David J. Alworth
Robert Fitterman's *Metropolis XXX* and the Politics of Appropriation

Recently, at a graduate student conference on the state of the profession, I heard a doctoral candidate in English Literature discuss why she chose to pursue an academic career instead of continuing her work in politics. It was, she explained, the very act of "close reading" that convinced her of the political potential of literary study. Not only is reading "an ethical practice," she elaborated, but the kinds of reading made possible for a critic through his or her academic training often lead to conclusions and theories that are politically progressive, not to mention efficacious when shared with an eager group of impressionable students.[1]
Metropolis XXX cover

Notwithstanding the obviously extemporaneous and cursory formulation of these remarks, this student is recovering a concept that has lost currency in some institutional circles (the Academy, the Associated Writing Programs) during the past decade: the explicit link between reading and a progressive political agenda. Current professional and cultural conventions underscore the relational rather than the constitutive connection between reading and politics, so that in the best case scenario claiming practical political effects for reading seems passé, perhaps quaint; in the worst, specious, perhaps stupid.

When Robert Fitterman gave a lecture at the Poetry Project on 27 February 2006 entitled "Identity Theft: My Subjectivity," he appeared to his audience to be taking the side of those who would completely uncouple reading and politics, as if any political resonance in the former were mere optical illusion. Through a sophisticated discussion of Alice Cooper (preceded by his playing the 1971 Cooper song, "Is it My Body"), Fitterman argued for an embrace of pop culture, suggesting that even at its worst, stagiest, and most trivial, it could have some interesting potential.

The success of Alice Cooper is the success of a shtick — a recursive theatricality that not long after establishing its own economy of signification dooms its practitioner(s) to a Sisyphean fate of repetition without transformation — which would get coopted by bands like Black Sabbath, and mass-marketed to angst-ridden suburban teenagers, before finally being packaged for prime-time television in the form of Ozzy Osbourne's reality show, The Osbournes. At this point, then, what could the shtick of Alice Cooper do for a contemporary poet? If the mechanisms of capitalist enterprise (marketing, packaging, advertising, creating demand where there is not yet supply) are easily apprehended in narratives of one pop-cultural phenomenon breeding another, then perhaps a critical engagement with these mechanisms through pop-culture is not far off.

In his lecture, Fitterman made the case that Alice Cooper — once radical, now fully coopted, pop-cultural icon — in his gleeful merger of faux androgyny and hyper-masculine histrionics, actually anticipated some of the most recent and cutting-edge theoretical work on subjectivity: the identity-construtivist view that our subjectivities have always been unitary repositories of an amalgam of subject positions. Thus, a better reading of mass-cultural junk — precisely those phenomena that appear to be coopted, or those "artifacts" that seem to operate unabashedly in service to some marketing scheme — could yield interesting, if not prescient, theoretical claims.

In the best case scenario, this would go a long way toward unpacking heretofore unacknowledged facets of the capitalist power-structure; it would reclaim political efficacy for the humanities by changing the critical focus: "close reading" the junk, not the well-wrought urn or even the budding experimental text. In the worst case, however, this looks like nothing more than subservient willingness to engage the detritus of capitalism simply because of its ubiquity. But these scenarios are not mutually exclusive: by immersing ourselves in the junk of pop-culture (something, it seems, we do without volition anyway) we can have moments of genuine aesthetic bliss while simultaneously critiquing the very objects in our environment and their logic of inception.

This was the theme of Fitterman's "Identity Theft" lecture, and it extended throughout the most compelling (and, for some audience members, unsettling) portion of his remarks, those dealing with his compositional strategy. The poet's comments about composition-by-appropriation — using the language of mass-mediated consumer culture without necessarily taking an ironic, critical stance toward such material — were met by a nearly unified response of uneasiness. At the most hostile moment, Fitterman was charged with being lazy, and his poetics was critiqued on account of its supposed easiness and disengagement from political concerns.

The theoretical contextualizations he provided were not enough to assuage a cohort of detractors, whose distinct criticisms shared a kind of thematic rhyme: importing the language of junk, waste, and excess without explicitly offering clues for how its recontextualization in a book like Metropolis XXX operates in service to an agenda of critique is politically irresponsible and, according to one respondent, perhaps even dangerous. For even in what could be considered the most inclusive and progressive poetry institution in the world, there was a certain exclusionary conservatism expressed in response to Fitterman's remarks, and one needs to ask why.

What it is about Metropolis XXX that makes it susceptible to this type of distinctly political critique? For the sort of audience we could find at the 92nd Street Y, the uptown foil to the Poetry Project,[2] there is something fundamentally unsettling about appropriative compositional strategies, especially in the way they grant purchase to expressive categories that are not necessarily conversational representations of a continuous interior life. But it is curious that an audience well-versed in the traditions of Language writing and post-Language writing, conceptualism and post-conceptualism would find the work of Metropolis XXX potentially dangerous.

Though the particular agonistic tonalities in the reaction to Fitterman's remarks could be unique and chalked-up to the specifics of the night — the people in attendance, the social context for the lecture, the way the poet presented his material on that given day — they do bespeak a broader pattern in the short reception history of the Metropolis poem, a pattern in which formal observations almost immediately generate seemingly irresolvable political concerns. It seems Fitterman's compositional approach strikes a chord of anxiety with even the most progressive of readers (or, perhaps, especially with the most progressive of readers), and it is a kind of anxiety that subtends readings of Fitterman as lazy, irresponsible, and dangerous.

The poet suggests that he appropriates the language of excess, junk, waste, and sprawl "not as mockery and not always with the predictable distance that a contemporary poetry reader would bring to the text."[3] Instead, Fitterman prefers to use this vocabulary in the same way as "pop artists [who] embraced the new vocabulary of TV images."[4] This, in part, would explain his interest in the sculptor Jason Rhoades, who often creates installations with two types of material: newly purchased items from stores like IKEA and Home Depot and the assorted rejectamenta of heavy industry, popular consumer culture, and Silicon Valley technology. But Rhoades's installations are not met with the same kind of criticism as Fitterman's book. Obviously, this could be attributed to the distinctions between their respective media and fields of reception, but I think there is a more complex, if latent, reason.

There is something inherently rebarbative about Fitterman's compositional approach, particularly owing to the fact that it does not have an associated pedagogical apparatus: Metropolis XXX does not teach its readers how respond. The work of Jason Rhoades, on the other hand, has a series of tonalities that construct a sufficiently ironic context for, say, the unchecked production of massive amounts of donuts, or the artist in a fat suit with a ventilation tube attached to his "anus (ASS HOLE)."[5] Fitterman's book is more ambiguous about its appropriations of readily available rejectamenta: the stuff of GOOGLE searches is imported but not restrictively contextualized, as it is with Flarf and other kinds of GOOGLE-generated poems. Flarf is deliberately inappropriate or offensive; it is unclear if Metropolis XXX is deliberately anything. The fact that this leaves open the

possibility for reading it straightforwardly, without what Fitterman calls a "predictable critical distance,"[6] makes it alarming to some people and, more importantly, situates it on theoretical fault line (or, perhaps, a line of theoretical fault) that requires some attention.

There is no doubt that Metropolis XXX is difficult to appreciate (let alone enjoy), not lastly because the experience of "close reading" it is firstly, if not exclusively, akin to a mind-numbing immersion in the worst kinds of advertising and mass-marketing. Pages one through sixteen are each filled with an advertisement of some variety. In the first moment not explicitly selling something, page seventeen begins, "I've got a clearcoating problem that I need some help with." Sick of Re-Clears-Steve from Sacramento details his dilemma, which is simultaneously quotidian and entirely obscure, explaining that he is "about to lose [his] mind" if he does not figure out why the superficial layer of his clear coat is "peppered with these little dust things."[7] The respondent, who will ultimately provide an extremely detailed answer, first comforts Steve with a customary version of democratic affirmation: "you're not alone," he or she says, "I've heard of this problem many times."[8]

But the democratic subtexts of this response, which initially seem warm and convivial, turn wry and critical. "Let me take a wild guess," the unnamed respondent offers with an air of snide superiority, "you live in a humid environment," and "[e]veryone knows that humidity in the line" is responsible for the problem you have encountered.[9] Much could be said about how colloquialisms like "everyone knows" make a semantic shift when placed in this context; everyone knows, for example, that Fitterman's compositional approach has some political subtexts. The criticisms of his work do not seem to charge him with political muteness (or mootness), but not enough dissent: it is a question of degree. Perhaps Fitterman's appropriation of language such as this, and his consequent avoidance of a recognizable mode of radical dissent, however, actually gives Metropolis XXX a furtive apparatus for critique, more profitable because of its stealthy nature.

Importing the theoretical terms of Fredric Jameson, Christopher Nealon describes the fiscal circumstances of contemporaneity as "something like really, really late capitalism; capitalism in a fully globalized and triumphal form, the destructive speed and flexibility of whose financial instruments alone make Nixon's lofting the dollar off the gold standard in 1971 look thoughtful and conservative."[10] Without making too much of historical contingencies, we can recognize that an entire cultural landscape, the so-called "postmodern condition," is shaped by these ubiquitous, consumptive, and predatory fiscal circumstances. Perspicaciously contrasting the recent past from our present moment, the visual artist Mike Kelley notes that the so-called postmodern condition is "quite different from postwar existentialism because it lacks any historical sense — there is no notion of a truth that has been lost."[11] In what he will go on to describe as "a general evenness of meaning,"[12] Kelley aphoristically summarizes the predicament of Metropolis XXX: the social and cultural parataxis that it both represents and seemingly emblematizes.

For some readers, the book articulates helplessness in its resistance to a certain kind of satire, but there is another way to understand its political subtexts. If, as the poet Brian Kim Stefans notes, certain progressive compositional "tactics — beat poetry, punk rock, even radical performance art — have been compromised by contemporary social conditions in which anything, including dissent, can be commodified,"[13] then Fitterman's book is a kind of dissent that attempts to resist commodification: it stages critique without falling back on recognizable (and thus easily bubble-wrapped and vacuum-sealed) models of intervention.

Organized in thirty numerical sections, and indebted to Enlightenment historiographer Edward Gibbon for its subtitle (The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire) and epigraph ("little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind"), Metropolis XXX has both an architectonic veneer and a continuous intertext with a foundational moment in Western history. Since these characteristics bespeak the putative order and authority of any great historical treatise, I asked Fitterman about the cover art, half-hoping the number "535947" in the upper border would signify some secrete code for unlocking the best interpretive paradigms for the book. If in fact this

is an important work of historiography, I assumed it must have a method, however experimental.

On the contrary, I was surprised to find that "the number is a random one that came back from the photo lab,"[14] not a heretofore undiscovered meta-mathematics or some transcendental signifier for Fitterman's poesis. The poet would argue that the number is meaningless — "it echoes the excessiveness," he says, "the junk of the books innards"[15] — but this does not render it semantically vacant. Conspicuous numerals on the cover of a book of Internet-based procedural poetry prime the reader with a series of possible interpretative pathways — the most obvious of which requires a reading of the book as a recent installment in the nascent field of Digital Poetics,[16] literalizing, and consequently theorizing, the algorithm-driven, numerically-coded processes of search engines — without actually providing any: they call attention to themselves only to remain recalcitrant. The cover of Metropolis XXX thus becomes a harbinger for a book chock full of moments that beg to be read in a certain way, yet ultimately resist categorization. The recontextualization as poetry of the banal, and all but ubiquitous, language of contemporary, mass-mediated consumerism engages a tradition of countercultural critique.

But Metropolis XXX persistently rejects familiar models — the camp aesthetic, for example — appealing to (and, in the process, refurbishing) something more akin to mimesis, thereby staging a generative tension between expectations and actualizations. It is this tension that both undergirds "the junk of the books innards,"[17] and enables a certain kind of political auspiciousness, in part for the ways in which it renovates familiar reading practices, and in part for how it argues compellingly for new models of expressivity in a digitized age of post-identity.

It is thus possible to read Metropolis XXX as one might read other books of conceptual poetry, but perhaps not profitable. Even the most experimental works of post-Language writing provide for the opportunity of employing familiar strategies of "close reading" to immerse oneself in their cosmologies. Metropolis XXX, however, firmly resists any attempts toward this end, not because of its ambient though rebarbatively dense language (as is the common charge against other experimental works), but because of its familiarity. The immediate affective experience of reading Fittermnan's book is almost identical to that of encountering language in our daily lives. Metropolis XXX, therefore, fails to produce a significant estrangement; it does not generate the kind of entfremdungseffekt that would ask us to read it as we would anything else on the continuum from recognisable convention to experimental jargon.

And yet, as Michael Kelleher points out, this is not entirely the case, since "[r]eading this book is sort of like being read to by a thousand voices at once, none of whom [we] recognize, but all of which seem very familiar" (35). This bespeaks a linguistic dualism, which correlates to an affective syntax of simultaneous intimacy and distantiation. The language of Metropolis XXX is entirely new to us, yet it always has the quality of being a reminder. The poet Tan Lin observes that our language is full of remainders, cognates to the junk Rhoades might use in his installations, and it is these remainders that take on the quality of reminders in Fitterman's book. Lin writes:

If language is infinite and endlessly self-generating, like some organic cell that spontaneously divides and mutates a structure, it is also a series of dead formulas, stale jokes, archetypes, unmemorable ads, clichés which are rigidly scripted by the rhymes that stick in our heads, by the country and city we live in, the social world we hang out in, the Nissans and Fords we drive, the soap we shower with, the friends and lovers we have, the t.v. shows we half-listen to, the dogs we talk to.[18]

Metropolis XXX draws from an unending — and constantly morphing — supply of material to rearticulate those "dead formulas" and to chart the mutative nature of language, its "infinite and endlessly self-generating" qualities as compounded by the technological, fiscal, and social circumstances of our historical moment. Fitterman's compositional approach thus resituates the Internet as nothing more than a readily available data set from which to cull idiolects — all kinds of

idiolects. Though it may seem retrogressive and ignorant of its own political subtexts, this practice is inherently critical. What if the Internet, Fitterman seems to ask, were to operate in service to poetry? This would not only destabilize certain models of critique, like "close reading," but it would also interrogate the very idea of critique in contemporaneity.

In forcing us to ponder how we ought to read a book of junk from the Internet, Fitterman is asking, by extension, "How do you read the Internet in the first place?" This fundamental question must be answered before we can develop paradigms for adequately critiquing the culture of triumphant mass-mediation. Elaborated through language that is simultaneously foreign and recognizable, innocent and vexing, Metropolis XXX, therefore, demands a new kind of critical engagement from its readers, an entirely different form of close reading.

The macrocosmic nerves of the project — its organization (which Fitterman has likened to a series of gallery spaces in Chelsea)[19] as thirty discrete sections, each with their own unique visual prosody — direct us firmly away from the particulars of lexicon and syntax, as if to argue against missing the forest for the trees. "Think bigger!" Metropolis seems to say. But while certain macrocosmic features of the project remain fixed — this is a book of conceptual poetry that remains steadfastly true to its concept — there is a constantly shifting terrain page-by-page: merchandise lists, followed by e-mails, followed by tourist brochures, and so on.

The tension between the page and the book thematizes the vertiginous nature of the language Metropolis XXX seeks to represent: miming the affective experience of watching or hearing a series of advertisements, Fitterman subordinates "content" to the rapid-fire of marketing, partly evoking then quickly disbanding thematic nodes. He manages this through the coexistence of collage and sampling, the former at the level of the book (or the concept), the latter at the level of the page. As Kristin Prevallet notes, "collage… decontextualizes and removes the reference from the object by forcing a cohesion with other objects, sampling preserves the reference by presenting it as a chunk of information, rather than a fragmented cutup."[20] Fitterman, like others before him, experiments with the collision of multiple referents at varying semantic and syntactic levels, but moves beyond the cut-and-paste of Berrigan's Sonnets or Ashbery's Tennis Court Oath to violently yoke idiolects at a larger scale — the poem for Fitterman is what the line was to Berrigan — so that familiar models of reading and cliché countercultural aesthetic paradigms can be critiqued. Recognizable stimuli set off a series of affective and referential intertexts without sticking around long enough to get comfortably contextualized, and this puts on trial both the way we read and the way we (ought to) feel.

The pseudo-camp tonalities throughout the book, for instance, call to mind a certain kind of aesthetic, but only to undo it. As Nealon argues, "Mass cultural camp invites us all to be clever; post-Language poetic camp … invites us to take a polemical affection for what's obsolete, misguided, or trivial, and to risk the embarrassment of trying it out."[21] But Fitterman, inasmuch as he is a post-Language poet, uncouples the "polemical" from the "affection" in Nealon's logic by asking us to make affiliations with the "junk of the book's innards"[22] that are not always straightforwardly polemical. Each page of Metropolis XXX makes possible a unique affective response — sometimes we find them humorous; sometimes stupefying; sometimes downright boring — in the end leaving us not with a set of lingering questions (now what did the poet really mean by this?), but a sense of befuddlement about the pay-off (did I really invest time and money in a book of junk from the Internet?).

At the level of the book, therefore, Fitterman argues for a critical (even polemical) affiliation; at the level of the page, however, he troubles the very idea of polemic by providing an array of different cues to generate multiple and often shifting reactions.

The polemical, then, is purchased in Metropolis XXX with neither the familiar avant-garde practice of thematizing the quotidian to subvert the would-be representation of other more appropriate realms

of human experience nor a blatant assault on the power-relational features endemic to the language of late (-late) capitalism. Instead, Fitterman argues persistently for an embrace of the miasmic consumerist lingo, without restricting the possible forms that this embrace might take. With its guise of informational egalitarianism and its here comes everybody textuality, the Internet for Fitterman demonstrates finally how "the authentic and the inauthentic can co-exist in interesting ways,"[23] something experimental poets have known for decades.

This version of coexistence, however, has undergone major transformative shifts since the rise of personal computing and mass-mediation: for one thing, it is no longer politically or aesthetically radical to combine the quotidian with the inspired, the "fake" with the "real." As Fitterman suggests, our culture "IS authentic and its simulacra is part and parcel of its appeal … this is why we don't speak of 'irony' per se anymore."[24] Thus, in a classically poststructuralist way, Metropolis XXX is polemical in its very avoidance of straightforward polemic, its acknowledgement of the Internet, in the words of media theorist Daniel Downes, as a series of "play spaces for experimental interactions"[25] from which "real" material can be culled. Fitterman is neither interested in the hierarchical categorization protocols of GOOGLE nor in the way GOOGLE-sculpting detournes the proper application of search engines, but genuinely captivated by the "glimmering surface"[26] of the junk that GOOGLE allows him to access.

Metropolis XXX is the product of that captivation, literalizing the act of treating GOOGLE search results as worthwhile materials for poetry, not Flarf, to remind us that since the reality of technologization is not going away, poets ought to claim it. In its seemingly transparent yet carefully managed appropriations (its complex architectonics of collage and sampling), Metropolis XXX argues that the results of genuinely engaging the worst parts of our language — those "unmemorable ads" and "t.v. shows we half-listen to" that Tan Lin eloquently catalogues — are intrinsically complex and interesting. A polemical response to the hypermediation of the zeitgeist, therefore, is not only misguided but also moot. Explicitly railing against the power structure is a familiar practice espoused by some experimentalists, like Edward Sanders or the Language writers, but not by Fitterman: instead, he argues, "the act of plundering is the more political act, claim[ing] consumer language for a world where it does not belong."[27]

For some readers this is terribly alarming: Metropolis XXX denotes a dire state of affairs, proves the political obsolescence of poetry. Fitterman has responded by arguing extensively for the redemptive nature of his compositional approach, suggesting that the act of "plundering," as he prefers to call it, is "inherently political."[28] Etymologically speaking, this is certainly the case, but rather than dispute the semantics of "plunder," I would prefer to offer that Fitterman's strategy, politically efficacious or not, makes possible a second-order critique, a metaphysics of dissent.

In his gleefully ambivalent poetics — which, like the numerals of the cover, simultaneously asks to be read as critique, yet refuses to yield a wholly "polemical affectation" — Fitterman makes it known that our so-called "postmodern condition" demands different compositional, receptive, and theoretical paradigms than did even the most recent histories of post-1968 politics, Reganomics, and emergent globalization. In appropriating language, Fitterman suggests the poet can "realize subjectivity in the conceptual strategies or choices of borrowed texts: the endless compositional intersections, interactions, interplays,"[29] and this kind of post-existentialist argument for gaining identity exclusively through action (or, in this case, processes of appropriative articulation) is perhaps the most important contribution of Metropolis XXX: it expands the field of self-expressivity by utilizing "everything," as Fitterman would say, without subordinating composition to familiar (polemical, ironic) contextualizations.

This may or may not finally be efficacious in the political domain, but it is certainly innovative in a way that denotes the transitionary aspect of our historical moment. If Metropolis XXX is written by a poet who believes subjectivity, as embodied by Alice Cooper, is an amalgam of subjects within a unitary subject position (and it is), and if the book itself reflects a kind of all-over appropriation (and

it does), then the argument for cultural and political progress made by Metropolis XXX is one of reflective potential: pause now and immerse oneself in the vertiginous real, even if it is a pack of lies or a procession of simulacra.

The process of interrogating previously fruitful though currently inapt modes of critique, Fitterman seems to suggest, is our best point of departure for beginning to imagine new models of intersection for the political and the aesthetic. Metropolis XXX begins, "You've come to this country to relax and enjoy this beauty and cultural diversity,"[30] proposing that tourism in one's own land has its benefits, its meaningful entfremdungseffekt. So perhaps now, in this time of rapid transition through technologization and mass-mediation, our most politically productive poetics, as Nealon puts it, are "waiting"[31] — that is to say, not exhausting themselves with belated practices, as Fitterman writes, "searching for the best deals and most provocative experiences."[32]

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Notes

[1] Gradicals Working-Student Group Conference, New York University, 5 May 2006.

[2] For an account of this bifurcation, and more on the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church, see Daniel Kane, All Poets Welcome (University of California Press, 2003).

[3] Robert Fitterman, e-mail to the author, 16 February 2006.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Jason Rhoades, A Rhoades Referenz (Oktagon, 1998).

[6] Robert Fitterman, e-mail to the author, 16 February 2006.

[7] Robert Fitterman, Metropolis XXX. 17.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Christopher Nealon, "Camp Messianism, or, the Hopes of Poetry in Late-Late Capitalism," American Literature September 2004: 580.

[11] Mike Kelley, Foul Perfection (MIT Press, 2003). 102.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Brian Kim Stefans, "Stops and Rebels: A Critique of Hypertext," Shark 4 Summer 2002: 158.

[14] Robert Fitterman, e-mail to the author, 16 February 2006.

[15] Ibid.

[16] See Loss Pequeno Glazier, Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries (University of Alabama Press, 2002).

[17] Robert Fitterman, e-mail to the author, 16 February 2006.

[18] Tan Lin, "Information Archives, Garbage, the De-Materialization of Language, and Kenny Goldsmith's Fidget and No. 111 2.7.93-10.20.96," Shark 4 Summer 2002: 148.

[19] Robert Fitterman, e-mail to the author, 16 February 2006.

[20] Kristin Prevallet, "Investigating the Procedure: Poetry and the Source," Telling It Slant (University of Alabama Press, 2002). 125.

[21] Christopher Nealon, "Camp Messianism, or, the Hopes of Poetry in Late-Late Capitalism," American Literature September 2004: 581.

[22] Robert Fitterman, e-mail to the author, 16 February 2006.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Daniel Downes, Interactive Realism (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005). 12.

[26] Robert Fitterman, e-mail to the author, 16 February 2006.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Robert Fitterman, Metropolis XXX. 9.

[31] Christopher Nealon, "Camp Messianism, or, the Hopes of Poetry in Late-Late Capitalism," American Literature September 2004: 588.

[32] Robert Fitterman, Metropolis XXX. 9.

David Alworth grew up in Huntington, New York. After graduating with a degree in literature from New York University, he attended the University of Chicago, where he is currently a doctoral student in the English department.