fragmentation, layered texts, collage, and the embrace of—why not say it?—nonsense. [A t]heoretically self-pleasuring […] zoo of rampant esotericisms." This brief judgment is to be found in an anthology of *poetry*, evidently written by a specialist.

The newborn work will always be regarded as a monster, even by those who find experiment fascinating. There will be some curiosity, of course, some gestures of interest, always some provision for the future. And some praise; though what is sincere will always be addressed to the vestiges of the familiar, to all those bonds from which the new work has not yet broken free and which desperately seek to imprison it in the past.

For if the norms of the past serve to measure the present, they also serve to construct it. The writer herself, despite her desire for independence, is situated within an intellectual culture and a literature that can only be those of the past. It is impossible for her to escape altogether from this tradition of which she is the product. Sometimes the very elements she has tried hardest to oppose seem, on the contrary, to flourish more vigorously than ever in the very work by which she hoped to destroy them; and she will be congratulated, of course, with relief for having cultivated them so zealously.

Hence it will be the literary specialists (novelists, poets or critics, or over-assiduous readers) who have the hardest time dragging themselves out of its rut.

Even the least conditioned observer is unable to see the world around her through entirely unprejudiced eyes. Not, of course, that I have in mind the naïve concern for objectivity which the analysts of the (subjective) soul find it so easy to smile at. Objectivity in the ordinary sense of the word—total impersonality of observation—is all too obviously an illusion. But freedom from observation should be possible, and yet it is

not. At every moment, a continuous fringe of culture (psychology, ethics, metaphysics, etc.) is added to words, giving them a less alien aspect, one that is more comprehensible, more reassuring. Sometimes the camouflage is complete: a word vanishes from our mind, supplanted by the emotions which supposedly produced it, and we remember a landscape as *austere* or *calm* without being able to evoke a single outlines, a single determining element. Even if we immediately think, "That's literary," we don't try to react against the thought we accept the fact that what is *literary* (the word has become pejorative) functions like a grid or screen set with bits of different coloured glass that fracture our field of vision into tiny *assimilable* facets.

And if something resists this systematic appropriation of the visual, if an element of the world breaks the glass, without finding any place in the interpretative screen, we can always make use of our convenient category of "the experimental" in order to absorb this awkward residue.

III.

But words are neither significant nor experimental. They *are*, quite simply. That, in any case, is the most remarkable thing about them. And suddenly the obviousness of this strikes us with irresistible force. All at once the whole splendid construction collapses; opening our eyes unexpectedly, we have experienced, once too often, the shock of this stubborn reality we were pretending to have mastered. Around us, words *are there*. Their surfaces are distinct and smooth, *intact*, neither suspiciously brilliant nor transparent. All our literature has not yet succeeded in eroding their smallest corner, in flattening their slightest curve.

Instead of this universe of "signification" (psychological, social functional), we must try, then, to construct texts both more solid and more immediate. Let it be first of all by their presence that words establish themselves, and let this presence continue to prevail over whatever explanatory theory that may try to enclose them in a system of references,

whether Structuralist, Freudian or metatextual.

In this future universe of the novel, words will be there before meaning something; and they will still be there afterwards, hard, unalterable, eternally present, mocking their own "meaning," that meaning which vainly tries to reduce them to the role of precarious tools, or a temporary and shameful fabric woven exclusively—and deliberately—by the superior human truth expressed in it.

Henceforth, on the contrary, words will gradually lose their instability and their secrets, will renounce their pseudo-mystery, that suspect interiority which Roland Barthes has called "the romantic heart of things." No longer will texts be merely the vague reflection of a hero's vague soul, the image of her torments, the shadow of her desires. Or rather, if words still afford a momentary prop to human passions they will do so only provisionally, and will accept the tyranny of significations only in appearance—derisively, one might say—the better to show how alien they remain to people.

IV.

As for the novel's words, they may themselves suggest many possible interpretations; they may, according to the preoccupations of each reader, accommodate all kinds of comment—psychological, psychiatric, religious or political—yet their indifference to these "potentialities" is apparent. Whereas the traditional text is constantly solicited, caught up, destroyed by these interpretations of the author's, ceaselessly projected into an immaterial and unstable elsewhere, always more remote and blurred, the conceptual text remains, on the contrary, *there*. It is the commentaries that will be left elsewhere; in the face of this irrefutable presence, they will seem useless, superfluous, even improper.

Exhibit X in any detective story gives us, paradoxically, a clear image of this situation. The evidence gathered by the inspectors—an object left at the scene of the crime, a movement captured in a photograph,

a sentence overheard by a witness—seem chiefly, at first, to require an explanation, to exist only in relation to their role in a context which overpowers them. And already the theories begin to take shape: the presiding magistrate attempts to establish a logical and presiding link between things; it appears that everything will be resolved in a banal bundle of causes and consequences and coincidences….

But the story begins to proliferate in a disturbing way: the witnesses contradict one another, the defendant offers several alibis, new evidence appears that had not been taken into account … And we keep going back to the recorded evidence: the exact position of a piece of furniture, the shape and frequency of a fingerprint, the word scribbled in a message. We have the mounting sense that nothing else is *true*. Though they may conceal a mystery, or betray it, these elements which make a mockery of systems have only one serious, obvious quality, which is to *be there*.

The same is true of the language around us. We had thought to control it by assigning it a meaning, and the entire art of the novel, in particular, seemed dedicated to this enterprise. But this was merely an illusory simplification; and far from becoming clearer and closer because of it, language has only, little by little, lost all its life. Since it is chiefly in its presence that the text's reality resides, our task is now to create a literature which takes that presence into account.

V.

All this might seem very theoretical, very illusory, if something were not actually changing—changing totally, definitively—in our relations with text. Which is why we glimpse an answer to the old ironic question, "Why now?" There is today, in fact, a new element that separates us radically this time from Dickens as from Austen or from Brontë: it is the destitution of the old myths of "depth."

We know that the whole literature of the novel was based on

these myths, and on them alone. The writer's traditional role consisted in excavating Nature, in burrowing deeper and deeper to reach some ever more intimate strata, in finally unearthing some fragment of a disconcerting secret. Having descended into the abyss of human passions, she would send to the seemingly tranquil world (the world on the surface) triumphant messages describing the mysteries she had actually touched with her own hands. And the sacred vertigo the reader suffered then, far from causing her anguish or nausea, reassured her as to her power of domination over the world. There were chasms, certainly, but thanks to such valiant speleologists, their depths could be sounded.

It is not surprising, given these conditions, that the literary phenomenon par excellence should have resided in the total and unique adjective, which attempted to unite all the inner qualities, the entire hidden soul of things. Thus the word functioned as a trap in which the writer captured the universe in order to hand it over to society.

The revolution which has occurred is in kind; not only do we no longer consider texts as our own, our private property, designed according to our needs and readily domesticated, but we no longer even believe in their "depth." While essentialist conceptions of man met their destruction, the notion of "condition" henceforth replacing that of "nature," the *surface* of things has ceased to be for us the mask of their heart, a sentiment that led to every kind of metaphysical transcendence.

Thus it is the entire literary language that must change, that is changing already. From day to day, we witness the growing repugnance felt by some writers for texts of a visceral, analogical, or incantatory character. On the other hand, the visual or descriptive adjective, the text that contents itself with measuring, locating, limiting, defining, indicates a difficult but most likely direction for a new art of the novel.

**The Text Festival: An Interview with Tony Trehy**

The Text Festival in Bury, UK, is an internationally recognized event investigating contemporary language art in all its guises. Language, it proposes, is a unified field of enquiry, and an international art-practice and dialogue. This interview took place in 2011 after the third festival.

The Festival specializes in performances, experiments, experiences, and exhibitions that mix art forms in ground-breaking combinations which challenge traditional language art boundaries and offer artists a forum for dialogue and exchange of ideas.

Tony Trehy is an international art curator, Director of the Text Festival and a poet-text artist. He has published in various international literary journals and has published 4 books of poetry: *50 Heads* (2006), *Reykjavik* (2007), *Irony of Flatness* (2008) and *Space The Soldier Who Died For Perspective* (2009). He rarely performs but insists on each reading being structured around new analysis for previous works. His poems are also frequently responses to particular gallery or urban spaces, with these texts subsequently installed in gallery spaces in cities from Edinburgh to Reykjavik, Bonn to Melbourne. His latest (and last?) collection *The End of Poetry: Other possible Trehys from Leibniz* was published by MetaSenta, Melbourne in 2012. Robert Grenier has said of Trehy's poetry that "Just as William Carlos Williams brought 'American speech' into the long tradition of 'making' poetry in English/American literary usage/language, so Tony Trehy has introduced the lingo/thinking ('style') of mathematics into the 'poem-containing-history'—well emboldened by passionate, personal knowledges of his own." Trehy lives in Manchester, with his wife Susan and the famous poetry dog, Barney.

**derek beaulieu**: What was your impetus for creating the Text Festival?

**Tony Trehy**: Having curated various art-forms (but mainly in

galleries and public art) for about 15 years in parallel with a separate personal output of writing, I had come to a point where I was trying to fit the two creative practices—curating and poetry—into not enough hours in the day. Then sometime in late 2003, I had been talking to Lawrence Weiner about a commission and had reason to communicate with Ron Silliman. There was a sudden moment when I realized that these split conversations mirrored my own psychological segregation of language into art and poetry: I realized that my poetry was part of my curatorial persona. And concurrent with the revelation that I could break down the split in my practice, of course, instantaneously, I had to recognize the split also existed in the wider interaction between conceptual art and poetry; subsequently, I have extended this conception to question the location of language across art-forms—sound, multimedia, performance, etc. I have got used to quickly adding in relation to 'poetry' that I mean the progressive art-form little connected to the dead form that mostly passes for 'poetry' in the UK. The moribund state of UK poetry in relation to international developments was definitely one of the aspects that the first Text Festival took on. Although, I still find it personally entertaining to have a go at the state of mainstream poetry on my blog, it is more the pleasure of flogging a dead horse rather than being a real issue that concerns the Festival.

**beaulieu**: What has the response been from the UK poetic community?

**Trehy**: Pretty much none at all. But that's really to be expected—British mainstream poetry didn't get to its current comatose state by engaging with new developments; it's sort of gratifying that it can't respond to criticism as it verifies its incapability. But in the end, it's not so important—the Festival isn't conceived in relation to the UK or to poetry *per se*.

**beaulieu**: If the response from the poetic community has been

silence what about the visual art community? What do you believe that the 2 communities have to learn from each other, as epitomized in the Text Festival?

**Trehy**: I wouldn't say that the response of the poetic community in the UK has been silent—that is the default position of the Hegemony of the Banal, but it's poetry is pretty quiet too—(Ron Silliman's phrase: the School of Quietude). The response of the poetic community has been more complex related to the local (UK) structures of dialogue and status. The visual art community gives a more relaxed impression of critical engagement with the Festival. I am not sure why that is—maybe it is that the venues of the events are more in their comfort zone, a familiar vocabulary of spaces. I am always careful of this juxtaposition of visual to poetic though, because for me (and them) sound artists, performance artists, media artists—any other language forms—are all part of the mix: I find poets are most keen to treat it as a dialogue between the two 'communities', maybe that is part of their isolation from the practice of the other art-forms.

**beaulieu**: In terms of that isolation from other art-forms—what do you believe that the poetic community has to learn from the art community?

**Trehy**: I suppose it could do with not being isolated! It's generally been my position that significant things happen when art-forms are in dialogue. This is one of the things the Text Festival assumes.

**beaulieu**: Has the mandate of the festival changed since its first incarnation? What to you have been some of the highlights of the festival to date?

**Trehy**: There is something about the word mandate that suggests that its imperatives came from somewhere else, from outside; I think the reason why it has developed a unique status is that it generates its own context. I suppose no-one else can see the festival the way I do because I

have seen all three of the festivals, but for me, the Text Festivals are in dialogue with each other. I have found it interesting this time round how a number of poets have written about how it has taken a direction or a position in relation to poetry. The Festival isn't about poetry; it's not a poetry festival. The festival is always to do with a question. So with the first exhibition of the first festival (also my first highlight), I asked myself: how to curate a show that juxtaposes contemporary poetry with visual (language) art? By its aesthetic location, the festival often operates in fields in which recipients (to use Lawrence Weiner's term) may not come equipped with the knowledge and histories of particular art-forms. As Art Monthly magazine observed, I have an "intrepid resistance to interpretation", and in exhibitions of text I don't see how you can use interpretive texts without clunking over the works. So then I have the question of what curatorial strategy can contextualize the question for a gallery visitor? In the first show, I created therefore a large bookcase that blocked views into the gallery—you had to face it and go round it to get in. I called this "The Canon" and featured all the books you would need to get all the messages in the show—ha! Audiences aren't asked to work hard enough nowadays. And into the show itself: again, is there curatorial conceit that can represent this coming together of forms? Taking a form from Concrete Poetry, I came up with a display constellation. This was working very nicely but there was still something missing. Although the festival has announced submission deadlines, if the curatorial concept demands it, I will keep accepting proposals and looking for works right up to the last minute. In this case, I didn't know what was missing, just that it needed something. It came in the form of a performance artist, Hester Reeve (HRH.the) who proposed to spend the 9 weeks of the first show sitting in the gallery reading and simultaneously writing Heidegger's "Being and Time."

In the second Festival, although a lot of people rated the *Bury Poems* readings with Tony Lopez, Carol Watts and Phil Davenport, my

highpoint was the headline gig with Ron Silliman. For this the question was, if you have Ron doing his first ever reading in the UK, who else do you put on the bill? There couldn't be another poet, so I programmed Scottish story-telling artist, Catriona Glover, German turntablist Claus van Bebber, and Hester Reeve. I was very pleased with that balance. It was a great night, but this year surpassed it curatorially by the juxtaposition of sound art from Sarah Boothroyd and Bruno Bresani with Holly Pester, Eduard Escoffet, Christian Bök plus the surprise interventions of Geof Huth and you.

A couple of guest curators have produced magical moments to note: Phil Davenport's Bob Cobbing show in 2005 and this year's readings of Schwitters' *Ursonata* at Warth Mill.

This sounds like a lot of highlights but one element of all the festivals that forms an integral part of the dynamic is the festival party where a lot of the artists meet—that is very important.

**beaulieu**: So—if each festival is in dialogue with the previous, then what—after the 3rd incarnation—would you still like to address?

**Trehy**: Ah, the trick question—I wondered how you might approach this. As you know, I announced before this Festival that I wouldn't be doing another. At various points during the 2011 event I did have ideas of what might be interesting next. But I am still resisting the tyranny of having to do what one is able to do. Through my links with Finland—visual art and poetry—we are talking about doing some sort of Text show/event in Tampere (the Manchester of Finland), so my textual inclinations may still be occupied; but either way, if there was another Text Festival, it couldn't be until 2014 because I am working on another (non-text) international art project which will keep me occupied until then (starting in September, I'll be setting it up in China).

But thinking about the question, I have been reflecting on the Festival just ending and have an increasing sense of disappointment with

the responses of the poetry community—so I'd probably start thinking about how to address the problems I perceive: namely, it struck me that, despite my aspiration to locate poetry in dialogue with other language-using art-forms, writing from the festival poets have tended only to engage with poetry. I found it really telling that no-one commented on the location of George Widener and Steve Miller in Wonder Rooms, for instance—both visual artists not visual poets, both using language in gripping ways. I'm not saying that there weren't great visual poems in the show; I'm saying it seems odd to me that the visual artists' contribution drew so little attention from the poets. Similarly, the poets have tended to focus on Ron Silliman's neon text and Tony Lopez's digital text in the Sentences exhibition; but the poets, don't seem to have anything to say about the Marcel Broodthaers, for instance. I think I would address this. Maybe there would be fewer poets; maybe supporting a notion of 'poetry community' is counter-productive in shifting poetry into a more critically rigorous relationship with art.

I think that Ron also asked a question that interests me: he observed that a lot of the work on display can't be "called new in any way that is meaningful within poetry" (note again that this locates the Festival agenda as poetic). He proceeded to raise the question "Is the work any good?" Some of it is more than good. Some of it isn't. I have a pretty good idea which is which. But again, I am not sure that I am comfortable with the claim for the festival that quality of work is its aim. I set out to investigate the implications of certain actions, certain juxtapositions. It's my hope that testing ideas is what participating artists will use the festival for—the space to fail, and learn things from that. Some of the criticisms of Ron's neon are legitimate but much of it misses the point of what that work does in the gallery and how it will function as a piece of site-specific public art. Christian Bök's *The Xenotext* is still a work in progress; he would acknowledge that he developed his thinking about how the model

and text function as objects on display as the installation progressed; and I think that that is an important contribution to the development of the work.

**beaulieu**: How has the festival affected your own poetic practice?

**Trehy**: I'd have to say it has stoned it dead! After the first festival, I took a year off to recover during which I wrote *50 Heads*. And with a gap of 4 years between the first festival and the second, I was able to write a body of works including *Reykjavik* and *Space The Soldier Who Died For Perspective* plus various text art installations. This time the festival was almost too big for me to handle and in the run up and afterwards, the huge creative demand of it has pretty much drained me. I had a handful of very useful conversations during the festival (not least with you and Christian Bök), which suggested to me where my writing should go (an inkling of re-inventing a non-poetic form, taking my interest in language and space in a new direction) but there seems little chance that I will have the energy to address it anytime soon.

**Every Word in the Sentence: An Interview with Natalie Simpson**

Natalie Simpson is a mainstay in Calgary, Alberta's poetic community. Longtime editor, publisher, facilitator, host and generous colleague, Simpson's work has been published extensively across Canada. Renowned for her poetic delivery, Simpson's two volumes of poetry, *accrete or crumble* and *Thrum* complement almost twenty different chapbooks and dozens of anthology and magazine appearance. This interview was originally conducted in two parts immediately following the publication of Simpson's two volumes of poetry. It has been knitted together here into a single discussion of poetics and process.

**derek beaulieu**: To start with, I'd like to discuss your first book of poetry *accrete or crumble* (Line Books, 2006). You did your MA thesis at the University of Calgary, writing on Stein's sentences—to what extent did the Steinian sentence influence your work, and specifically *accrete or crumble*?

**Natalie Simpson**: I think with Stein the issue is how to escape her influence—I first started reading Stein near the end of my undergraduate degree and immediately everything I wrote sounded exactly like her. Stein's writing has such distinct rhythm and such a seductive style that once her voice gets into your head it's difficult to avoid trying to rewrite and rewrite her. I like to think that I've been able to incorporate her influence without writing too derivatively. There are a few distinct elements of the "Steinian" sentence that stand out for me. First, the flattening of syntactical hierarchy, which means giving every word in the sentence equal weight, regardless of its function. In Stein's sentences, all the small words, such as prepositions, pronouns, articles, demand as much attention as the nouns and verbs that in normative sentences drive the narrative or convey the sentence's information. This equalized approach to parts of speech results from (or contributes to) the move away from referentiality towards

materiality, and it's quite liberating. I admire Stein for how creative and radical she was able to get with syntax. And certainly the best response I've heard to my writing is that the syntax is unexpected and therefore exciting. It is exciting to subvert the authority of the sentence without feeling any need to *get out of* the sentence.

Second, I've found Stein's attitude towards punctuation very instructive. Her lecture on punctuation in *Lectures in America* is really absurd (…at most the comma is a poor period that lets you stop and take a breath but if you want to take a breath you ought to know yourself that you want to take a breath...) but delightful. She perceives so much personality in each punctuation mark, and it's true—using a dash where a semicolon would do, for example, really changes the tone of a sentence. I think a lot about punctuation and what it does, how it aids syntax, and how it frustrates syntax. I think there is a fundamental tension within written language between syntax and punctuation, and I think that's where a lot of the energy of poetry comes from. In particular, I remember writing a section of the thesis on Stein's use of the comma in *Tender Buttons*. I thought it was fascinating how she employs the serial comma, which normally separates items in a list, to link together disparate phrases, which form a pattern, and a rhythm, and flower into this brilliant discourse. It's really a masterful use of such a reviled, "servile" punctuation mark. There are certain poems in *accrete or crumble* that are all about punctuation. Studying Stein has made me pay very close attention to the smallest elements of the written language.

The third element of the Steinian sentence that has influenced me is Stein's reverence for (is that an appropriate description? I'm not sure; fascination with, maybe) the sentence. I do think that Stein was always composing sentences and nothing but sentences, and that her various works are essentially longer or shorter chains of longer or shorter sentences. The energy with which she seems to have approached writing

sentences and the pleasure she seems to have taken in the minutest grammatical shifts are really infectious. When I write (and in particular when I wrote most of the poems in *accrete or crumble*) I'm primarily focused on sound, syntax, rhythmic shifts, tensions, torques—all very intricate and delicate aspects of sentence construction—and minimally interested in meanings, themes, larger patterns. I'm not convinced that my approach to writing is entirely successful. *accrete or crumble* for example, probably suffers from a lack of overarching theme or an obvious structure. But a large part of the pleasure I get from writing and reading poetry rests in that sort of transcendent or disoriented feeling of being surprised by language, the sort of double take when successions of words reveal their strange possibilities. Oh yeah, *ostranenie*, that's what I'm describing. Making strange.

**beaulieu**: In some of your recent poetry—*Dirty Work* (above/ground press, 2008), for example—is that interest in materiality and *ostranenie* driving you towards the use of found language? To me it does seem to be an attempt to assert your voice, and—in the case of *Dirty Work*—assert a female voice within the masculine discourse of the oil and gas sector in Calgary.

**Simpson**: Yes, found language is a wonderful method for revealing the tenuous and fragile relationship between the words we use and the information we expect them to convey. My found language poetry revels in failures to communicate, linguistic gaffes that often subvert their speaker's or writer's intentions. It's also fascinating to realize how much context matters. Decontextualizing phrases or sentences from any number of mundane contexts and recontextualizing them in a poem tends to strip them of any rational significance, laying their absurdities bare. I love finding poetic language in the least likely places, and it's amazing how much poetry is out there, hidden in technical manuals, corporate memos, spam mail, and people's habits of speech. I once started a bit of a manifesto about found poetry, which centred on the idea of "snag" language, bits of

language from myriad sources snagging onto the poet's perception, like burrs or those cottony poplar seeds that cover Calgary every spring. In that scenario, the poet is a hypersensitive receptor of language, sculpting or arranging rather than creating the material of the poem.

As for the second part of your question, I was trying in *Dirty Work* to voice my frustration at finding myself in a very secure, well-paid, but incredibly unsatisfying job in an industry that didn't interest me. Collecting the ridiculous snatches of misused language saturating my work life kept me sane and gave me hope that I might take something positive out of a fairly depressing experience. Ultimately, that job was quite valuable in a number of ways: it helped me really understand that vibrant and vital poetry doesn't necessarily come out of an academic environment, and it also made me realize that I can make poetry out of whatever material is at hand, no matter where I am or what I'm (supposed to be) doing.

I don't think I set out with the explicit intention of making a feminist statement about the oil and gas industry, but that was the inevitable result. The oil industry is very conservative when it comes to gender. I always got the sense that female professionals, such as engineers and geologists, were acceptable (perhaps as honorary men?), but the idea of a male receptionist or administrative assistant was laughable. Nobody seemed to question the "natural" order of men doing important work and women providing support to the men. Many of my co-workers arranged their families along those lines as well. I must be very privileged and maybe also very naïve, because before I started that job I was pretty much unaware that anybody still held such antiquated views of gender relations and gender roles. I found it odd, and disorienting. It also made me pretty angry, and thankfully it was a productive anger—*Dirty Work* is my favourite of my works. Paradoxically, finding and appropriating, rescuing, other people's careless expressions is one of the most useful methods I've found for expressing, among other things, my indignation.

**beaulieu**: Do you feel that indignation is something shared by members of Calgary's wider writing community, and how has it been manifested, in your opinion?

**Simpson**: Actually, I'm not sure indignation is a response I associate with the Calgary writing community. Most of the writing here is more celebratory than critical, and the poets in particular are excited about language, performance, and innovation. All of which is reflected in Calgary readings and literary festivals, which consistently feature exuberant, vocal, supportive audiences.

That's not to suggest that the writing coming out of Calgary is apolitical or unconcerned with the current issues that poetry can address—*Booty* by Brea Burton and Jill Hartman and *Fake Math* by ryan fitzpatrick are two good examples of projects that resist hegemony and critique patriarchy through poetic engagement. Although the writing is serious, the performances for those two books are always rambunctious affairs, replete with shout-outs, w00ts, and friendly heckling from the audience. It's also significant that those books use humour to register their discontent with the status quo. Many Calgary poets prefer laughing at absurdities to cataloguing outrages.

Another really interesting project coming (indirectly) out of Calgary recently is Jordan Scott's *blert*, which I think is a wonderful model for an intensely personal poetics that resists facile lyricism by evincing a careful attention to language. The end result is to transform the negative associations of the stutter into an exciting and original poetics: no mean feat. Maybe I'm projecting here, but I've always had the sense that Calgary poets in general are very demanding of their poetics, and wary of accepting language without interrogation. And I think those tendencies are directly attributable to the stellar creative writing programs offered by the University of Calgary English department over the past twenty or so years.

Having said all that, I think there is an acknowledgment within the Calgary writing community, as well as in other artistic communities, that the political climate here can make it difficult to be an artist. Funding for the arts has never been a high priority for our provincial or municipal governments, and—I could be wrong about this—I've always had the sense that low provincial and municipal contributions can make it more difficult to get significant federal grants. When I was managing editor at *filling Station* a few years ago, I was thrilled that my grant-writing efforts increased the magazine's annual budget from just over $10,000 to around $15,000, but I was also a bit piqued that similar literary magazines in other provinces had sufficient funding for office space and paid staff, two things *filling Station* has never been able to afford. But even the paucity of arts funding doesn't necessarily evoke an indignant response; I think it just contributes to the DIY attitude that typifies the writing and other arts communities here. It doesn't matter whether or not governments support our efforts; we're going to do it anyway. That perseverance and the freedom inherent in that attitude are two of my favorite things about the writing community in Calgary.

**beaulieu**: In terms of that DIY aesthetic, what prompted you to start *edits all over* press, and how has that contributed to your poetic?

**Simpson**: I published one chapbook under the name *edits all over* press in July 2006 and then started publishing more frequently in January 2008, partially because I got a printer as a Christmas present, but more importantly because I had a surplus of creative energy that wasn't finding expression in writing, and I wanted to do something more tactile, more visual. I love thinking about different ways to present poetry, finding the right form of chapbook for each poem, and nudging gently at the boundaries of the obvious chapbook and broadsheets formats. I also enjoy setting design restraints for myself, such as not binding with staples. Choosing the various design elements for each project is an exciting creative

process, and doesn't seem to lead to the same blocks and neurotic obsessions that can frustrate my poetry-writing process. I often start with a vague idea about the size or shape of the chapbook, then get a sense of how the cover should look, and finding the right image for the cover leads me to hunt down the right font, which influences the colour and texture of the paper, or vice versa, etc. I don't know the first thing about graphic design, so I keep things fairly simple. But I do have certain tendencies towards perfectionism, so I pay careful attention to the placement of each line, each word, every fold, every stitch, and I think that makes for a pleasing visual impact.

So far I've only published my own writing, not out of an inflated valuation of my own writing, but because I don't want to take on the responsibility of publishing other people right now. Often the design of a chapbook flows from my familiarity with the text, and relates to something I had wanted to get across in the text itself but which didn't necessarily come out in the writing, so the chapbook complements and enhances the poetry. Chapbook publishing for me is a very personal, creative process that's not just about getting the work out there, but getting the work out there in the right package. Which explains why I've done so few chapbooks: I probably spend too much time thinking about them.

Has *edits all over* press affected my poetics? I'm not really sure. I think it has affected how I perceive my role as a writer within the "poetry community", however that might be defined. Before my book came out, I felt that I'd been writing long enough and to sufficient interest that I should have an actual book. It seemed like a logical progression. I'm incredibly grateful to Line Books for publishing *accrete or crumble*, and very pleased with the book *qua* book, but I've never been comfortable with trying to write a book-length project, or even with patching shorter pieces together into book length, so I'm in no rush to publish another book-length book (I seem to be having trouble articulating what I mean here—

the categories themselves are a bit ridiculous). I think I'm more comfortable now with having shorter pieces in circulation that will not necessarily ever form part of a longer publication. And I like the chapbook trade economy. So far I haven't sold any of the chapbooks, just handed them out and assumed that I will get back at least as much as I give away which has led to more readers becoming aware of what I'm doing and has even led to a few sales of *accrete or crumble*. And I in turn have become aware of more writers. I really dislike the word network, but I think it's apt.

**beaulieu**: What is the draw of the shorter (non-'book-length') form? What do you feel the chapbook (or shorter) size enables in its moving away from the 'authority' of the book?

**Simpson**: I guess moving away from the authority of the book enables a move away from the authority of the page, or rather a move towards a more fluid concept of how the page contains the poem. It tends to be easier to experiment with the presentation of the work, in the sense of the physical artifact, in shorter forms. And it's interesting to think about how a change in the presentation of the poem changes the poem. Often a shorter series of poems that makes a perfect chapbook loses some of its vitality when it's republished as part of a poetry collection.

It's also a matter of evading the expectations readers bring to books. I think the current publishing climate in Canada fosters an expectation that every poetry book can be tidily summed up in back cover blurbs or upbeat reviews. Shorter forms provide space for fragmentation that doesn't necessarily tend towards a whole. They allow delay. I find it easier in a shorter form to deal with language elementally, to focus on one tiny aspect, such as unfamiliar sounds of letters rubbing up against one another in unlikely combinations, or the visual oddities of letters strewn across the page. It's easier in a shorter form to enact an intense, spontaneous poetics. The worst thing is reworking a poem too much to make it fit into a longer manuscript, and smoothing down its edges, wearing out

its energy. But maybe I protest too much. Maybe what it boils down to is failure—a failure to sustain an idea beyond the moment of composition, failure to envision a whole. Nevertheless, I like fragments. I like a poetics of pinpoints, random flashes, diversions, disintegration, and abandonment.

*

**beaulieu**: What has changed for you since the publication of *accrete or crumble* in terms of your poetics?

**Simpson**: Poetics for me is largely process. I rarely write with any notion of an end result (thinking in terms of product or intention tends to sap my creative energy), so the poems cohere from a somewhat arbitrary process of expansive free writing, restrictive editing, cut and pasting, and exploring form. Often the sentences and phrases that comprise a particular poem travel extensively before settling into (the right?) place. What has changed in the past few years is the variety of methods I use to begin the process. I used to employ almost exclusively true free writing: blank page, no intention, write from nothing and try to tap into a rhythm, a mood, or a tone. This method can be incredibly fruitful, but can also be intimidating to the point of creating a barrier between my desire to write and my ability to begin. I now find it easier to use writing prompts, in the form of found language, such as newspaper headlines, and in the form of influence, such as quotations from other authors. Many of the poems in *Thrum* came out of this new method of free writing. I copy out the prompt at the top of the page, and then write back to it. The writing that results may be linked to the prompt thematically, semantically, phonetically, rhythmically, or merely obliquely.

**beaulieu**: To my mind, *accrete or crumble* has more exclamations on poetics, more sentences that declare what poetry is and how it functions, while *Thrum* is an application of those declarations. Would you agree with this?

**Simpson**: I think the difference may be evidence of more confidence in my poetics or maybe growing comfort with uncertainty. I've always had a tendency to write self-reflexively: to comment on the materials and processes of writing as I employ them, to ground the content of the poem in its own ontogeny. This tendency is very much on display in *accrete or crumble*, but perhaps less so in *Thrum*. I think in *Thrum* context becomes more important: the poetry is more about finding odd bits of language in various discourses than about pointing out how the language of each poem is operating. What I love about the poetic tradition I write from—which I often call the innovative tradition while acknowledging the insufficiency of that label—is the freedom and possibility it presents. Language is a vast playground and there's nothing a poet could do with language that could not be claimed for poetry. Knowing this is intensely invigorating, but there's also anxiety attendant on this knowledge. The anxiety of too much choice. While I used to defuse some of this anxiety by foregrounding the elements of the poem, my poetic strategies are perhaps now more nuanced.

**beaulieu**: The Conceptualists argue that poetic creation is a matter of "pointing," of selecting a certain depository of information and asserting that it is worthy of attention verbatim ... Do you identify with this poetic dictum? Or are you drawn to more of a "first thought, best thought" technique of accessing an inner poetic voice through the prompt of found language?

**Simpson**: I'm happy to use either strategy, depending on the text. For example, my poem "A Long and Fitful Sentence Accumulating Grace" consists entirely of a verbatim appropriation of one sentence from a turn-of-the-nineteenth-century will quoted in a legal case. My only poetic interventions were to remove the sentence from its context and to give it a title. I didn't want to change anything about the sentence because I think it has a great deal of beauty and power; it's a wonderfully

constructed accumulation of rhythm and sound and—oddly—pathos, quite apart from its primary function, which is to settle the terms of a testamentary trust. So the purpose of making this sentence into a poem is primarily to carve out a space where its elements can be read and admired as poetry, and perhaps secondarily to comment on the opacity of legal language. For this poem, the Conceptualist strategy of pointing to the text best serves the material. In contrast, the found text in some of my other poetry sequences in *Thrum* (i.e. "Smash Swizzle Fizz" and "Tot Sparks Plunge") doesn't merit verbatim appropriation but serves best as raw material to be manipulated and arranged. I really enjoy the often laborious process of selecting and arranging found fragments into an engaging poem, but I wouldn't call that a method of accessing an inner poetic voice. It's more curatorial; it's a stitching together.

**beaulieu**: I really enjoy the tension in your response between work ("labour") and craft ("stitching"); can you speak more to how your writing responds to or troubles your work and how you see the role of the poet in Calgary?

**Simpson**: Craft is a contentious analogy for poetic practice, but I do like the idea of having intimate and advanced knowledge of a particular aesthetic form. When you've honed your skill, you can experiment and play and create. Work can engage creative thinking also, but work is more goal-oriented, more driven by imposed outcomes or expectations. I've developed a fairly productive tension between work and craft, in that my profession, while allowing me to support myself and to contribute in measurable and practical ways to my community, leaves me with not quite enough time for my artistic practice. Struggling to work and also create requires me to affirm again and again my commitment to a life of art-making. I never have to write, but I want to. As I write this in a pub at the height of the playoffs, I wonder if the poet has a role in Calgary, other than to be the eccentric in the corner with laptop and wine. Late-

ly, I've been writing almost exclusively in public, in coffee shops or bars, alone or with other writers. Several establishments in my neighbourhood recognize many of us as "the poets." Regardless of role, at least we have presence. I think the arts are a necessary component of education and public life, but poetry doesn't need proselytizers or converts. Poetry has been and will continue to be an esoteric concern. If poets have a role in public life, their role is to assert the integrity of their art. Often arguments in favour of arts—and I'm thinking specifically of municipal funding for arts in this city—centre on economic factors, such as tourism and cultural capital. It's for poets to resist accessibility in service of narratives of progress.

**Copy Paste Publish: An Interview with Gregory Betts**

In this mutual interview, Gregory Betts and I discuss the politics of appropriative writing and some potential new directions for poetry. Betts coined the term "plunderverse" in 1999, after John Oswald's plunderphonics, to describe a particular appropriate writing strategy that sculpts new poems from source texts by "inserting deletions" and peeling away words and letters until a new poem, with a new voice, emerges. The texts he creates, including his book-length plunderverse of William Shakespeare's sonnet 150 in *The Others Raisd in Me* (Pedlar Press 2009), simultaneously speak with and against the original.

**Gregory Betts**: In a parable of moral (and religious) crisis, Dostoyevsky writes "everything is permitted." It's a line that has stuck with me as a kind of ominous warning, particularly against some of the morally relativistic implications of postmodernism. It has also echoed in the back of my mind as I tread some of the politically charged grey waters of appropriative writing. Your texts have always been boundary crossing, but in *How to Write* (Talonbooks, 2010) you make what I believe is your furthest foray into the potentially illegal world of literary appropriation. I wonder if you have a line where something, some literary appropriation, is no longer permitted, and how you determine that point?

**derek beaulieu**: Funny that you come to that idea through Dostoyevsky, I come to the same result through William S. Burroughs ("nothing is true, everything is permitted"). Dostoyevsky's quotation starts with "When there is no God..." which changes the matter only slightly from Burroughs refrain. But that said, I think that appropriation does have some controversies—especially when it comes to the issues of voice, ownership, and representation. Vanessa Place has really challenged what can be done with appropriative writing by quoting statements from rape and sexual abuse trials—the "ordinariness" of language is set upon its

head ... so then, what lines are appropriate to cross? I think that what conceptual writing has highlighted is not the idea of writing or voice, but rather the issue of CHOICE. So, then, as Dworkin has said, "the test of poetry [is] no longer whether it could have been done better (the question of the workshop), but whether it could conceivably have been done otherwise." Authors are now judged not by the quality of their writing but of the infallibility of their choices—WHY have you appropriated THIS text instead of that? Why in this way? Within what framework? To what end?

Politics and representation does enter into these decisions, and the author must be able to justify his or her actions. What would it mean, for example, for a Caucasian author to have written M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, to use the language of slave-ship legal proceedings?

So then, one measurement—along a different set of requirements—is that if the text exists online, it is *de facto* public domain, everything reproduces infinitely online, and any attempts to control the internet will only turn into a punch-line on boingboing.net. So then, online everything truly is permitted. At its base, the net is a Borgesian library of perversions and pornography whose only redeemable feature is the card catalogue itself.

And you—what would you say are the limitations of your own appropriative practice; what are the map-able edges of the plunderverse universe?

**Betts**: Place, no question, is working at the far edge of current practice. I read with her in Los Angeles and witnessed infuriated, offended people walking out of her reading in protest. The problem they had with her writing is similar to the old voice-appropriation debates from the 80s and 90s that questioned the re-victimization of disempowered people by such texts. Where, I believe, Place avoids the moral quagmire of someone like W.P. Kinsella, to pick a gross example, is in how her text reproduces public documents verbatim, without aestheticizing the victimiza-

tion, drawing attention to the extremely political and personal and charged nature of the language in these public forums. Furthermore, the common law legal system, like ours and that of the United States, follows the doctrine of stare decisis, which means that precedence determines future court decisions. Decisions are arrived at through consideration of the facts of a case. In other words, testimony such as that re-presented by Place as poetry influences *de facto* law by influencing the outcome and implications of a particular case. As this precedence becomes general law, the testimony can be said to have had enormous and widespread implications beyond the personal experiences of trauma that she documents. The private realm is a publicly codified space.

For me, an important line between Place and Kinsella, or other less controversial appropriative writers (Jen Bervin, say, or John Robert Colombo) and other less notorious voice-appropriators is that only the latter in each case exploit bad feelings between people, perhaps enhance them. To be blunt, a racist can take satisfaction from a Kinsella story in a way that a sex offender could not from Place.

I completely agree with you about the nature of information dissemination in this day and age. It was true before too. I grew up in the community that fostered and helped create the Copy Left movement. I've never been interested in the grand myth of the ownership of language—which I equate in my mind with the attempt by Monsanto on the prairies to own all of the wheat, suing farmers if "their" wheat seeds blow by the wind into unlicensed property. Language blows freely too. When I steal or plagiarize, though, it also seems a useful part of the narrative of the text to document where the language comes from. Plunderverse is explicitly oriented towards that narrative.

I notice that you also include all citations of your appropriated texts. How important was their inclusion to you—or was that even your decision? I think of the case of David Shields who was pushed by his in-

sistent publisher to include full citations—which he did, along with a note explaining that the citations were included under protest.

**beaulieu**: The decision to include the citations in *How to Write* was—unlike Shields—my own. I wanted to include the sources as a nod to my own bibliographical impulses (I love reading bibliographies and works cited lists, its often the first part of a book I read), my own interest in literary archaeology. I like your idea of including in a poetic narrative the original source of the text.

Talonbooks didn't ask specifically for the bibliography to be included, but was concerned about the inclusion of texts that were potentially in copyright. I saw the texts I used—which are, with a few exceptions, entirely available online—as fair game, being that they were posted online. Shields' book doesn't *need* the bibliography, and I do like the "cut here" line he's included in the finished book, but I do also, admittedly, like the resource they provide. I also think that including the citations allows the original texts to slide more readily into an uncanny space of familiar yet not...

As academic writers we are in a quandary to an extent—there's an acceptance of producing work without citation when that work is creative, but not when the work is academic ... but where's the line between the two? So Shields requires citation, but Markson does not?

In terms of Copyleft, did you consider releasing *The Others Raisd in Me* under a Creative Commons license? I was talking with Jonathan Ball around his book *Ex Machina* (BookThug, 2009) which he released with an attribution-non-commercial-share alike license—is that something you've considered?

**Betts**: It was for no particular reason that *The Others Raisd in Me* wasn't registered under Creative Commons. To be honest, considering the kinds of experimental/appropriative work that I've done, I've always assumed that anybody who wanted to do anything experimental with my

writing would automatically know that it was okay. I'd want to know about it simply because I'd want to know about it, but it didn't really cross my mind that anybody might be slowed down or discouraged by my not making that opportunity explicit.

That said, my next project (a sampling of which was recently published by your No Press) has been registered with Creative Commons to formalize its stand against the policies and machinations of the Facebook corporation. That project, working under the running title of *Exquisite Corp*, emerged from a simultaneous disgust with the privacy policies of the Facebook corporation and with witnessing the illegal police activities in Toronto during the G8/G20 rallies. The thing that struck me about both of those events—both of which erode privacy and citizenship—is that they are encoded with a banality, as if we've all grown accommodated to such impingements. Creative Commons and the Copyleft movement is part of the development of a third way that is an alternative to the eternal stalemate of either being inside the system and changed by it or else outside the system and irrelevant to it. I am always looking for new ways of sharing language and ideas without contradicting the openness of language.

The use of explicitly already-written language in plunderverse or appropriative language to speak or to write seems to access an alternative and new solution to this problem. Language works within a system that constantly recycles shared words, even ideas and feelings, but the system falters when somebody attempts to arrest the flow. The problem, as Derrida outlined a while ago, is fundamental to language and makes our proprietary rules on language-use absurd: "There would be no cause for concern if one were rigorously assured of being able to distinguish with rigor between a citation and a non-citation." I think we cite in academic papers because the identity of the authors and the history of the specific texts (including such editorial backroom mechanics as editions, versions, trans-

lations and so on) that we refer to are significant to how we use and respond to their ideas, even if we happen to think as Derrida, and as our creative work suggests, that language is more complex than is implied by the ownership of words and ideas.

He draws a line between "citational" language and "performative" language, but I think appropriation proves the lack of an edge between these types. Language can be both if it is written through the simultaneity of reference and speech act. I wonder if this moves into your work on the idea of poetics as objects?

**beaulieu**: *Poetics as Objects* was a workshop I gave a few years back through Calgary's TRUCK Gallery and their *Camper Project* in which participants could earn an imitation boy-scout badge for creating visual poetry and handmade books. My aim was to try and increase awareness of the physicality of writing and publishing. My own writing treats text as physical objects, things that can be manipulated much as LEGO ... and is often quite gestural in terms of creation. In terms of "citational" and "performative" writing, I argue that my novels, *flatland* and *Local Colour* and prose collection *How to Write* are in fact transcriptions of reading practices. And that's where the searchable text and PDFs come in—non-narrative or non-plot-driven reading is now much more possible…

**Betts**: Computers do change everything about reading and writing, and we are still so early in our collective encounter with this radically new technology that we likely cannot yet even imagine its eventual impact on the idea of literature. I feel that we must be in a moment similar to that period shortly after the printing press arrived, but before writers really knew what to do with it. So, naturally, they tried to use the new technology to replicate the old practices. Our first reaction to the computer has been to rather flatly import page-based writing online.

It does seem somewhat ironic to me that while concrete and visual poets were true pioneers in introducing, even creating, a radically new

graphic consciousness through their work with the page and with the typewriter, visual poets today tend to be many steps behind rather commonplace explorations of software by visual artists and industry hacks. Brion Gysin's famous line that Kenneth Goldsmith and Christian Bök like to quote is that literature is 50 years behind visual arts, but the problem for visual poets today is that they are now suddenly thrust into the same (digital) terrain as the visual artists in an era gone graphic mad because of the visual orientation and possibilities of the computer. Consequently, visual poetry is not nearly as shocking as it once was, nor as disruptive of our sensory biases: it has become somewhat symptomatic.

A similar problem haunts all of the old avenues of experimental writing. New ways will emerge to incorporate medium-consciousness, including things like search functions—which out of all technologies has probably had the biggest impact on how I read. Copy/Paste has been the biggest impact on how I write. There are so many directions that new medium-conscious writing could go, and I suppose right now it is anybody's guess. Appropriation and the conscious sculpting of source texts seem like useful applications of the new software. I've also been thinking lately about all of the software that archivists and editors have developed to track and trace the genesis of a text. These applications have started to change how we read canonical writers, most forcibly Shakespeare. When you can see his source texts exposed on the same screen as you read his plays, they start to seem like the work of a masterful proto-collage artist, which of course he was.

All of which is to say that, yes—let's let the physical act of writing and publishing be constantly in mind, and let that self-consciousness infuse and inform the art. That still seems to me to be an ample exit door out of the narrowing psychosocial conditions of life in the transnational capitalist bubble. Which raises a danger, of course, in the extent to which innovations in textual practice are determined by access to expensive

technologies and tools. I do worry that the rush to discover the new spaces concocted by digital writing has sacrificed some consciousness to technological determinism. I mean, I suppose, that I still think of writing as an act on—and to a certain extent against—writing and language itself. Play too passive and you risk losing writing as a radical space. In this moment, just before computers become more accomplished than humans in producing emotive texts like lyrics poems and genre prose, writers can keep their relevancy by keeping medium-consciousness in their works. There doesn't seem much point in writing anymore without that sense.

**beaulieu**: So then Creeley's dictum that "form is never more than an extension of content" carries forward? I've had extensive discussions with kevin mcpherson eckhoff about form and content, wondering if the dictum could be reversed to "content is never more than an extension of form." Our discussions brought us to Beckett's defense of Joyce's *Work in Progress* in which he writes "[h]ere form is content, content is form [….] this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. [… this] writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*." It takes the emphasis off of semantic content on to the physicality of communication. That the form—the HOW of writing—dictates the WHAT of writing (as opposed to Creeley's position that the WHAT dictates the HOW). That's what bumps it against Beckett's statement—that writing is not about something, it is that something. I'm interested in writing which doesn't necessarily try to discuss any sort of emotional position, it simply evokes form—so the basic unit of composition isn't the sentence, the phrase, the line, the word ... it moves down the chain to the level of letter or mark.

**Betts**: The "something" you identify, perhaps the very kernel of contemporary/conceptual writing, seems like a writerly thinking or a form-consciousness that I suspect has been accelerated by computers and the experience of writing in the digital age. The new writing has become more akin to enacting a reading strategy by breaking a work down to the

parts (its HOW) that create its meaning (its WHAT). Your *flatland* seems to go even farther along this line, by actually reconciling form and content in an older text that lacked this equilibrium. It certainly seems to read a macro-oriented text through its micro particles, thereby making it that "something" the original text describes—the 2-dimensional world. By contrast, *The Others Raisd in Me* derails the WHAT of Shakespeare's sonnet by exploiting the surfeit meanings embedded in the HOW—the language—of the text. From this vantage, both of these projects seem less like appropriations in the plagiarism sense than malapropisms, creative misreadings. Do you ever consider how the author of your source text would react to your project?

**beaulieu**: I like the idea of creative misreading—I think its a very generative term. I haven't considered the response of a source text's author before I've constructed a piece (I wonder if that's a useful distinction, "constructing" instead of "writing"?) but I did contact Paul Auster when *Local Colour* was published and sent him a copy. I heard back from a secretary that he was initially bewildered but eventually flattered and thrilled by the resultant text. I have to admit that I would find it strange for an author to be anything but flattered.

**Betts**: I agree that there is a gesture of homage in the act. Appropriative writing captures and repurposes the excess creative energy in all texts—what Lévi-Strauss called the "overspill" meaning—but that excess is especially present in the rich language of open texts. Whether created by constructing or writing or creatively misreading, it is a tribute to linguistic density of the author. Conversely, in the hands of a satirist like Rachel Zolf in *Human Resources* (which appropriates advertising copy-text), we get the pun of a source author's density. I suppose her work highlights more creative anti-readings than misreadings. We seem to be at a crucial juncture, though, as the range of applications of appropriations is just opening up now to a widening field of possibilities. There seems to be a

useful affinity between the political and the formalist implications of appropriation. I wonder how long this affinity will last? Is a conservative engagement with appropriation even possible?

**beaulieu**: I don't think that a conservative engagement with appropriation is impossible—in fact, its happened in poetry pretty consistently across poetic style—whether that be Pound or Eliot ... originality is actually quite unoriginal and unoriginality ain't original either.

**Betts**: And it is good to know the limitations and potential dangers of work in this direction as well. Appropriation, though, always disrupts by restaging and recontextualizing. A seed catalogue, a legal transcript, or a weather report repackaged in a poetic text breaks the original work by drawing attention to surplus meanings at play in that language. Even Shakespeare's plagiarism built new contexts, new plays, for borrowed/stolen words. Such creative/uncreative acts begin precisely in their failure to conserve or preserve the original, creating a dynamic tension in the slippage. There remains a potentially radical and disjunctive irony in that breach whether it is realized or utilized or not.

**The Plastic Cast by Hugo Vernier**

*The Plastic Cast*, by Hugo Vernier, is the masterpiece of the 21st Century, a literary progenitor to such feats of Conceptual writing as *Day*, *ReWriting Freud* and *Apostrophe*. *The Plastic Cast* is the folkloric name for a single line of code in the Deep Web; the vast array of computers and networks that are not accessible through traditional searches. This innocuous sample of text has made elusive, and supposed, appearances embedded as dialogue or description within otherwise unrelated novels such as *Les Problemes d'un probleme*, *In a Network of Lines that Enlace* and *On the Use of Mirrors in the Game of Chess*. *The Plastic Cast* not only enables the archiving of all text generated online daily in a series of vast, interlinked hard-drives, it also archives that text in advance of the original publication date, effectively archiving the future. Vernier—as elusive as his apocalyptic text generator—has released a single statement publicly:

> My point is that I see the library not as a passive depository of books, but as a generative mass that alone is capable of writing the best works.

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And finally, Kristen: *thank you, my love*.

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