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NOTES ON CONCEPTUALISMS

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VANESSA PLACE / ROBERT FITTERMAN

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Foreword	9
Notes on Conceptualisms	13
Ventouses	59
Appendix	73

FOREWORD

Robert Fitterman

In the winter of 2008, at a launch for *The noulipian Analects* (C. Wertheim and M. Viegner, eds., Les Figues Press, 2007), Vanessa Place, Anna Moschovakis, and I were engaged in a conversation about the poetics of erasure techniques. There was some question as to whether or not erasure strategies would fit under the rubric of conceptual writing. Depends on the end result, we agreed, more than the writing strategy itself: i.e., is the poet employing this technique to reach for a larger idea outside of the text, or is the poet primarily concerned with making a new poem out of the erased one with its own local meaning? Or, conversely, are both things happening, or don't both things have to happen, or is there a ratio, a spectrum, of how much the new text relies on some kind of "thinkership" outside of the text itself? These questions led to larger questions about what conceptual writing is all about, how it differs from Conceptual Art, and why this tendency has taken hold in the poetry community. As our conversation thickened, Anna suggested that Vanessa and I write something about conceptual writing for publication with Ugly Duckling Presse.

What follows, then, is a collection of notes, aphorisms, quotes and inquiries on conceptual writing. We have co-authored this text through correspondence, shared reading interests, and similar explorations. *Notes on Conceptualisms* is far from a definitive text and much closer to a primer, a purposefully

incomplete starting place, where readers, we hope, can enter so as to participate in the shaping of these ideas: to add, subtract, multiply.

We chose the title *Notes on Conceptualisms* after much deliberating. We are painfully aware that Conceptual Art was termed nearly half a century ago, and much of what we address might equally be called post-conceptual or neo-conceptual (to borrow terms from the visual arts). We use the term Conceptual Writing in the broadest sense, so that it intersects other terms such as: allegory, appropriation, piracy, flarf, identity theft, sampling, constraint and others. Conceptual Writing, in fact, might best be defined not by the strategies used but by the expectations of the readership or *thinkership*.

Our co-authored text is followed by Vanessa Place's essay "Ventouses," another genesis of this project and of Ugly Duckling Presse's interest in it. Also, the text is followed by a brief Appendix, which lists a selection of books of conceptual writing published recently in the U.S., Canada, and England. These examples are in no way meant to suggest a complete list of writers working with conceptual writing strategies globally or locally, but, rather, to suggest a sample reading list as a starting point.

NOTES ON CONCEPTUALISMS

Vanessa Place & Robert Fitterman

1. Conceptual writing is allegorical writing.

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

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

In allegory, the author-artist uses the full array of possibilities—found and created—to collage a world that parallels the new

production (collectively) of objects as commodity.

Words are objects.

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

compare:



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

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

All conceptual writing is allegorical writing.

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

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

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

In this way, conceptual writing creates an object that creates its own disobjectification.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fiction meaning poetry.

Poetry meaning history.

History meaning the future state of having been.

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

2e. In his essay "Subversive Signs," Hal Foster remarks that the appropriation artist (visual) is "a manipulator of signs more than

a producer of art objects, and the viewer an active reader of messages rather than a passive contemplator of the aesthetic or consumer of the spectacular.”

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

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

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

2g. In this sense, conceptualism enacts Gödel’s Theorem: the degree of constancy/completeness of the “subject” and “matter” is modulated by the degree to which the linguistic object-image is limited/unlimited in nature.

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

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

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

Consider the retyping of a random issue of *The New York Times* as an act of radical mimesis, an act of monastic fidelity to the word as flesh. Consider the retyping of the September 11, 2001 edition (a day that would not be) as an act of radical mimicry, an act of monastic fidelity to Word as Flesh. If these gestures are both critiques of the leveling and loading medium of media, their combined critique is inseparable from the replication of the error under critique. Replication is a sign of desire.

Radical mimesis is original sin.

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

Note the desire to begin again.

3a. Wystan Curnow's paper presented at the Conceptual Writing Conference held at the University of Arizona Poetry Center (2008), while not identifying conceptual writing as allegorical as such, suggests that conceptual writing could be classified as pre- or post-textual (or a hybrid). Pretextual writing assumes a "pretext," an extant idea—the constraint/procedure, the "strategic generality" of the technique, such as appropriation or documentation. The "post-text" is the document necessarily created by the pre-text, though post-text may also refer to a primary text used in a hybrid as a secondary text. Regardless of its textual composition, Curnow notes that conceptual writing invites its own performativity, a performativity that often crosses genres and media, and is an attempt to disembody the meaning "in the contingent and the contextual."

3b. The distinction here is between post-texts that are illustrations of their pre-texts (texts that are open; the idea is paramount/paradigm), and post-texts that are proofs (texts that are closed; the idea is exhausted in its execution).

There are end-points to any spectrum and infinite points between them. How one defines the end-points and the points in between instructs how one defines conceptual writing.

In hybrid or “impure” conceptualism or post-conceptualist writing, the points in between can accommodate a rebellion against, or critique of, the more stringent end-points. This has been articulated in post-conceptualist visual art.

What is an “impure” conceptualism or post-conceptualism in writing? A post-conceptualism might invite more interventionist editing of appropriated source material and more direct treatment of the self in relation to the “object,” as in post-conceptual visual art where the self re-emerges, albeit alienated or distorted (see Paul McCarthy).

Adding on to and/or editing the source material is more a strategy of post-conceptualism; so is reneging on the faithful execution of the initial concept. The most impure conceptualism may manifest in a symptomatic textual excess/extravagance, such as in the baroque. Do these broken promises point to a failure in a conceptual writing text?

Failure is the goal of conceptual writing.

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

I have failed miserably—over and over again.

4. If allegory assumes context, conceptual writing assumes all context. (This may be in the form of an open invitation, such as Dworkin’s *Parse*, or a closed index, such as Goldsmith’s *Day*, or a baroque articulation, such as Place’s *Dies*.) Thus, unlike traditional allegorical writing, conceptual writing must be capable of including unintended pre- or post-textual associations. This abrogates allegory’s (false) simulation of mastery, while remaining faithful to allegory’s (profound) interruption of correspondences. Allegory breaks mimesis via its constellatory features—what scattershot this is. Conceptualism’s mimesis absorbs what Benjamin called “the adorable detail.”

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

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

More: “The allegorical mind sides with the object and protests

against its devaluation to the status of a commodity by devaluing it for the second time in allegorical practice.”

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

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

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

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

Note: these are strategies of failure.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The skull is the heart.

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

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

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

Note that the absence of mastery is old hat for females and other others. Christine Buci-Glucksmann: “this discourse through the other is also discourse of the Other.”

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

Note that woman has been the likeness of a likeness.

Note the fidelity problem, or the failure of fidelity.

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

See the story of women.

Inconstant as a mirror.

See Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*.

See Eirin Moure, *Sheep's Vigil by a Fervent Person*.

6. Note the allegorical difference between appropriation techniques that elevate the banal—such as Richard Prince's appropriation of Marlboro ads, blowing them up and turning them into art photos—and works that level the elevated, such as Sherrie Levine's re-photographing of Walker Evans' photos.

Note the similarities between Kenneth Goldsmith's appropriation triptych—*Traffic*, *The Weather*, and *Sports*—and

Jen Bervin's *Nets*, a book of poems that perform erasure on Shakespeare's sonnets. Goldsmith adds the artist/author to the readymade quotidian, upping its art-quotient; Bervin subtracts the master from his masterpiece, author from authority.

Note: Goldsmith's replications are Duchampean in that the "narrative of process establishes a primary meaning, an ultimate originating referent that cuts off the interpretive chain" (Yve-Alain Bois on Robert Ryman, as quoted by Buchloh).

Note: Bervin's gesture is more like Rauschenberg's erasure of de Kooning's painting in leaving the presence of the absence, than it is like Duchamp's proposed Rembrandt-as-ironing board.

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

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

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

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

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

6b2. In conceptual writing, writes Goldsmith, echoing LeWitt, “what matters is the machine that drives the poem’s construction.” Increasingly, for conceptual writers, that machine is now a literal machine. Moreover, as in search engine–based poetry, the

process of construction may be another machine. In this sense, both construction and constraint are informed by market needs and consumer inquires (a procedural loop).

6b3. In Sianne Ngai’s forthcoming collection of essays, *The Cute, the Zany, and the Merely Interesting: Three Problems for Aesthetic Theory*, one of her definitions of the zany today is the multi-tasking worker. While Lucille Ball in the *I Love Lucy* episode “Job Switching” (like Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*) performs the “zany” of the assembly-line human, doomed to frenzied repetition, the overwhelmed actor in a polysemous universe is more like the Marx Brothers’ version of war in *Duck Soup* (where Groucho appears in a variety of American uniforms, including those of both sides of the Civil War, and the Boy Scouts), or war itself. There is no secure signification, not even the dehumanization of man by and into machine, just the vertiginous effect of too much of too much. A worker who works at home—traditionally a devalued situation, though now often assumed and sometimes commodified as a telecommuting “perk”—finds the traditional demarcation between work and leisure obscured.

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

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

Simulation replaced by medium.

Žižek has written about the contemporary phenomenon of consumer goods being stripped of their malignant properties (decaffeinated coffee, nonfat cream, Internet sex) as a form of constrained hedonism. (*The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*). To have one's cake and vomit it up.

Conceptual writing reinserts the malignancy while re-enacting the purge.

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

6b5. Note that by virtue or device, conceptual writing that needs a narrative frame (like a snail, it must carry its house on its back) elevates the role of the artist-author as first interpreter. Writing scripture is an excellent way to make a church. Writing scripture is an excellent way to make the self a disciple while appearing to be doing something outside the self. Insisting that the gospel, and supporting texts, have nothing to do with the self is an excellent way for potential believers to think about the self of the disciple. This gospel-making is very much within the critique and celebration of celebrity. This is very American, particularly since Warhol. This is a story of real faith.

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

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

6b6c. Nb: these two allegorical axes (gesture/content) do not necessarily work algorithmically, but can, and can also work at odds.

7a. Thierry de Deuve: the crisis in representation is a crisis in representivity.

Historically:

narrative is the representation (image) of prose;

sentiment is the representation (image) of poetry.

Now:

inverse.

7a1. If conceptual writing is considered as representation, it must be considered as embodied. As embodied, it must be considered as gendered. As gendered, it must be considered. Race is also consideration. Consideration is what is given to complete the acceptance of any contractual offer. The social contract hinges on such embodied considerations.

7a2. Representivity could = signification. A crisis in signification today would mean meaning, not unlike what meaning meant for Mallarmè in 1890. Would mean there was an alphabet in the alpha sense: there are not empty signifiers any more than there are empty selves. Or the arch possibility hereof. A crisis in signification in this sense means a crisis in insignification—we may mean more than we had previously planned.

A crisis in signification = a crisis in representation.

There are two end-points on the spectrum of approaches to such a crisis:

1. Render the object closed.
2. Render the object open.

Conceptual writing can be conceived as open or closed.

Conceptual writing is a matter of equivalencies.

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

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

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

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

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

This is allegorical. This is sentimental.

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

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

Note that in a post-Cartesian world, there is no splitting the baby: minds are bodies, bodies minds. The brain is a piece of body-meat, the body a bit of brain. This thought, once intolerable, is now comforting proof that “I” do not exist.

“I” am autobiography, text and context.

“I” am innocent/guilty.

Objectivity is old-fashioned, subjectivity idem.

The Subject is the properly melancholic contemporary entity.

The Subject exists in a perpetual procedural loop: the iconic subject is Dante’s *manturningsnaketurningman*.

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

For an example of textual subjectivity, see Place, *Dies: A Sentence*; for an example of appropriated subjectivity, see Fitterman, *My Sun Also Rises*; for an example of neo-constructivist subjectivity, see Craig Dworkin, *Parse*; for an example of psycho-linguistic subjectivity, see Christine Wertheim, +|me’S-pace.

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

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

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

7b. Note that the notion of exhausted or degraded language is an essentialist notion; note that this does not mean it’s not true, just that it may be no truer today than before. Note that there is little sacred writing in the West, though there is room for sport, which implies sanctity.

7c. Walter Benjamin wrote that baroque allegorical writing (save Dante) is fundamentally writing as souvenir, commodity as collector's item. Because allegorical writing is a frozen dialectic, its figural properties are necessarily deformed/destroyed—as figured by the “ruin.”

According to Christine Buci-Glucksmann, because allegorical writing is figural writing, the best representation of Benjamin's ruin is the figure of The Woman, frozen between object and concept, absence and presence.

Note: The Woman is simply another way of saying embodiment.

Note: embodiment = failure.

7d. Transparency is self-refuting.

8a. Rewriting obliterates the past in favor of history as appropriation rewrites the present in favor of the future.

8b. Nevermore = nevertheless.

9a1. There are two fundamental mimetic responses: fidelity and infidelity. Fidelity is an advantage of maturity, infidelity of immaturity. Fidelity is a problem of maturity, infidelity of immaturity.

Is appropriation a problem of maturity or immaturity?

Is the baroque a problem of fidelity or infidelity?

What is the measure of a work's faithfulness or faithlessness? Faithfulness/faithlessness to what?

9a2. If there is an ethics specific to appropriation, it is enacted in the question of editing. Does the writer edit, for example, online language because it is offensive? Does the act of editing become another ethical problem? Does the failure to edit become collusion?

9a3. Simon Critchley argues that ethics is defined by community; morality is imposed by larger conventions. Is it better to be governed by a *physic* or a *metaphysic*? What are the aesthetic ramifications/manifestations of each? If *physic*, pure conceptualisms are more ethical as more directly dictated/ratified by the relevant communities, both generative and receptive.

Note that the generative community (the source of the pre-text) is often more inclusive/accessible, more democratic, than the receptive community, the relatively elite/rarified art world.

If *metaphysic*, more impure or post-conceptualisms are more abstracted and idiosyncratic, and potentially more disruptive, ethical impulses. This too is subject to the critique of elitism.

Note the elite capitalist assumption in critiquing cultural elitism, especially literary elitism, which is sans profit.

10. Things to be considered in materiality:

prosody

book object/page object

language

external text(s)

internal text(ures)

10a. Prosody:

Collage, pastiche, procedure, constraint, performance, citation, documentation, and appropriation (part or whole) may be techniques used in conceptual writing.

What is the difference between conceptual collage and literary others?

Examples of others: Pound, Berrigan, Ashbery—use of collage as pre-text technique to create choral ensemble, i.e., wherein the authorial voice is emergent/dominant/extant; use of collage to

demonstrate specific author or authored aesthetic/metaphysic (theme, e.g.).

C.f., Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) use of collage/citation to create post-text argument (nb Laurence Sterne was accused of plagiarizing Burton in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* [1759]).

Shandy and *Anatomy* are examples of "learned wit," a classical form of satire involving witty manipulation of the materials of erudition (may be appropriated in style/form or text). Consider how learned wit mutates/mutilates via Pound/Marinetti and the incorporation of the quotidian + the rarified. Consider what is now considered rarified.

Same: use of collage to ironize/lionize material of collage.

Examples of nonliterary others: Rauschenberg, Picasso, hip-hop, punk 'zine.

Consider the difference in status given to various hip-hop takings: quotation/citation ups the stature of the source material, "biting" questions the origin of the source, and sampling is status-neutral but ontologically dense—creating the possibility of homage, intentional misquoting, creative "chopping" and other forms of sound virtuosity, i.e., mastery. (See Douglas Kearney's essay "Lomaxing: Poetic Tactics for Quotation, Appropriation and Sampling" [paper given at the 2008 "Untitled" conference on art/text hosted by CalArts]).

Conceptual writing may differ from its others insofar as it does not create a single voice or thematic constant from its constituent bits. Conceptual writing also may not differ from its others in any significant respect. This lack of distinction confuses literary technique or device with literary history.

10b. Book object/page object : font, page size, hard/softcover/chapbook; spine

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

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

See Appendix for more.

10d. External text(s)—may include ur-text, see *Day*.

10e. Internal text(ures) may include logic-locks, see Christian Bök's *Crystallography*.

10f. The medium is the meeting-point.

Note: there may be multiple meeting-points, which may or may not involve multiple media.

See Wertheim: a single text acts as signifier (characters), as narrative container, as visual object, as score for sound performance.

De-materialism emphasizes materiality like silence in a song.

Nb, the now-canonical Cagean cage, where silence is the song, and once absence is presence, presence is absent, and the present absence is simply another absent presence. Moreover, there's much that is missing, or rather much extant that is conjured or calculated or otherwise computed, not as fixed formal substance, but as an immaterial gesture towards materiality. A caloric substance, immanence with bleached teeth.

11. Institutional Critique, a visual art term that gained currency in the 70s and 80s, in which the organs of art—galleries, museums, etc.—are critiqued via appropriating or simulating an institutional aspect in a new context in order to expose the mystique or inner workings of the institution. For example, Fred Wilson's *Guarded View* (1991), where he dresses up manikins as museum guards in minute detail.

See Andrea Fraser's many works, including: *Museum Highlights* (1989), in which she posed as a hyperbolic museum tour guide who described the Philadelphia Museum of Art cafeteria as a room "that represents the heyday of colonial art in Philadelphia on the eve of the Revolution, and must be regarded as one of the very finest of all American rooms"; *Official Welcome* (2001), a series of prefatory art-talk remarks; and *Untitled* (2002), videotaped hotel room sex with a private collector, who paid \$20,000 to participate.

The prevalence of Institutional Critique artworks of the 80s and 90s casts a long shadow—to the extent that Alexander Alberro argues that Institutional Critique is not only intertwined with Post-conceptualism, but has been absorbed into much of the artwork that is made today.

11a. The capitalist absorption of critique was evidenced as museums and galleries quickly incorporated the very critique of those same institutions, hosting Fraser's performances for major museum donors, for example. Institutional Critique, as an arm of Conceptual Art, cannot destroy these institutions, but aims to unveil and underscore them through demystification. Note

that ironization here can be used to re-gird the privileges of the institutional structure (rewarding the major donors), much like exposed struts in a downtown restaurant.

11b. The poetry community has a vastly different relationship to its institutions, both historically and economically. Yet there are poetry works that radically de-articulate our institutions of small press publishing, reading series, conferences, etc.

See Gary Sullivan's *How to Proceed in the Arts* (erasure pieces from literary magazine rejection and acceptance letters); Charles Bernstein's poem "Recantorium" (an ironic apology for being an innovative poet now reformed as an "official verse" poet); Dirk Rowntree's design choices in *war, the musical* (leaving several pages blank or black, reproducing the titles from several contemporary poetry book covers). Note the difficulty of critiquing from without (Sullivan) versus from within (Bernstein).

Moreover, because institutions of poetry and progressive writing already wield so little cultural and economic capital, conceptual writing has been increasingly shifting its attention to mass media

and the larger bodies of language management, e.g., websites, ads, blogs, etc. Note the potential for collusion. Note the insistence on culpability. This is another embrace of failure.

11c. Things to be considered in institutionalism:

the reading

the reading series

the course materials

the blurb

the introduction/afterword

the guilt by association

the transparency of the language

the Conference

the Project

the Manifesto

the School

the Scene

the Situation

“the short lyric of self-definition”

the Now

11d. Things to be considered out of institutions:

When is a critique not a critique? Note the tension between the concept of conceptualism (affirmatively anti-institution) and its potential practice (a new formalism = a new institutionalism).

Is the absence of normative standards possible? practical? desirable? What is the principle of the unprincipled? Are we left then with only principals?

I.e., is the danger of Author replaced by the danger of Authority?

Brecht: “What’s the robbing of a bank compared with the founding of a bank?”

12. Thesis:

Aesthetic : ethical : aesthetic : ethical (see Wittgenstein/Rancière).

Consider the sentence: aesthetics + ethics are joined (can only be joined) in the subject which then attempts to transmit or transcribe this joiner into an object.

The process of this transcription is a narrative process.

A narrative is a connective... transcription, connectivity.

Proposition:

The readymade emphasizes the subject nature of aesthetics by reducing art to pure object. The readymade is thus the most aestheticized object, existing only as art. The readymade is also the most subjectified ethic, entirely reliant on its communicative capacities, hovering as object in the midst of this transaction.

Proof:

Heimrad Bäcker's *transcript* (ed. Freidrich Achleitner, trans. Patrick Greaney and Vincent King, forthcoming Dalkey

Archive, 2010) appropriates documentation of the Nazi exterminations. Each entry is an unadorned quotation taken from some contemporaneous account of the Holocaust, often for accounting purposes (e.g., "66 min / 87 min / 106 min / 74 min / 65 min / 65 min / 53 min / 70 min / 5 min / 66 min / 87 min / 65 min"), or as project memoranda ("it is very difficult at the moment to keep the liquidation figure at the level maintained up to now"), or messages in bottles ("this is my last letter, and i'm letting you know that i was shot on september 1 at six o'clock"). The book, published as *nachschrif* in 1986, also uses citation, abbreviation, isolation, and alteration (including erasure), and has been considered primarily as a montage work of concrete poetry.

[Bäcker includes a citation to a laudatory review of a laudatory Hitler biography that he wrote as a 17-year-old local leader of the Hitler Youth. The work thus admits of its subjectivity as its partial object, and of its author's documented guilt and subsequent textual silence (having forfeited further speech). For another strategy of failure in Holocaust representation, see Celan, "Iefimnee, / I-i-e" (fracturing "neimehr," nevermore) (Tiefimschnee).]

Compare: Charles Reznikoff's *Holocaust*, which appropriated testimony from the Eichmann and Nuremberg trials, casting it in lyric form.

transcript is fidelity to infidelity (re: aesthetics : ethics).

Compare: Fitterman's *Sprawl*: fidelity to fidelity.

Place's *Dies* (baroque & broken): infidelity to infidelity.

Dan Farrell's *The Inkblot Records*: infidelity to fidelity (subject stripped bare by way of stripped subject).

12a. *transcript* is a work of failure: the prosody used refers to a failed system (politics) of a failed humanity. A failure on all fronts; one that cannot exist save in its constant manifestation of constant absence—the citation without content, with partial content, with mutilated content. Language was the first strike of the Final Solution. Language was its eyewitness, and will be its shadow substitute, as supplementary texts/narratives (the play and work of words) begin to memorialize and supplant memory. This is the postcard-placard effect of history.

12b. Note: when the word is the wound (the site of failure), there are two extreme forms of mimetic redress: isolate and seal the word/wound (pure conceptualism), or open and widen the word/wound (impure conceptualism and the baroque). The first is the response of the silenced subject, the second, the screaming subject.

Note: this is the difference between negative and positive space.

12c. This kills Kosuth dead.

Rise Kosuth.

♦ glorious failure!

13. Glorious failure because among the crises catalogued by/in conceptual writing is a crisis in interiority.

A crisis in interiority is a crisis of perspective. In jettisoning the normative (or the normative of the normative), we are left with the contingent or relative normative, which is no real normative at all, and worse still, recapitulates the same problems (by default and paying attention to something else) as the old normative normative. In other words, we reject the province of the monoptic (fixed) male subject heretofore a marker of success. This is the difference between Narcissus and Medusa. This is the difference between the barren and the baroque. This is the problem.

Note that the solution is not provided by the *machina ex deus*.

This brings us back to meaning, and the possibility of possibility.

This is allegorical.

VENTOUSES

Vanessa Place

A small iron chair on a small iron platform, the chair, and some surrounding air, encased in a cupping glass. This is the image of home. This is the image of summary justice. Note that there is no image. The theme of the 2007 Venice Biennale was “Think with the Senses, Feel with the Mind.” Embroidering upon this oddly Cartesian notion, director Robert Storr explained that the year’s art was about the “immediacy of sensation in relation to questioning the nature and meaning of that sensation, intimate affect in relation to engagement in public life, belonging and dislocation, the fragility of society and culture in the face of conflict, the sustaining qualities of art in the face of death.” Note that this is a description of, and in, writing. In considering the relationship between writing and image, let’s take as our cue not the question what the literary can learn from the imagistic, but what is image, and what is image today?

I use images in my writing. Sometimes they are graphic images—they look like something. A police officer, perhaps. A piece of (hot) pie. Sometimes they are utilitarian images—they function as something. A hole to be torn in the page, maybe, or an inked blot of birdshit that obliterates a significant bit of information, keeping that character blind. Sometimes they are images of images—an ekphrastic description of one of Goya’s war disasters,

the concretized narration of a single smoking cigarette—but whether realist or abstract, they are all written images. They conjure visions, engage an undertow of consciousness or sudden effect like the drone played on a bagpipe or an elbow put to the nose. What we want in all our work is apprehension. Textual apprehension. Narrative apprehension. Apprehension immediate as an egg, layered as parfait, unavoidable as self-doubt. Apprehension of the materiality of the thing, which is the act of, and in, all art.

My image/non-image of the iron chair in a cupping glass was based on a 1998 piece by Louise Bourgeois entitled *Untitled (Chair)*. As an ekphrastic description, it was fairly materialist, a description of the thing itself, followed by a compact conceptual thesis. As a narrative, it was fairly conventional, going from inside the individual character out to a smaller, then larger, social organization. It was Austen, Flaubert. As a concept with an image, it is unfairly Joycean, to title “untitled,” to call an untitled a chair, to use a cupping glass, which is, as you know, heated and placed against fevered flesh to draw blood to the surface, for healing purposes, painful, yes, and clear, and chair is chair is flesh in French and chair is char is burn in English. And that’s just the beginning: you’re on the hot seat now, because Bourgeois was a

housewife, a femme-maison, whose house was her head in early self-portraits, and thereby is word made flesh in her works, just as flesh is made word in yours.

In 1766, Gottlieb Lessing wrote *Laocöon*, arguing that Horace was wrong: poetry and painting are not sister arts, not even kissing cousins, for poetry deals with action, objects in progressive time, and painting is devoted to bodies, objects existing side by side. Ignoring for the moment whatever difference we think lies between the poetic imperative and that of fiction, and using painting as short-changing shorthand for all visual art, there is something in Lessing’s distinction which I see as the difference between a horizontal plane and one that moves vertically. Painting was traditionally horizontal, it had the landscape’s edge on writing as it could represent simultaneity, which words could not, and allegory without exposition, which words will not. Poetry was traditionally vertical, with epic’s inclinations, if not its proportions, and words had the advantage there of home-field specificity, of character as development and time as progress, of a story which could be told without, if that’s what was wanted, reference to any other story but itself. Poetry, by which I mean also prose, could take the slow route, could rest in a cul de sac and insist on the telling insignificance, or the casual appointment

of digression. Poetry needed a scheme, but not a schema. A mole could blip dear beauty's cheek without besmirching inert virtue, and Virginia Woolf could decapitate a decade in a series of besides. Writing had time and image had space and the race was on to appropriate the other in the name of best mimesis. This all fell apart of course, for once things are placed in opposition, they can't help but come together, if only to fight. To nutshell post-Enlightenment Western arts, writing became more extremely vertical then less so: from Eliot, George, to Joyce and Stein and then on through Ashbery and Barth and the wall of words that proved a work's modernist and post-modernist worth started to elide into snapshots—Sebald's images on the one hand, graphic novels on the other, concrete prose perhaps as a third, pictures put into text like pepper in a pot-au-feu or text serving pictures like the boom ! added to the balloon of smoke that heralds cartoon explosions. The materiality of literature became words as things, no more or less meaningful than Campbell's soup cans. At the opposite end of town, painting grew flatter and more Greenbergian until they said no, and Robert Smithson drew A Heap of Language and Mary Kelly made postpartum documents out of her son's dirty nappies, and the materiality of art became the word in things, because it was only art's idea that mattered. Just as in Joseph Kosuth's 1965 piece *One and Three Chairs*, a work made of a wooden folding chair, a photograph of this chair,

and an enlarged dictionary definition of the word "chair," every representation became Platonically ideal and thus hopelessly immaterial. Literary art had vertical lift and visual art horizontal heft, and to hell with it. Like the two trains in the math problem, word and image have headed towards a common destination at varying speeds and the question is which station will serve the best coffee, assuming we're standing there waiting?

Visual art wants stories. History stories, narrative stories, stories about the self and what used to be called the other. At this point in time, when conceptual and post-conceptual visual art has abnegated showing in favor of telling, and telling in favor of saying, writers think of rushing in with little rollers, hoping to get some horizontal traction from visual aids, to add to a stock-in-trade that which we fear most subtracts. For isn't this the point of this? We're scared some other team's winning, or won, and so concede the power of the optic over the litteral, and want to figure out how to candy the eye. Some of our most innovative conceptual writing prints blank pages, suitable for framing, or collages Google bricolages, or catalogues cutups, nothing worth writing home about, but plenty to see. Dematerialization, that's the ticket, constructivism, that's the other. No new news is good news. And before the beat cop shows up to move the crowd

along, we should consider that from Newman's nugatory zip to Gerhard Richter's squeegeed woods to last season's gallery show of airbrushed portraits of the cast of *Hogan's Heroes*, visual images are being systemically drained of image, leaving behind the image referent—language.

The language is a narrative, the narrative often a series of interrogations: what is the role of the immediate? What is the place of the situation? What is the form as it correlates to the event? Is there a conceptual unconscious? What is the meaning of is? And while these lingual sacs are often a defense against subjectivity, i.e., a defense against vulnerability, they collapse into their stories: there is a fairy tale to be told about the German woods, wherein children are put into ovens. The squeegee wipes, but cannot clean. Not to tender too many conceits about writing, but I think we're missing the point of the pupil, which is, as you know, hollow. If there is superior art, it lies in the ability of any image—real or abstract, written or pictorial—to dropkick, lick, tickle and torture, to render its reader absolutely sensate.

This would be the Wittgensteinian point at which there is an intention and an act, and the success of the work is measured by

the extent that the expectation created by the piece is fulfilled by the act as it acts in accord with the intention. *Middlemarch* sprawls and constellates, *Guernica* shatters and resurrects. The watercolored Huck and Jim in my Illustrated Junior Library edition of *Huckleberry Finn* showed me what color was Huck's hair, and what shoes Jim did not wear. But that was then, when cultures could be kept chiastically separate and we could spit into the ensuing abyss. The problem facing contemporary visual art is that when everything can be art, then only authorship transforms the notion or gesture into art; the problem facing contemporary innovative writing is that having gotten out of the cult of the author, we're left with either the cult of the performer or the cult of the object, and the object, in order not to be secretly authorial, must be mass-made, and that, as we ought suspect by now, is how democracies go on the march—and the cult of the author finally and fully replaced by the cult of the authority. Too, as artist and writer Danielle Adair points out, when art gives up image, it gives up only one of its mediums, like oil paint or the photograph; when writing dematerializes, it gives up on itself, medium and message. What we should take from contemporary art forms is not the horizontal act of illustration, whether literally imaged, as in Sebald's photographic counter-proofs, or unimagined, such as new lyric's Pierre & Gilles iconography, or the horizontal gesture of dematerialization, a critique of iconography sounded by the

blue-lipped flush of history, but the vertical act of, and insistence upon, creation. Creation, as we all know, is sensate as skin, and as soft and true a container. You could argue it's the only truth, as it is proved by so very many objects. Rather than join the cult of the image, let's inscribe its cultivation.

We write on a page. Most of us type on a pre-formatted white space that bears no relation to the bound frame it will ultimately take. The page is peppered with ink and slatted with white spaces, it can be potted with figural images, for or against the text, blotted with black holes, shouting down the sentences, or blasted with a blank null which might pass for silence. The page is one of some number of pages the reader holds in her hand, and this thickness or thinness provokes sentiment, anticipation or dread. Too, consider the materiality, horizontal and vertical, of the words themselves. The double-aught or emptied eyesockets stuck in the middle of "gloom" and "doom," the heave in Heaven and god's huff in Hell. The clutch of objects you work with—those cones and squares and cylinders which may be letters that compose words or pictures that refer to words—are evidence of your creation and its reception. And we haven't even tapped the text.

In concrete poetry, visual metaphors, such as a poem about a necktie shaped like a necktie, and visual metonyms, such as the Eiffel Tower as radio tower, are fashioned into visual tautologies, the thing that speaks of itself, and thus renders the poem unspeakable. The lyric, frozen as a shipwreck, testifies to an itch for graphic—not oral—transcendence. Concrete prose similarly transforms narrative, an essentially and primarily temporal process, into a flatter spatial object. Spatialization of time in postmodernism and beyond can be equated with spatialization of metaphor and metonym in high modernism and before—visual structures are now as local and global as Pound's appropriated seafarer and Dickens's aptonymic Scrooge as all are tethered to a presumed awareness of the referenced object, and because the reference is presumed to have an end-point, sometimes of simple exhaustion. Like the double-hump of McDonald's golden arches, there's only so much teleological purchase to be had from an image when billions are unblinkingly served. Current conceptual writing concretizes time and space like stills from a digital video: there is a narrative, of which you are being shown a portion, the portion can stand for the whole, the whole can stand for a story, though the story itself does not need to be told. Allusion to the story, like illusion itself, is enough. But it is not enough. As much as writers should mind the physical materiality of language, they need to maintain, not crop, its meaning.

For in an age when judgment suffers from spectatorship, the snapshot must be called into constant question.

The problem is that the snapshot speaks. The problem is that images communicate like nobody's business. Rorschach to Rothko, Reuters to Rockwell, something's said, and snappily too. The problem is words are images and images are words—linked, and different, one and two-in-the-same. As it turns out, the frame is the caption is the image of the thing, and art is their encounter. So design, goddishly. Sometimes a cereal box is just a cereal box, and, like the box on the breakfast table, it may be left on the page. Someone might read the back, where a prize is promised, and a story told of Lucky Charms, complete with castration complex. This would be a distraction from the story of what is happening at the breakfast table, just as the back of the box pulls your attention from what's being said between Daddy and me. Sometimes subtext can be set off by a thick black line, or surtext blurred into a pinwheel or open drain, demonstrating its dilation or contraction into an image of words. An image of words is silence. Someone once wrote that every poem is about silence, and happily, I can keep my trap shut about that, because every text's about saying something, even if that something is nothing at all. This is the metamorphosis of soundlessness into

silence, as the written image of the iron chair transforms the absolute absence of the chair into the image of a chair that is not there.

What is an image? An image is a reference. Sometimes to the thing itself, like a portrait. Sometimes to the thing in-itself, like Dante's Beatrice or de Kooning's *Woman I*. The optic can have it all at once, and does. And then, like any good art, it teaches you to linger.

What is narrative? Narrative is a sequence of reference. Delay is given. The all that you'll get will come later, or not at all, through wrought-iron acquisition or the call of the immediate in the face of extinction; in any event, it's constantly rewritten, constantly reimagined, constantly received, constantly recognized. Coleridge wrote about something being "as idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean." To see a painted ship upon a painted sea is an aesthetic story. The art in language is formed content and contented form. For the fact remains that a thing is nothing imagined of itself, and a word is worth a thousand pictures. Use them all.

APPENDIX

A short list of book-length examples:

Appropriation:

Bergvall, Caroline. *Fig*

Bervin, Jen. *Nets*

Farrell, Dan. *The Inkblot Record*

Fitterman, Robert. *A Hemingway Reader: The Sun Also Also Rises*

Goldsmith, Kenneth. *Day*

Gordon, Noah Eli. *Inbox*

Kennedy, Bill, and Darren Wershler-Henry. *apostrophe*

Morris, Simon. *Re-Writing Freud 4. The Interpretation of Dreams*

Shirinyin, Ara. *Your Country Is Great*

Appropriation with Sampling:

Doris, Stacy. *Paramour*

Fitterman, Robert. *Metropolis XXX: The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

Goldman, Judith. *DeathStar / Ricochet*

Kim Stefans, Brian. *Kluge: A Meditation*

Lin, Tan. *BlipSoak 01*

Mancini, Donato. *Ligatures*

Morrison, Yedda. *Girl Scout Nation*

Richards, Deborah. *Last One Out*

Rosenfield, Kim. *Good Morning—Midnight—*

Spahr, Juliana. *Response*

Zolf, Rachel. *Human Resources*

Without Appropriation:

Beaulieu, Derek. *Flatland: A Romance of Dimensions*

Dworkin, Craig. *Parse*

Gladman, Renee. *The Activist*

Place, Vanessa. *La Medusa*

Thurston, Nick. *Reading the Remove of Literature*

Wershler-Henry, Darren. *The Tapeworm Foundry*

Wertheim, Christine. + |'me'S-pace

Zultanski, Steve. *Pad*

Constraint/Procedure:

Bök, Christian. *Eunoia*

Brown, Laynie. *Daily Sonnets*

Nufer, Doug. *Never Again*

Place, Vanessa. *Dies: A Sentence*

Documentation:

Blachly, Jimbo, and Lytle Shaw. *The Chadwick Family Papers (A Brief Public Glimpse)*

Buuck, David. *Buried Treasure Island*

Goldsmith, Kenneth. *Fidget*

Mirakove, Carol. *Occupied*

Flarf

Friedlander, Benjamin. *Simulcast: Four Experiments in Criticism*

Gordon, Nada. *Folly*

Mesmer, Sharon. *Annoying Diabetic Bitch*

Mohammad, K. Silem. *Deer Head Nation*

Sullivan, Gary. *PPL IN A DEPOT*

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