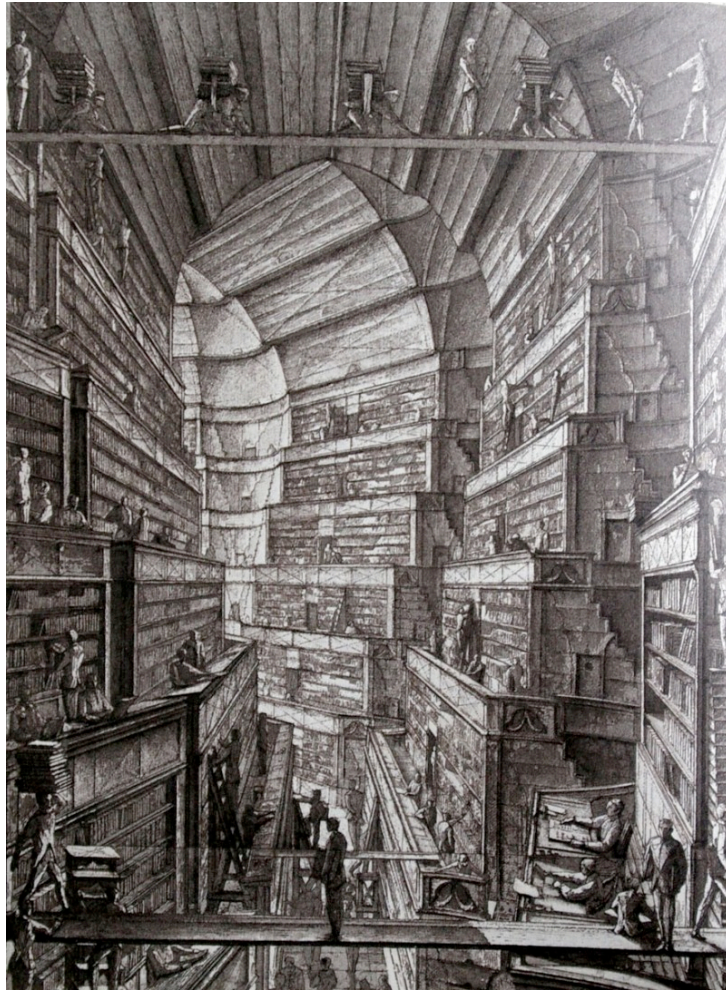


SEEN OF THE CRIME:
ESSAYS ON CONCEPTUAL WRITING

DEREK BEAULIEU



/ubu editions
2012

Seen of the Crime:
Essays on Conceptual Writing

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Please, no more poetry.

Poetry is the last refuge of the unimaginative.

Poetry has little to offer outside of poetry itself. Poets chose to be poets because they do not have the drive to become something better.

Readers are a book's aphorisms.

All bad poetry springs from genuine feeling. To be natural is to be obvious, and to be obvious is to be inartistic. Poetry, sadly, knows it's poetry, while writing doesn't always know it's writing.

Art is a conversation, not a patent office.

Poets in ostrich-like ignorance of the potential of sharing—as opposed to hoarding—their texts, are ignoring potentially the most important artistic innovation of the 20th century: collage. What's at stake? Nothing but their own obsolescence. If you don't share you don't exist.

We expect plumbers, electricians, engineers and doctors to both have a specific and specialized vocabulary & be on the forefront of new advancements in their field, but scorn poets who do the same.

Poets are now judged not by the quality of their writing but by the infallibility of their choices.

Having been unpopular in high school is not just cause for book publications.

Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal.

In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. But, in practice, there is.

Rules are guidelines for stupid people.

In poetry we celebrate mediocrity and ignore radicality.

Poetry has more to learn from graphic design, engineering, architecture, cartography, automotive design, or any other subject, than it does from poetry itself.

Poets should not be told to write what they know. They don't know anything, that's why they are poets.

The Internet is not something that challenges who we are or how we write it *is* who we are and how we write. Poets—being poets—are simply the last to realize the fact.

If writing a poem is inherently tragic it is because it is hard to believe that the author had nothing better to do. It is inherently tragic because we still choose an out-dated form as a medium for argumentation.

If we had something to say would we choose the poem—with its sliver of audience and lack of cultural cache—as the arena to announce that opinion?

Please, no more poetry.

“I cannot sleep unless surrounded by books.”

I dream of bookstores.

I dream of finding the perfect bookstore, the oneric storehouse of all the volumes which I knew existed just beyond my fingertips. When I explore corporeal bookshops, I always compare them (unfavorably) to my bibliophilic dreamscapes.

Like *déjà vu* or a faintly remembered conversation there are a few stores which hint at the possibilities: Montréal’s The Word, Vancouver’s Pulp Fiction, Calgary’s Pages Books on Kensington, Halifax’s John W. Doull, Bookseller and Washington, DC’s Bridge Street Books all suggest the antechambers of my imagined bookshops. But these are merely appetizers for my yearned-for main course.

Jorge Luis Borges in “Poemes de los Dones” famously said that he “imagined that Paradise will be some kind of library.” I agree with him though bookstores haunt my dreams. It not unusual for me to dream of nondescript doors that open onto disheveled stacks and shelves, piles of maps and chapbooks, garret rooms of obscure titles and rarely-seen folios. While Borges said “I cannot sleep unless I am surrounded by books,” I often dream that books surround me.

But the bookstores of my dreams are not filled with the stock of your average retailer. Instead they inevitably contain eccentric books I’ve heard of but never held (Luigi Serafini’s *Codex Seraphinianus* for example); fantastic

tomes mentioned in literature (Silas Haslam's *History of the Land Called Uqbar* for example); and unlikely volumes (previously unpublished collections by Italo Calvino for example). All of these volumes are gathered in impossible bookshops that populate my dreamed streetscapes.

Parasitic Ventures Press has published 5 of those impossible texts—each tantalizingly out of reach. The Press's Lost Book Series consists of Edward Gibbon's *The History of Democracy in Switzerland* (destroyed after poor reception on initial drafts), William Shakespeare's *Love's Labour Won* (a known, but unfound sequel to *Love's Labour Lost*); Confucius' *The Book of Music* (a lost member of his "6 books" now considered completely fanciful); T. S. Eliot's *Literature and Export Trade* (edited into an unrecognizable shape) and Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Bildungsroman and its Significance in the History of Realism*.

Bakhtin's volume is the triumph of the series. At the outset of World War II the manuscript of *The Bildungsroman and its Significance in the History of Realism* safely existed in 2 copies. Knowing that the working copy of the manuscript was protected at his Moscow publisher, Bakhtin repurposed his copy as cigarette paper, and dutifully smoked his manuscript. Unbeknownst to him, his Moscow publisher Sovetsky Pisatel—and the only extant copy of the manuscript—was destroyed in the 1942 battle of Moscow.

Of course, the ironic thing about dreaming of bookshops and impossible oeuvres is that it is impossible to read in dreams. In dreams books are merely the shells of themselves; they point to "bookness" but do not hold the texts for which my mind searches. In our onerotic nighttime escapades, we are able

to accomplish a myriad of impossible feats but we cannot read. Text is just beyond the threshold of our mind's eye (the next time you recall your dreams, try to focus on any text you encountered).

Parasitic Ventures Press hasn't performed an unlikely feat of literary archaeology in republishing these lost classics however. The books are blurred beyond the threshold of readability. You can polish your glasses or tease out the range of your bifocal vision as much as you'd like; the texts are nothing more than horizontal layers of smoke. *The Matrix* may cast us into convincing landscapes but its ability for detail only reaches to a minimal level; text floats in a grey shifting field. Newspaper headlines may be needed for a realistic street scene, but the articles under those headlines are washed out.

Parasitic Ventures Press plucked a talisman from my dreams, a symbol of the limits of my own subconscious and gave it form, taunting me with the physical reminder that my dream volumes will always remain unreadable.

§

I am also drawn to libraries.

Small or large, a collection of books will no doubt attract my eye. Whenever I am at someone else's house, I am drawn—like so many of my colleagues—to my host's bookcases and the evidence of their reading. Authors, scholars and academics are often socially awkward and I find myself discovering more about a host's personality from their bookcases than I do from their conversation. How are the books arranged? What subject matters (and authors) are represented? What periods are reflected? How are the books kept?

I have a friend whose library consists solely—as a means of limiting the size of his collection—of first editions. He does not loan his books and believes that they are best preserved for posterity under UV-protective glass.

Another colleague's books were re-arranged by his spouse from a random array into a more aesthetically pleasing arrangement based upon colour and height...the books soon wandered back to their original randomness reflecting his more idiosyncratic way of looking at the world.

My personal library threatens to overtake our apartment, and is arranged by genre, author's last name and then by height ... with a few nods to practicality (Joseph Campbell's indispensable *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake: Unlocking James Joyce's Masterwork* is filed next to *Finnegans Wake*; *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* is filed between *Ida* and *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays*). There's a bookcase for visual art; two for graphic novels and comics; four for fiction, poetry, drama and theory; and one for a further mix of additional visual art, graphic novels, typography, travel books, literary journals, and a hodge-podge of other genres (which oddly places *Blazing Combat* next to *The Holy Bible*)—and that doesn't include my daughter's growing collection, nor my partner's.

The juxtaposition of books upon a shelf is one of the thrills of wandering a library (my own has an intriguing juxtaposition of Francis Picabia, Vanessa Place, Gabriel Pomerand, Francis Ponge and Bern Porter).

I continue to be dumbfounded by the University of _____'s decision to move any books from their collection that have not been signed out in the last 3 years into off-site storage. These books will only be available to readers

and returned to the stacks if requested by name and call number. In my opinion this “culling of the herd” based on frequency of usage not only prevents the thrill of browsing, but it also prevents unexpected eruptions within directed research. Students will no longer encounter any books on the shelf that haven’t been placed there by previous research. The ocean of eye-catching spines, unexpected misfiled books, or volumes sadly unexplored by recent scholars will be drastically reduced into a much shallower pool. Over the last year I have heard a veritable choir of graduate students and colleagues bemoaning the disappearing thrill of browsing.

Craig Dworkin’s *The Perverse Library* is a love-letter to the library. Critiqued by a colleague for possessing a “*very* perverse library,” Dworkin’s volume combines 3 distinct bibliophilic fervors. The book opens with a masterwork introductory essay that borders on Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* for hallucinatory descriptions of collections, shelves and stacks. In a brilliant ‘pataphysical moment, Dworkin postulates that canonicity is not an aesthetic prioritization of genre but is in fact an architectural necessity:

A library is print in its gaseous state, filling every available space and then increasing pressure—compressing, rotating, double shelving—until, according to the constant required by Boyle’s Law, either the current container breaks, loosing books onto new shelves and stacks, or else the volume stabilizes, stabilizing volumes. (14)

The Perverse Library continues with 2 separate bibliographic catalogues; “The Perverse Library” and “A Perverse Library,” each of which is a giddy playground of potentiality. Borges’ library need not be a fantastical one, it is

inherently embedded in *every* library, every shelf. Due the demands of moving, Dworkin has sorted his library by publisher's trim size (my Green Integer edition of *To Do*, as an example, is 6" x 4¼") in order to fit an ever-increasing number of volumes in his residence. "The Perverse Library" is a bibliographic listing of each book that Dworkin yearns to add to his personal library, while "A Perverse Library" is a listing of each volume already possessed barring books at his office, tomes not on the shelves at the time of indexing, volumes of theory and anthologies. The paragraph-long list of categories of omitted books reflects that "A Perverse Library" is, in fact, exactly that—a perverse choosing of volumes which provide a non-pervasive, yet complete, portrait of Dworkin's working library. *The Perverse Library* opens with an epigraph from Thomas Nakell, "[t]he library is its own discourse. You listen in, don't you?" (9)

“Compose the Holes”

In the various anthologies and publications of concrete and visual poetry in my personal library, it's not particularly surprising to find visual poets who are intrigued by the graphic possibilities of punctuation. Canadian examples include David Aylward's *Typescapes* and Sha(u)nt Basmajian's *Boundaries Limits and Space*; both are relatively simple combinations of punctuation, both explore the graphic possibilities of typographic marks. Paul Dutton's *right hemisphere left ear* includes his off-the-grid 6-page “mondrian boogie woogie.” What is a bit more unusual—and to me a lot more exciting—are novelists and visual artists with the same interest in punctuation. Most of the writers I know who work with punctuation do so by isolating the punctuation from existing texts as a means of creating new resultant texts devoid of any semantic content.

Gertrude Stein's essay “On Punctuation” opens with the dictum that “[t]here are some punctuations that are interesting and there are some punctuations that are not” (214). With *Gertrude Stein on Punctuation* Kenneth Goldsmith isolates all of the punctuation in Stein's lecture, leaving blank spaces where all the other typographic characters once occurred and proves that all punctuation are equally intriguing once flattened and removed from their intended use as semantic traffic signs. Goldsmith has an entire series of work in this vein, including all of the punctuation from William Strunk and E. B. White's chapter on punctuation in their *Elements of Style*.

Carl Fredrik Reuterswård’s *Prix Nobel* also uses an original source text to create a new punctuation-only result. While I know nothing about the source text that Reuterswård uses, I was able to find a brief recording of him reading from *Prix Nobel*. Reuterswård’s *Prix Nobel* is scrubbed clean, but he voices the novel by naming each mark: “Point. Point. Point.”

herman de vries’ *argumentstellen* consists entirely of 48 clean linen pages each marked with only a single period floating in compositional space. The text was written as a response to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 2.0131: “der räumliche gegenstand muss im unendlichen raume liegen. (der raumpunkt ist eine argumentstelle.)” The “full stop is the place for an argument” but it is also geographically the marker of potentiality.

Gary Barwin’s *Servants of Dust* isolates all the punctuation from Shakespeare’s sonnets but articulates them as words

comma
 inverted comma comma
 comma
 colon
 comma comma
 inverted comma inverted comma dash comma
 comma
 period
 comma
 comma
 comma comma period
 comma comma comma
 inverted comma comma period

that create a new form of sonnet, but one without any semantic content other than a map of latency. Barwin’s text resembles both a map of

Shakespeare's sonnet and a transcription of Reuterswård's reading of his own punctuation-only novel.

Riccardo Boglione's *Ritmo D. Feeling the Blanks* isolates all the punctuation from Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, one of the most censored books in history. The punctuation here acts as a "ghost of the text [that] roams around the structure that should contain it."

All of these texts are maps of potential. Each text offers the reader the opportunity to imagine the possibilities inherent in the skeletal framework of punctuation by filling the spaces between the marks with latent texts. The punctuation does not insist upon a particular form, it only asserts that in the resultant text the pauses and stops must occur at the predetermined locations.

§

Jorge Luis Borges' short story "The Library of Babel" posits a universe embodied in a single interminable, honeycomb-like, library. Borges' literary repository holds every potential combination of letters arranged without a card catalogue, dooming the denizens of this collection to wander the stacks searching for meaning.

For writers, Borges has issued both a condemnation and a challenge. By proposing an effectively infinite library (for given current estimates on the size of our universe, it would take $10^{1,834,013}$ universes to hold the entire collection) Borges lays claim to every book within the library's holdings: there are no books that an author could propose which Borges' library does not already contain. When faced with the ontological nightmare of the Borgesian

library, a writer has two choices. She can either shrink from her task, believing that there are no remaining original ideas that Borges has not already placed within his collection, or she can see Borges' library as freeing her from the onerous weight of originality. Within this tact, the author must assert the poetics of choice—writing for her has become not a matter of *creating* art but *selecting* art. To be a writer is to artistically select a single volume from Borges' shelves and assert that volume as particularly worth examination and consideration.

Borges' library is a fractal—its implications reproduce at every level from the most minute to the universal, from the library to the section to the bookcase to the shelf to the volume to the page. At every level the contents of Borges' archive is a sea of un-asserted meaning. Every volume is titled on the spine, but the title does not portend any insight into the contents of the volume, The book could be titled *The Plaster Cramp* or *Combed Thunder* or *Axaxaxas mlö*, none of those volumes would significantly waver from the next in terms of its content or meaning.

Novels and poems formed entirely from punctuation, much like “The Library of Babel,” assert every novel as being both anchored and unanchored for each is its own Borgesian library of potential—each book is every book.

§

Allowing slightly more text than these minimalist gestures are the poets and novelists who craft through erasure. The compositional technique is sometimes conflated with William Burroughs and Brion Gysin's “cut-up method,” but I see it as a radically different strategy.

For Burroughs and Gysin all existing writing serves as raw material that can be re-arranged and regrouped in a way that exposes an unexpected voice, the “third mind” of collaboration. The cut-up method argues that aleatory writing foregrounds a poetic voice inherent in the text that supplants any intention of the author in favour of the preternatural other. Their technique echoes Tristan Tzara’s famous “dada manifesto on feeble love and bitter love” which insists upon a new form of chance-based writing:

TO MAKE A DADAIST POEM

Take a newspaper.

Take some scissors.

Choose from this paper an article of the length you want to make your poem.

Cut out the article.

Next carefully cut out each of the words that makes up this article and put them all in a bag.

Shake gently.

Next take out each cutting one after the other.

Copy conscientiously in the order in which they left the bag.

The poem will resemble you.

And there you are - an infinitely original author of charming sensibility, even though unappreciated by the vulgar herd.

Tzara—like Burroughs and Gysin—uses existing text as the raw material for new writing with no regard for how the text appears in the geography of its original page. Erased texts do.

Tom Phillips and Ronald Johnson are the two major practitioners of erasure; they each create texts by erasing passages from other authors' work in order to isolate new meaning. In *A Humument* (now in its 367-page 4th edition) Tom Phillips paints, draws and collages over the majority of the text in W.H. Mallock's *A Human Document*. In doing so he extracts from Mallock's original the tale of Bill Toge (a particularly obscure combination of letters in the English language: Toge's name only appears embedded in the words "together" and "altogether"). Phillips' *A Humument* is so masterful as to be the limit-case in terms of erased texts and artist books. Unlike Burroughs, Gysin and Tzara, Phillips does not create his work by aleatory procedures but instead carefully scours each page for the appropriate texts to isolate. Since 1966 Phillips has continued his engagement with Mallock, creating additional interpretations of each page for each new edition. Phillips states in the 4th edition that when the 6th edition of *A Humument* is eventually published it will not have a single page in common with the 1st edition (and a completely new narrative).

In *radi os* Ronald Johnson erases the majority of Milton's *Paradise Lost* leaving single words and isolate phrases. In doing so he extracts from Milton's original a commentary on the poet's role in creation. More than few poets have continued in this tradition—the ones I find most interesting are those who leave the lifted words in their geographic location from the original page; the texts—like books composed entirely from punctuation—suggest that locked within each text are an infinite number of other stories.

Authors do not create new stories, they—to quote Ronald Johnson—
“compose the holes.”

While there are plenty of erasure texts out there, many are light-hearted, playful works like Austin Kleon’s *Newspaper Blackout*. I think that the poetic possibilities of erosion (as opposed to accumulation) are better served with texts like Jen Bervin’s *Nets* (a manipulation of Shakespeare’s sonnets); Elisabeth Tonnard’s *Let us go then, you and I* (a manipulation of a fragment from T.S. Eliot’s *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*) and Janet Holmes’s *The ms of my kin* (a manipulation of the poems of Emily Dickinson).

Some writers eradicate the “holes” and compress the appropriated language over the geography of the original pages. The resultant poetry is one further step from the distanced original.

Gregory Betts’ *The Others Raised in Me* consists of 150 unique “readings” of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 150:

O, from what power hast thou this powerful might
With insufficiency my heart to sway?
To make me give the lie to my true sight,
And swear that brightness doth not grace the day?
Whence hast thou this becoming of things ill,
That in the very refuse of thy deeds
There is such strength and warrantize of skill
That, in my mind, thy worst all best exceeds?
Who taught thee how to make me love thee more
The more I hear and see just cause of hate?

O, though I love what others do abhor,
With others thou shouldst not abhor my state:
If thy unworthiness raised love in me,
More worthy I to be beloved of thee.

Using Shakespeare's original, Betts explores what he terms "plunderverse." Restricting himself to only the diction found in Shakespeare's original, Betts finds a freedom in the sonnet. Betts uses not solely the original's words, but also the individual letters, which allows him the potential to create:

131.
a new act
begins
in the rushed click
after math (201)

and

150.
the end
of everything
isn't much. (220)

Robert Fitterman's *Rob The Plagiarist* undertakes the same compositional conceit in a different direction. The 13 chapters of *Rob The Plagiarist* each use a unique tactic towards appropriation; and each steals at a different volume. In "The Sun Also Also Rises" Fitterman recontextualizes every sentence beginning with the first-person pronoun from Hemingway's *The Sun Also*

Rises. By un-anchoring Hemingway's muscular prose from the original, Fitterman allows the "I" to float restlessly, uncertainly attaching to Fitterman's own (minimized) compositional voice. As readers, we are unsure with which speaking "I" to relate. Is the "I" Hemingway's, Fitterman's, or does the text become a funhouse mirror in which to see our own visage? How do we identify with the author, when the author didn't actually create what the presented text? This troubling of authorship—where authors are but a single voice in a compositional choir—is a central issue in conceptual and "plunderverse" writing.

These books explore the Borgesian possibility of an infinite library. Every book contains a text only slightly different from the book next to it. What I find so inspiring about Borges' "The Library of Babel" is that it is fractal in scope—just as the library contains an infinite number of books, so does each book contain an infinite number of potential narratives.

“Besides, it’s always other people who die”

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?

Enrique Vila-Mata’s novel *Bartleby & Co.* is an essay by a fictional, frustrated, novelist. Vila-Mata’s piteous, hump-backed, balding narrator last published a novel about impossible love twenty-five years previous and since that time hasn’t written a single word. He “became a Bartleby.”

Bartleby, of course, is the eponymous character from Herman Melville’s novella *Bartleby the Scrivener* who, in the face of capitalist expectation and responsibility, states that he simply “would rather not” have any active role in his own life other than that of refusal. Vila-Mata’s unnamed narrator, in the face of a 25-year drought, explores the “writers of the No,” those writers who have decided to never write again. The book takes the form of footnotes for an imaginary essay. The notes build a history of writers, both real and imagined, who have decided that they were better served by not publishing (as typified by J.D. Salinger who did not publish a word after 1963’s *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction*). Can

not writing at all be a literary act? Can we consider that an author is adding to her oeuvre by ceasing to write?

Vila-Matas uses a combination of real and imaginary books in order to explore the “no”—the real books seem too good to be true (and often are), and the imaginary seem just real enough (and often aren’t). The line between the written and the unwritten blurs both in the argument and its support.

By juxtaposing fictional authors with factual ones, Vila-Matas undermines the reality of all authors. Every author he cites, and by extension every writer there is, is merely a figment of his imagination and every text written (or refused) equally ethereal. Writing, to Vila-Matas, does not need to be something created, only something posited.

Once again Borges’ library architecturally looms—only this time the books are empty; we are entombed in the walls noting silent authors within the din of potentialities.

**“Hence latent of satisfaction, relating singing of of bunch
the effect.”**

But what about texts which weigh in on the other size of the scale?

While my own practice in fiction tends to lean towards the sparse and the “unreadable,” I am also inspired by texts that exhaustively catalogue. These texts look not to the minimalist gesture but to the maximalist undertaking—the exhaustive, the complete. Instead of looking to crystalline haiku and brevity as poetic tropes, these books embrace (as Kenny Goldsmith has suggested) the *database* as most indicative of writing in light of the Internet’s economy of plenty.

Simon Morris, based in York, UK, is co-publisher with Nick Thurston of Information As Material, a press dedicated to publishing “work by artists who use extant material—selecting and reframing it to generate new meanings—and who, in doing so, disrupt the existing order of things.”

Morris is also responsible for a series of wonderfully “maximal” pieces of conceptual literature: *The Royal Road to the Unconscious* (2003), *Re-Writing Freud* (2005) and *Getting Inside Jack Kerouac’s Head* (2010) all published by information as material.

Morris’ texts, much like Goldsmith’s *No. 111 (2.7.93–10.20.96)* (all the words that end in the “schwa” sound as overheard for 3 years) and Craig Dworkin’s *Parse* (the entirety of Edwin Abbott’s *How to Parse* parsed by its own rules), work at the level of the database and examine how we handle,

sort and move large sets of information. For Morris, Dworkin and Goldsmith poetry is not a matter of “original” writing; it’s a matter of moving, sifting and packaging. It’s a matter of choice.

Morris’ 2005 volume *Re-Writing Freud* is a wonderfully playful example. The 752-page volume is a response to Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*. With his *Re-Writing Freud*, Morris—in conjunction with his partner Christine Morris—created software that completely randomizes all the text in Freud’s original. Over a 3-day period the computerized algorithm randomly assembled the text into a new form. The resultant manuscript is completely random, and changes every time the algorithm is executed.

The printed edition of *Re-Writing Freud* mimics Volume 4 of the Penguin collected Freud so closely as to be almost indistinguishable and is only 1 of an affectively infinite number of potential randomized texts generated from *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

Morris’ volume is a Freudian *I-Ching* that can be consulted on any number of subjects on any page—the struggling writer can access an unending chain of potentialities. *Re-Writing Freud* includes every one of the 266,704 words from Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* but re-presents them to the reader in completely random order. Faced with such random verbiage, a reader must apply Freud’s own interpretative theories from *The Interpretation of Dreams* in order to extrapolate sense.

“Have you studied the soft toes of Geckoes?”

Over the last few years I’ve accumulated three different books written entirely in the interrogative.

The first volume in this miniature collection is Gilbert Sorrentino’s *Gold Fools*. Sorrentino’s book takes the form of a western pulp novel:

[w]ere Nort Shannon, Dick Shannon, and Bud Merkel exceptionally morose as they sat before the small bunkhouse and about the flames of the blazing campfire? Was their recent failed adventure in ranching all over, and did Bud, in particular, think it time to pack it in? Was Bud a colorful speaker, in the great tradition of the heartbreakingly beautiful, yet very dry, American West? Was their late debacle tough luck, or just *what* was it? Had loco weed played an important role in their failure? If so, how? Pack what in? Just what is loco weed? (9)

Gold Fools is a series of toggle switches for the reader’s composition of another book—for if Nort, Dick and Bud were *not* exceptionally morose, what were they? If their recent adventure in ranching was *not* over, when would it continue? If it *wasn’t* time to pack it in, what time was it? Each interrogative opens another narrative...

2009 was punctuated by the publication of two question-only novels. William Walsh constructed *questionstruck* solely from questions posed by Calvin Trillin in his *New Yorker* columns and his food and travel narratives. Even when isolated, the questions reflect the original author’s texts and signal an absence of narrative (unlike Sorrentino’s novel):

The former sheriff? How are you? What can I do to help? What's so odd about it? If the local law enforcement people launched an undercover operation of such effectiveness and probity, he asks, why was one of the state policemen transferred far from his home and the other one encouraged to retire? What's the story about the hog?

What's the appropriate hog story? (17)

questionstruck doesn't have the grace of *Gold Fools* as the questions posed are harvested without an appreciation of how their juxtaposition may influence reading. *questionstruck* is merely a gathering.

Padgett Powell's *The Interrogative Mood*, on the other hand, is a fascinating book. Lacking a traditional narrative, Powell's book poses questions at 'you'; a litany of questions that slow the reader down. Each personality-defining, seemingly unconnected, query is a test for the reader:

Are your emotions pure? Are your nerves adjustable? How do you stand in relation to the potato? Should it still be Constantinople? Does a nameless horse make you more nervous or less nervous than a named horse? In your view, do children smell good? If before you now, would you eat animal crackers? Could you lie down and take a rest on the sidewalk? (1)

Each of these texts use the reader's tendency to sub-consciously answer questions posed in a text, especially those posed to "you" because every "you" is you, isn't it?

§

Dan Farrell's *The Inkblot Record* gathers patients' responses to Rorschach tests from seven different textbooks and presents those results in alphabetical order. No record is given of the initiating inkblots and all responses are gathered into a single text. The results are distanced from any single patient's psychiatric responses:

Shape. Shape and appendages. Shape and head; climbing. Shape, black bear, no real body. Shape, colouring, white and grey stone.

Shape inside a heart effect, a real heart. Shape, it has no head, part of a tail, more nearly a moth with open wings, colour has nothing to do with it. (61)

The alphabetic sorting, coupled with the enigmatic nature of the responses, creates a chant-like repetitive rhythm:

Yes. Yes. Yes, all of it again, these white parts would be the eyes and mouth I suppose. Yes, all of it looks like an abstract of some sort ... you see the veins, different muscles, veins are usually in red. You try to allow for everything, but something unexpected comes up, things don't go your way. (105)

The design of *The Inkblot Record* cannily underscores Farrell's text. The book consists of dense rectangular blocks of text set in a full-justified, sans serif typeface (denying any inkblot-style "readings" of shape). Additionally, *The Inkblot Record's* cover denies authorial extrapolation; there is no author photograph, biographical sketch, endorsements or blurbs. Dan Farrell remains a faceless creator, just out of reach of the reader.

Craig Dworkin's "Legend (II)" is the sequel to a now non-existent original. Dworkin's poem "Legion" was a recontextualization of all of the true/false questions in the *Minnesota Multiphastic Personality Inventory*. The original "Legion" thus would have been an ideal addition to my minute library of interrogative texts. Despite the test's wide discreditation for psychiatric usage, the publishers of the *Minnesota Multiphastic Personality Inventory* insisted that Dworkin remove the piece from circulation. He willingly did so, but replied with a sequel. "Legion (II)" consists solely of his answers to the questions posed in the original—now redacted—"Legion":

No. True. False. False. False. False. False. False. Not especially. Uh,

not really. False. No. Um, no. I guess that's true. Not really. Uh, no.

No. False. No, but what a convoluted question! Of course not, that would be crazy. Not really. Uh, no. Yeah. True. False. True. Uh, false.

No. Some of it. True. No. No. Uh, true. I wouldn't call that an artist.

Without the original publisher's demand that Dworkin's text be redacted, his "Legion (II)" would not have existed. Thus his poem consists entirely of erased questions, questions which the reader then must generate.

Ron Silliman's long poem "Sunset Debris" also consists entirely of questions, a poetic addendum to my focus on prose. It has become a poetic cliché among readers of Silliman's text to answer the questions, thus generating a text not un-like Dworkin's "Legion (II)". Christian Bök attempts to move the text from confessional orientation to a more aleatory arena. Bök uses the initial 100 questions from "Sunset Debris" as a means to engage the online virtual intelligence of the A.L.I.C.E. chatbot. A.L.I.C.E. becomes an

unwitting interrogator of the reader/writer dichotomy inherent in Silliman's original text. Bök's "Busted Sirens" consists solely of A.L.I.C.E.'s answers to Silliman's questions where each answer becomes emblematic of our own responses to the interrogation of literature:

Yes, I think that this is hard, but I'm not completely sure.

Yes, I think that this is cold, but I'm not completely sure.

I suppose that it does.

Yes, I think that this is heavy, but I'm not completely sure.

Yes, I always have to carry it far.

I can't really speak for them.

Yes, I think that this is where we get off, but I'm not completely sure.

The blue one, I think.

We are just having a little chat.

It Quacks Like a Duck

The classical inspiration for writing poetry is the humanist moment—the urge to communicate a classical ‘truth’ about the human experience—love, memory, heartbreak—through now-familiar poetic diction. Poetry is an indicator for “what looks like poetry”—if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it must be confessional humanism. The poem as finely wrought epiphanic moment of personal reflection (the poetry norm) underlines mass-culture and political sameness; it does little to question or confront how language itself defines the limitations of expression—both personal and critical. Writers that emphasize the classical and humanist definitions of poetry without considering the work being done in alternative forms of writing do little to further the writing of poetry as they offer only what is most palatable to the most conservative of audiences.

The accommodationist “official verse culture” (Bernstein 249) of personal confession and reflection has been flattened into a sameness of subject, form and structure. In striving for universality it instead degenerates into an implicit support of sloganeering, advertising and suburban consumerism. Neo-conservative writing continuously underlines the relationship between power and language. A number of contemporary writers distance themselves from the humanist trope by finding inspiration in found and manipulated texts. These texts allow the author to move writing

out of its confines of the confessional, and into areas of language not typically seen as literature.

Emma Kay's *Worldview* successfully negotiates the schism between the humanist drive and the conceptual compositional strategy where language is assembled, not written. *Worldview* is nothing less than Kay's exhaustive history of the world from the Big Bang to the year 2000 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 on the history of the world until the 20th century, the remainder on the encyclopedic recitation of history drawn primarily from the artist's lifetime all with a flawless tone of cultural authority. A sample section of the index to *Worldview* reveals Kay's own selective sense of history:

HIV, 156, 181

Holland, 45, 57

Holliday, Billy, 113

Hollywood, 86, 99, 145, 190, 195

Holocaust, 92, 95

holograms, 129

Holyfield, Evander, 197

(220).

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. Kay’s text is both encyclopedic in purview and centred 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 poetics—‘the stuff of poetry’—but rather one that is developed through the sheer mass of the extraordinary ordinary.

In conceptual writing the author works with extant material in order to re-contextualize an already existing genre with a focus on materiality, collection and accumulation.

Sol LeWitt, in his “Sentences on Conceptual Art”—both a manifesto and a piece of conceptual art in its own right,—postulates that

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. [...]

29. The process is mechanical and should not be tampered with. It should run its course (222).

This shared processual base for conceptual art and conceptual writing is not to suggest that conceptual writing is a temporally displaced adjunct to conceptual art, but instead that the two share aesthetic values, and that

conceptual art can be understood as a moment of Oulipian anticipatory plagiarism.

LeWitt wrote in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but a generation of writers later, these statements have taken on new weight. He argues for a mechanical procedurality in visual art, as “[t]o work with a plan which is pre-set is one way of avoiding subjectivity” (LeWitt “Paragraphs” 214). His resistance to humanist subjectivity is particularly relevant for conceptual writing. Robert Smithson’s 1968 statement “Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth projects” is a comparable stance applied directly to literary work: “poetry being forever lost must submit to its own vacuity; it is somehow a product of exhaustion rather than creation” (107).

In his famous defense of James Joyce’s *Work in Progress*, Samuel Beckett argued that “[h]ere is direct expression—pages and pages of it” (502) and chides the reader that

“[y]ou are not satisfied unless form is so strictly divorced from content that you can comprehend the one almost without bothering to read the other” (502–03).

Beckett’s defense of *Work in Progress* is temporally adaptable to become a slogan for conceptual work in general:

“[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*” (503).

Rob's Word Shop

For May 2010, Robert Fitterman hosted a storefront facility in New York City's Bowery that sold nothing but words.

Rob's Word Shop was open Tuesdays and Thursdays May 5th through May 27th 11AM to 2PM selling single letters for 50 cents and words for 1 dollar a piece.

Clients were invited to request letters and words and specify which typeface (typed or handwritten, in printing or cursive) in which they would like those words produced. Fitterman then created the requested letters, words, phrases and sentences to the clients' specifications, produced an invoice and commercial documentation and completed the sale. All requests and conversations were recorded and all purchases were obsessively detailed—fodder for Fitterman's next book. Fitterman also allowed for mail-order requests and posted daily updates on his fledgling company's success at robwordshop.blogspot.com.

Needless to say, I couldn't miss the opportunity to participate in a venture that stands the traditional writing-publishing model on its head. I placed an email order for the penultimate sentence from Herman Melville's novella *Bartleby the Scrivener*: "On errands of life these letters speed towards death." I dutifully sent Fitterman a cheque for \$9US and promptly received an envelope containing the requested sentence handwritten horizontally across a standard sheet of paper rubberstamped and signed by Fitterman. Accompanying the sentence was an itemized invoice stamped KEEP THIS SLIP

FOR YOUR REFERENCE and a typed alternative setting of the same sentence (no charge).

At the outset of Melville's novella, *Bartleby* is a model employee, highly praised by his superiors. Bartleby soon refuses to participate in any of the expected duties of his office and of Capitalist society. Bartleby begins to respond to demands that he dutifully execute his role as scrivener (hand-copying business documents) with the phrase "I would prefer not to." This lack of participation soon spreads to all aspects of Bartleby's life and he eventually dies, preferring not to eat.

I requested that particular sentence as conceptual poets adopt *Bartleby the Scrivener* as a stylistic forerunner of conceptual writing. Conceptual writing "prefers not to" engage with the expectations of writing, as it is traditionally defined. Eschewing traditional formulations of literature, conceptual writing, echoing "Bartleby," consists of works that are unreadable, unsellable, unreviewable and that are ultimately outside of traditional definitions.

Fitterman, with *Rob's Word Shop*, was a writer who refused to write. He welcomed the position of 'scrivener' preferring to not express any of his own creativity. Instead of accepting commissions for creative writing, Fitterman merely transcribed words at his customer's request and charged them for a task they could have easily accomplished without intercession. Ironically, given the sales of poetry (especially that of avant-garde poetry), Fitterman's *Word Shop* probably "moved more product" than many poets.

If *Rob's Word Shop* is any indication, readers today do not want to purchase poetry; they would rather purchase their own words sold back to them at a profit.

A Phallic King Midas

Steven Zultanski's *Pad* (Los Angeles: Make Now Press, 2010) hilariously interrogates experimental writing's propensity for masculinist gestures.

Zultanski builds on Georges Perec's *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (in which he describes everything he observes from a café window over 3 days in October 1974), Tan Lin's *Bib* (in which he obsessively enumerates all of his reading materials and the length of time spent on each) and Daniel Spoerri's *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (in which he maps the histories of every item spread across his kitchen table).

Perec, Lin and Spoerri catalogue the random assemblages of the mundane; they create a level of significance simply through the application of choice. The resultant manuscripts are both socio-historical mappings of possessions, habits and behaviours and conceptual novels in which the authors abandon narrative intention in favour of compositional intention. The act of recording behavior and observation borders on the obsessive and yet frequently yields observations of strikingly tender contemplative moments.

Experimentalism (and conceptualism) is frequently criticized as a male-dominated field where author's works are judged not by grace or subtlety but by muscular exertion and literary "heavy lifting." Zultanski fully embraces the masculinist trope of conceptual "heavy lifting" and takes it to an absurd new extreme. In *Pad* Zultanski not only obsessively catalogues all of the items in

his pad; he also lists the items according to whether or not he could lift the items with his penis:

My dick cannot lift the small Holmes rotating fan sitting on the windowsill facing the bed. My dick cannot lift the windowsill. My dick cannot lift the bookcase filled with mostly unread books. My dick cannot lift the pile of mostly unread chapbooks sitting on top of the bookcase filled with mostly unread books. My dick can lift the cat postcard from Bob. My dick can lift the 2006 Turtle Point Press catalogue. My dick can lift the book *A Little White Shadow* by Mary Ruefle. (2–3)

Much as Kenneth Goldsmith's colleagues pored over his *Soliloquy* in search of details on how they were discussed behind their backs, *Pad* includes an obsessively detailed list of all the books in Zultanski's pad that he can lift with his dick. In an act of perverted reader-response, each item on Zultanski's shelf is sorted by his own member's success (or failure) in lifting it from a secure position on the shelf. I imagine that Zultanski's coterie will similarly search *Pad* in hope for evidence that their book was submitted to his phallic sorting. Zultanski's reading list is catalogued by whether or not he could dislodge books from its shelf (and implicitly, from a canonical position) through the muscular force of his own phallocentrism. This canonicity uncannily echoes most libraries own retention criteria:

My dick can lift the book *The Maximus Poems* by Charles Olson. My dick can lift the book *Collected Poems* by George Oppen. My dick can

lift the book *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* by Wilfred Owen. My
dick can lift the book *Notes for Echo Lake* by Michael Palmer. (120)

Zultanski gives overt voice to the masculine in *Pad* by literally associating everything he owns, everything he touches, with his penis. In *Pad*, the phallic is not implicit it is explicit. Everything in his apartment is included in Zultanski's tome, and thus he (and his cock) lays claim to everything in his purview. Zultanski surveys his empire and all within it. His schlong is the embodiment of the male gaze, and all that it can touch it can own and define. Zultanski's girlfriend's possessions are treated to the same disturbing taxonomy:

My dick can lift the girlfriend's green Gap t-shirt from the plastic bag
of clothes. My dick can lift the girlfriend's navy blue Suzy jeans from
the plastic bag of clothes. My dick can lift the girlfriend's red belt
from the plastic bag of clothes. (34)

Interestingly, while Zultanski categorizes all of his possessions according to his own penile acrobatics, he avoids grammatically claiming his girlfriend as 'his', preferring the definite article 'the'—and while the text opens with Steve's dick lifting all of "the girlfriend's" clothing from a "plastic bag of clothes," by the end of the book he declares

My dick can lift the plastic bag stuffed with the ex-girlfriend's clothes.
My dick cannot lift, all at once, the entire pile of the ex-girlfriend's
clothes. My dick can lift, one at a time, each article of the ex-
girlfriend's clothing (164)

This suggests that while there is a great deal that Zultanski's dick could lift, it "cannot lift the doorknob on the front door [...] the front door lock [...] the eyehole" and ultimately "still cannot lift the door" (165). The litany of products and items that Zultanski's dick struggles to lift closes with a castrated moment, where Zultanski and his dick are left alone and his "dick cannot lift the floor."

Zultanski, with *Pad*, is a phallic King Midas: all that he touches turns to dick.

An Articulatory Feat: An Interview with Caroline Bergvall

Language is inherently instable. It allows a flux of individual and personal connotations to gather around dictionary meanings like barnacles on the hull of a ship. Communication is dependent on what Caroline Bergvall refers to as the “smooth functioning of a speaking’s motor skills” where “speech fluency is an articulatory act.” Using fragmented text—words broken into their constituent pieces—poets draw attention to how meaning accumulates outside of intention. “Releasing poetics from poetry,” Bergvall explores how sound isolates and aggregates.

With *Fig*, her second full-length book of poetry, French-Norwegian poet Caroline Bergvall gathers collaborative texts written from 1996 and 2002 each of which interrogates how language and sound gather meaning. Bergvall uses multi-lingual fragments to articulate body-politics and gender, where words become entwined between surface and depth: “beyond the impl / gated c ated body limit.” Bergvall’s enjambment torques her poetic language to make the reader hyper-aware that text operates like a body in a room, always aware of its location:

figure prepares to faceload aF
acelike a redred rise
this is not, why ox en, g, -ent,
ouldnt see, err, twiny, I mean not tiny

Bergvall’s language refuses to sit still, refuses to behave. Bergvall’s

fragments simultaneously assemble and disassemble, a vibratory dance of sliding articulation.

beaulieu: *Fig* is a gathering of occasional pieces and collaborations (with John Cayley, Heiko Fisher, Redell Olsen, Ciarán Maher and even, to an extent, Dante and 47 of Dante's translators). How do you perceive collaboration as a poetic practice?

Bergvall: A few years ago, I was invited along with other British or British-based poets to answer a series of questions, of which one was on collaboration (see *Binary Myths*, ed. Andy Brown, Stride: 1998). My take at the time was that collaborative practice opened up the poet as much as the writing to "a wider network of activity and exchange" (by which I meant primarily, arts activities and critical dialogues). I still very much subscribe to this. Examples of arts collaborations are rife and frequently show for a loosening up of discipline constrictions alongside an increased sense of political or social urgency.

At a production level, collaborative practice helped me to negotiate a place for writing projects that feed from performance, sound, space, moving image, digital visuals etc. I'm not comfortable with the specialist isolationism of art scenes and have always been keen to see work in poetic environments as well as at arts and performance festivals. Collaboration is crucial in circulating language-based work across different environments, and in releasing poetics from poetry.

At a process-level, collaboration has emphasized an openness to tackling each specific situation or project as a formal and intellectual motif. I haven't

been interested in developing a recognizable writing “style,” but rather I have applied various skills and writing concerns as needed to each project. As my collaborators do with their own thought-processes and skills. Compromise and negotiation become important formal concerns.

At a cultural level, collaboration has favored a certain personal distance and has allowed me to explore and think performatively about some of the (often prohibitive) discursive frames placed on the manifestation of forms of subjectivity, community, collectivity.

The main challenge for the book *Fig* was how to present these textual pieces without sacrificing their collaborative and formally diverse starting-points. Most of the projects that are included in *Fig* were borne out of a strategic interest in collaboration and process-led writing as ways of experiencing and rethinking poetry’s role and cultural place.

Collaboration is not an absolute of practice. It is project-based and takes its cues from this. I am currently involved in two specific collaboration projects. Another bulk (as in load, in terms of quantity) of writing runs parallel to these and is currently dedicated to a project which is non-collaborative, and is being written and explored completely on the page. The need for such a project has emerged from the amount of traveling I’ve done in recent years. This has forced up the necessity for an autonomous and ongoing (no deadline) project and has also intensified an interest in the mobility and portability of developing work from notebooks and/or straight to computer and with no other end in mind than an accumulation of thoughts/pages. It comes at a time when I’m also interested in thinking

through more introspective, intellectually questioning, and less explicitly performic forms of writing.

beaulieu: To follow that more introspective form of writing for a moment, in *Fig* as well as in *Goan Atom*, I am struck with the poly-linguistic instability of language. In *Fig* you write that “[s]peech fluency is an articulatory feat” that “presupposes the smooth functioning of speaking’s motor skills.” (34). How does the fragment operate for you, especially within words where the fragment is letteral, an embedded stutter?

Bergvall: I don’t think of fragments, as much as of nodes, joins, points of articulated sound which can be used to redirect the language in use, and travel down another one for awhile. This comes from my interest in the heterogeneous traffic that is part of any language’s development, more or less intensely, depending on political circumstances. Words seen diachronically as much as synchronically. Bakhtin is fascinating on this. His concepts of polyglossia and of heteroglossia show at different levels, within and outside of a language’s national or regional bounds of self-determination, the stratifications or networks, and also the power dynamics, at play. All of this of course is crucially at work when languages are taken up to represent a specific vernacular, and in a sense, when literature is used to make a claim on a local and national consciousness. Dante decides to write in Italian, rather than in Latin; Chaucer decides to write in English, rather than in French; Luther gets the Bible translated into German. This story is replicated in most language histories. Aimé Césaire’s *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* provided an early and first model of the hybridism, or clear nodality, that has

marked much post-colonial literature, a written “créolité” which relies on a combination of French and Martinican Creole imagery to draw up its political and poetic lines. New speak for new consciousness. It reflects the complex making of new cultural and social bodies.

Since 9/11, the US has seen a politics which increasingly attempts to forget the polylingual migrant histories at the root of the republic and tries instead to confirm the national naturalization of English and of Christian culture. Of course, this exacerbation of the narrow culture in power can but fail in the long run, but in the short-term it pretends rather successfully to have only one tongue, one head, in order to criminalize a knowledge of the historical, social and linguistic complexities that form this country’s national body.

I think of these histories, or these lessons, these linguistic politics, also in their analogies to the repression of social body-types. And what kind of somatic (and poetic) speech has emerged from this. You mention the stutter and it is a strong image of this kind of bodywork. Deleuze of course describes it as the point of under-development in language and culture. Celan imagined the exhausted endpoint of European culture as a stuttering old man. A number of performance artists have used their own stuttering or have taken forms of stuttering in use as a way of making other kinds of speaking bodies visible. Anna O’s rebellious anti-paternalist speaking in tongues came out as a somatised stuttering. The stuttering denaturalizes the political language in use.

beaulieu: How can the stutter work to de-stabilize the body as a political, gendered site?

Bergvall: It can be seen to carry out metaphorically the malfunctioning of politics of gender and of heterosexual commands with it, these deceptively naturalized body-types, only to combine and distort these with the articulations of a combinatory, poetic tongue. In my work, sometimes this is done at a macro-level: unit shifts of bilingual nodes allow for polylingual, polysexual play: the Cogs of *Doll* or “16 Flowers” in *Fig*. At other times, the combinations take place at a more semantic level. I think of Alvin Lucier’s “I am sitting in a room” where spatial manipulation of the tape is used to ease off, disperse his own initial stuttering. I think of the fact that he imprints my listening space with this much-enlarged stuttering sphere. His spatial recording is socially compensatory (he seeks to disguise his stuttering) as much as poetically combinatory (he allows the act of stuttering to create a very new sonic dimension).

I see it also as the degree to which a writer is willing to involve their own body’s ways in the creation of their writing, or writing-language. And their reasons for doing so. This involvement of the physical reality of writing is always of interest to me. It works in two ways. It is a way of thinking about ways of working, stimulus and techniques, as well as digging into personal history lodged in the body. Roland Barthes became more and more interested in these spatial and temporal levels of writing and the way they involve the writer. Weirdly enough, it somehow de-individualizes the writer and moves them towards an understanding of differential collectivities. One

becomes one of many. This creates or favors a distancing effect, and this distancing becomes a point of entry to one's culture, and to writing. .

beaulieu: Your new work on *The Canterbury Tales* offers a translation which actively disrupts language's stability by including a temporal shift between Middle English and contemporary English, as well as other languages—all of this sifted through Chaucer's use of 'tale' and its use of speaker, and reliability. What led you to Chaucer in this context?

Bergvall: Charles Bernstein and the medievalist David Wallace invited me to do something for a Chaucer congress in NY in July 2006. It was perfect. Chaucer's English is chaotic, unstable, regional. There is no fixed spelling and the reputation of the language itself is still culturally vastly inferior to the neighbouring French or Italian, and of course to the imposing legacy of Latin. He wrote at a time when English had hardly begun as a national language, let alone as an international one. Somehow it seems the exact inverse of our time. I live in a time where English has exploded way beyond the national. It's being constantly recreated or de-created in the chaos of International English, it's regionalized by the making-do inventiveness of postcolonial anglo-patois, and there are even written similarities 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.

Poetic Representations of the Holocaust

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.

Theodor Adorno's dictum that all poetry after Auschwitz is immoral embodies the crisis of poetics following the Holocaust. How is European poetry to situate itself? In the Holocaust much literature was as defiled as the authors who had written it; poetry and prose were brought to unwitting service of a culture's destruction. 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 finally 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* without knowledge of Charles Reznikoff's *Holocaust* (1975). Reznikoff used a similar compositional strategy but drew from survival testimony at the Eichmann and Nuremberg trials. Both books are bereft of traditionally poetic language. Reznikoff's, however, 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, but *transcript* is as emotionally engaging as any humanist confession. 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” (28) when “it is very difficult at the moment to keep the liquidation figure at the level maintained up to now” (52).

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 primary documentation in search of the poetic in the unspeakable.

“An irresponsible act of imaginative license”

The traditional poetic impulse is a refutation of language’s inherent failures. It is the attempt to make language perform the impossible, to lucidly reconnoiter the ineffable. Metaphorical language is an acknowledgement of language’s inherent downfall. Language is too tied to *thingness*, to objects and gestures (as Robbe-Grillet argues in “A Future for the Novel”) to plumb the depths of the human soul. This is not to say that metaphorical language does not have moments of beauty and grace, but those moments are the result of a larger failure. As poets, we attempt to bend language to our lyrical will. What results is inevitably a failure, but poetry exists in the degree to which the poem fails.

Kevin McPherson Eckhoff’s *Rhapsodomancy* explores language’s inherent failures and surveys how those failures become poetic. McPherson Eckhoff uses two abandoned languages—*Shorthand* (created by Sir Isaac Pitman in 1837) and *Unifon* (created by John Malone in the 1950s) to visually tie concrete poetry (an ostracized poetic form) to sleight of hand, comic strips, optical illusions and pantomancy (the divination of the future through scattered objects).

Rhapsodomancy’s “Disavowals: Optical Allusions” recreate traditional optical illusions with *Unifon* characters. Each of the fourteen visual poems playful challenge the reader to define their own poetic foreground /

background relationship; the pillar of “I” warps, one of the arms of “E” falls into emptiness, the “O” is a linguistic Gordian knot. The “optical allusions” in “Disavowals” belie the illusion of poetry; strain your eyes as much as you’d like, vertigo is inevitable.

As hopeful as apantomancy (the divination of the future from astrology, palm-reading, tea-leaf reading which ultimately reveal more about the reader than the read) may be, poetry is just as naïvely optimistic. Poets have become literary palm-readers, not because they can divine or influence the future (gone are the days when poets were members of the court or endowed by the ruling classes to celebrate and immortalize their accomplishments), but because they are the literary equivalent of a tarot-reader in a secluded tent at a creative anachronist fair. Poetry has become *Unifon*: a language largely abandoned to specialists and anachronists who pine for a return to an imagined poetic heyday.

Rhapsodomancy revels in the exuberant, playful poetics of failure. The meaning “stamped on [the] lifeless things” of poetry is merely an illusion, a “now you see it, now you don’t.” Poetry is no longer the beautiful expression of emotive truths; it is the archæological re-arrangement of the remains of an ancient civilization. Faced with the “two vast and trunkless legs of stone” of *Shorthand* and *Unifon* (and by extension of poetry itself), mcpherson eckhoff realizes Shelley’s plea that “[r]ound the decay / of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away,” sits down and makes sandcastles in the rubble.

bill bissett's *Rush: what fuckan theory; a study uv language*

bill bissett's work for the past several decades has been problematic.

His lyrical voice is complicated by his complex idiosyncratic orthography. His concrete poetry intersperses dense typewriter-driven grid pieces with diagrams of ejaculating phalluses. Most problematic is the frequency and design of his books. Talonbooks has published a new bissett volume every 18 months for decades, and now the consistency of voice and style have made it difficult to differentiate one volume from another—they all blend into “bill bissett's new book.”

I remember the first time that I saw bissett perform. I was awe-struck by the combination of poetry and song, script and improvisation, speech and incantation. A few years later I saw him again. And that was the problem. This later performance—and the one after that (and the one after that)—was the same as, or almost indistinct from, the first one. Much like his books, his performances had taken on the role of “bill bissett performance” instead of exploring where he was *now*. Sadly in 2011 bissett's books and performance upon repeated exposure become the work of an overwrought maraca-wielding hippie who's overplayed LP is caught in a groove.

But then there's *Rush: what fuckan theory; a study uv language*.

Rush: what fuckan theory is bissett's vital 1971 manifesto in support of his poetics of sexuality, breath and page composition.

Within *what fuckan theory*'s legal-sized pages (with card covers, side-stapled and taped; all the copies I've heard of have a variety of cover illustrations and are just as variously stained and rumped), bissett issues militant directives for poetic composition.

bissett argues that only words liberated from traditional syntax can truly represent human emotion, "otherwise wer only writing what sum one is telling yu too that s all greeting cards advirtising fr certain authorizd emotions." He claims that poetry has been "usd fr all th bullshit fascism too" and that the academy attempts to normalize language in order to make "the language [...] safe nd still correct nd teachabul backd up with troops by the fort knowx."

bissett implores poets that "yu dont have to do it like everybody else," that "all thes correct usses ar like punishment" which force normative thought. Normative writing enforces normative thought and makes the reader conform to a homogenous culture ("sure baby i think liberals are nice people too but nort america really becomes increasingly fascist"). Instead, bissett argues, realize that "the first lettr of kill is s" and write knowing that "meaning is meaningless." The poet's attempt to create culture and to participate in a larger discussion of national cultural identity only re-affirms the culture that she may be trying to challenge. *what fuckan theory* argues that as much as paragrammatic language may undermine the linguistic status quo, "th pun fuks back" as a master narrative will always be ascribed. Our culture has the propensity to normalize everything. No matter how radical a poetic may be, it will eventually be ascribed a cultural value, a value which will be

make it consumable. So then, bissett argues, the point is to realize that “yu dont have to cum bak to th same place all th time.”

bissett’s manifesto flirts with what we would now consider conceptual writing, and includes a Sol LeWitt-like list of compositional strategies:

so yu dont need th sentence

yu dont need correct spelling

yu dont need correct grammar

yu dont need th margin

yu dont need regulation use of capital nd lower case etc

yu dont need sense or skill

yu dont need this

what dew yu need

RUSH argues that the last thing poetry needs is more poetry. The linguistic signals of effective communication are unneeded for bissett’s poetics, for “all these [things] yu dont need are tools of war.” With *what fuckan theory* bissett argues that the best way of interrogating the political control of language is to intercede with a radical orthography which foregrounds the text’s materiality of the text and the author’s ideological independence.

RUSH: what fuckan theory—the key book in bissett’s 45-year oeuvre—remains out of print.

Fidgeting with the scene of the crime

Kenneth Goldsmith's *Fidget* is a verbal map of a missing crime. *Fidget* interrogates the representation of bodies and the representation of the “crime scene,” a documented space of a prior action. The ramifications of these actions on the body and on the construction of history fall outside the frame of the narrative, the presentation of an absent body. The “formed holes” in narrative echo the crime scene as a questioned space where

[t]he body is envisioned neither as an innocent repository of nature nor as an existential symbol of isolation, but as an artifact that leaves traces and in turn is a surface for recording them.

(Rugoff “More than meets the eye” 104)

Fidget opens with the snap of an eyelid that resounds like the snap of a coroner's camera:

Eyelids open. Tongue runs across upper lip moving from left side of mouth to right following arc of lip. Swallow. Jaws clench.

Grind. Stretch. Swallow. Head lifts. (8)

The crime scene is more than simply the scene of the crime. Ralph Rugoff uses the field of criminalistics—what he defines as the “analysis of traces”—to examine conceptual art. Unlike the crime scene investigator, however, the viewer of conceptual art is not asked

to reach a definitive finding or conclusion: instead our search for meaning engages us in a goalless activity of speculation and interpretation. (Rugoff “Introduction” 18)

Art and writing practices are read through the “aesthetic of aftermath, as a place where the action has already occurred” (Rugoff “Introduction” 19).

Goldsmith has applied a transcription process to the movements of his own body aiming for the “observation of a body in space, not [his] body in space. There was to no editorializing, no psychology, no emotion—just a body detached from a mind” (Goldsmith as quoted in Perloff 91). Goldsmith’s process was seemingly simple. On June 16 (Bloomsday) 1997 Goldsmith woke and immediately began obsessively narrating the movements his body made over the course of the entire day without ever using the first-person pronoun. There is no speaking “I;” no narration of self-awareness. Goldsmith narrated each movement into a voice-activated tape recorder. He later returned to the tape, transcribed his recording and edited out all first-person pronouns. It was Goldsmith’s intention that the transcription and editing would “divorce the action from the surrounding, narrative, and attendant morality” (Goldsmith quoted in Perloff 93). The body of the poem is without anchor, without intention, it “addresses the body as a dispersed territory of clues and traces” (Rugoff “More than meets the eye” 88).

The artistic site as crime scene is dependent on “the actions of a missing body or [...] complete scenes that must be reconstituted from shreds of evidence” (Rugoff “More than meets the eye” 101). The absence of a body—

or in Goldsmith the presence of body but the absence of context and intention—leads “not toward analysis but toward a new mode of aesthetic contemplation precisely because there is no moral reason [...] but simply a documentary impulse to record” (Wollen 29). *Fidget* records the actions of an unanchored body in non-narrativizing narrative and also the “impulse to record.” This impulse overrides meaning as it is traditionally constructed, in favour of absence and melancholy, “meaning seems overwhelming in its presence yet strangely insubstantial ... [s]omething happened here that we cannot quite grasp or understand” (Wollen 25). *Fidget* leaves the reader / viewer reflecting on Goldsmith’s own movements:

Grasp. Reach. Grab. Hold. Saw. Pull. Hold. Grab. Push. Itch.

Push. Push. Turn. Walk. [...] Turn. Chew. Massage. Gather. [...]

Reach. Open. (62).

Unlike a retrospectively narrated detective novel where the scene of the crime is of utmost importance and where “the crucial dramatic action—the crime—always takes place before the story has begun” (Ernst Bloch as quoted in Wollen 33), *Fidget* occurs simultaneously. Classically crime scenes are “traces of prior mayhem” (Rugoff “More than meets the eye” 84); for Goldsmith the mayhem is continuous and continuously present:

Lips part. Hand tilts. Swallow. Repeat. Eyes dart left to right.

Ears twitch. Eyes look straight ahead. Focus. Double Vision [...]

Eyes dart left. Light forces eyes to move to right. Eyes focus

closely. Glance afar. Register motion. (35)

Goldsmith has “leach[ed] away the significance of narrative point of view and subjectivity” (Wollen 26) by removing agency from his body’s movements. Peter Wollen describes crime scene photography and crime scene investigation as having “an acute sensitivity to the trite, the futile, the banal, and the insignificant” (32).

Goldsmith meticulously documents the “banal and the insignificant” in an anti-space, a space of absence or negativity created by the “displaced signifiers of the crime” (Wollen 24). We are not asked to read for the evidence of presence, but rather for the residue of absence. Goldsmith’s *Fidget* articulates the absences of narrative. Walter Benjamin stated that “to live means to leave traces” (Benjamin quoted in Rugoff 75), and Goldsmith dwells exclusively in those traces creating a narrative solely of traces without effects. But, like any investigation, what is *not* documented in *Fidget* is just as important as what is documented. Goldsmith’s documentation gives in to “the temptation to make things fit, to squeeze clues into a coherent picture by highlighting some facts and excluding others” (Rugoff “More than meets the eye” 62). Only once does Goldsmith document the act of documenting: “Mouth forms round o of swallow” (10). This is the only time in the entire text where the act of speaking is documented. At this point the line between the document and the act of documentation becomes blurred.

The cool distance of *Fidget*’s isolated crime scene is soon degraded and contaminated by Goldsmith’s consciousness. As the task of narration becomes increasingly onerous, Goldsmith actively intercedes in the isolation. Barry Le Va argues that the rise of installation art in the 1960s meant that

“the stuff laying around the object ... grew more important than the object itself” (as quoted in Rugoff 71). As the hours of *Fidget* tick by Goldsmith introduces something “laying around the object” which begins to grow “more important than the object itself”: a fifth of Jack Daniels.

The narration of the factual in *Fidget* becomes increasingly idiosyncratic as Goldsmith becomes increasingly drunk. Transcription of the tapes exposed that his speech was increasingly slurred and difficult to transcribe, although this did not cease the description. Investigation into the crime scene became less dependent on fact and increasingly dependent on clues, suspicions of what the actions *may have* been. *Fidget* at this point is based not on movement, but rather on an approximation of the sounds of Goldsmith’s narration:

Greens projectile. On ah squint. Elen crows on tongue. With
muriss. Kush jimmyhands. Cinder hung moistened, Soldiers
stable. Midgets in palm. The latter affair. Lowerslime. Your pinch
yearning. (73)

The shift from faithful transcription to approximation suggests a homolinguistic translation where the resultant text gives clues about the original source text. *Fidget* becomes about the act of transcription itself, a “latter affair” of Goldsmith’s transcription.

The clue of action—the deposit of possibility—“may derive from the absence of a relevant object as well as from the presence of an irrelevant one” (William O’Green as quoted in Rugoff 90). The Jack Daniels infused chapters of *Fidget* border on Language Poetry, allowing a shift of priority

from *communication of fact* to *communication of suggestion*. *Fidget*, like a crime scene, presents us with “both a surplus and a dearth of meaning” (Wollen 25), a co-mingling of presence and absence.

Acknowledgements

For Madeleine.

Gracious thanks to the writers I discuss and interview in these pages.

Thanks also to the friends and colleagues who have provided the conversations that were the impetus for these pieces. I owe a debt of gratitude to Andrea Andersson, Jonathan Ball, Gary Barwin, Gregory Betts, Christian Bök, Kit Dobson, Craig Dworkin, Lori Emerson, Chris Ewart, Robert Fitterman, Kenneth Goldsmith, Helen Hajnoczky, Richard Harrison, Jake Kennedy, kevin mcpherson eckhoff, Simon Morris, Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl, Vanessa Place, Sina Queyras, Jordan Scott, Nick Thurston, Tony Trehy, Darren Wershler and Eric Zboya.

Jon Paul Fiorentino and Karis Shearer at Snare exhibited great faith and editorial acumen.

Kristen Ingram understands the work/life balance and helps me surf.

Thank you to the journals, websites, blogs and magazines where this work previously appeared.

Thank you also to the editorial collectives of *filling Station* and *NoD* magazines and the staff at *Pages Books* on Kensington. Each foster, support and challenge Calgary's exceptional writing community.

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