Re-thinking "non-retinal literature": citation, "radical mimesis," and phenomenologies of reading in Conceptual writing[1]

"Unreadability"—that which requires new readers, and teaches new readings.

Bruce Andrews, *Text & Context*

I. Declaring the unreadable

It's no secret that Conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith styles himself a

provocateur. (The introduction from his recent critical book *Uncreative Writing,* featured in the

"Review" section of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in September 2011, for instance, states

that in his classroom students "are rewarded for plagiarism" and that "the role of the professor

now is part party host, part traffic cop, full-time enabler."[2]) In the maze of self-quoting brief

essays, introductions, and interviews on Conceptual poetry published prior to this book, which,

too, includes self-citation, Goldsmith continually re-mounts the argument that the versions of

"uncreativity" based on strategies of textual appropriation are warranted because the old versions

of being creative are beyond worn out: "When our notions of what is considered creative became

this hackneyed, this scripted, this sentimental, this debased, this romanticized…this uncreative,

it's time to run in the opposite direction. Do we really need another 'creative' poem about the

way the sunlight is hitting your writing table? No."[3] Of course, Goldsmith may be

ventriloquizing the point of fellow Conceptualist Craig Dworkin, who had introduced his

UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing by stating: "Poetry expresses the emotional truth of

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[1] "Non-retinal literature" is a term coined by Bill Freind in "In the Conceptual Vacuum: on ~~Kenneth Goldsmith's~~ Kent Johnson's *Day*" (¶2); he adapts the term from Marcel Duchamp's well known phrase "non-retinal art."

[2] Goldsmith, "It's Not Plagiarism. In the Digital Age, It's 'Repurposing.'" The Chronicle Review, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 11, 2011.

[3] Goldsmith in conversation with Katherine Elaine Saunders, "So What Exactly Is Conceptual Writing?: An Interview with Kenneth Goldsmith."

the self. A craft honed by especially sensitive individuals, it puts metaphor and image in the service of song. Or at least that's the story we've inherited from Romanticism, handed down for over 200 years in a caricatured and mummified ethos—and as if it still made sense after two centuries of radical social change."[4] Though such remarks might seem directed at an ossified literary establishment, another target proposes itself: Language writing. For Language writers not only challenged a culturally dominant confessional poetry, but also did so precisely by issuing statements of which the Conceptualists' are (natch) carbon copies. The movement is here omitted from (counter-) record by the very means of its own provocation.[5]

"Conceptual writing" at first labeled works by a self-identified, core group of writers who amalgamated their school *c*.1999 and participated for years in a listserv devoted to the topic. Yet it was also always understood as a characteristic set of methods for making literary texts largely by manipulating found materials, involving procedure, constraint, or more simple annexations. While these methods tend to attenuate or substantially mediate authorial subjective expression, their main purpose lies in a revelatory hyperbole or deconstruction of content through arbitrary though telling operations.[6] Probably the two best-known works of Conceptual writing are Goldsmith's *Day* (2003)—a re-inscription in book form of the entirety of *The New York Times* of September 1, 2000, with the non-linear format of the work incorporating eruptions of ad copy into news stories and massive entries of stock quotes; and Christian Bök's *Eunoia*

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[4] The passage occurs right at the beginning of this brief essay.

[5] This theme is reprised at the end of Dworkin's "The Fate of Echo," his introductory essay to *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, xliii.

[6] See Christian Bök, "Two Dots over a Vowel," for an instance of cataloguing these methods. See also the organization of *I'll Drown My Book*, where the larger rubrics are "Process"; "Structure"; "Matter"; and "Event."

(2001)—each chapter of the book is a univocalic prose poem based on a different vowel and employs 98% of the univocalic words for that vowel in *Webster's Third International Dictionary*, while the chapters obey yet other constraints such as grammatical parallelism.[7] Conceptual writing has been unusually enthusiastically ensconced institutionally in both the domain of poetry and of visual art. In 2005, the Canadian poetics journal *Open Letter* published a full issue entitled "Kenneth Goldsmith and Conceptual Poetics." In 2008, the conference "Conceptual Poetry and Its Others" was held at the Poetry Center of the University of Arizona. In the last few years, panels on and readings of Conceptual Writing have been featured at MOMA and the Whitney Museum in New York, as well as an art festival in Berlin. Goldsmith read in the White House event "A Celebration of American Poetry" in May 2011. Two anthologies, together containing work by over 150 authors, have recently appeared: *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, edited by Goldsmith and Dworkin, and *"I'll Drown My Book": Conceptual Writing by Women*, edited by Caroline Bergvall, Laynie Browne, Teresa Carmody, and Vanessa Place.[8]

Conceptualists have been materially and socially supported by the institutions and community of Language poetry; they also share Language writing's focus on media capitalism, and the political economy and institutional and discursive organization of culture, poetry in particular. Yet Conceptualism parts ways, or so it represents itself, from its disavowed predecessor in regard to key tactics, concepts, and concerns. Perhaps the most important commonality among Language poetries' strategies and self-understandings was the cultivation of de-reifying, participatory forms of readership, to a great extent through the agency of disjunction

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[7] See Dworkin's discussion of Bök's project in "The Imaginary Solution" 52-3.

[8] In the interest of full disclosure, the present author is included in both of these anthologies.

and fragmentation. Such fracturing at the levels of word, syntax, and narrative diminishes extra-textual reference—a function serving and masking social control, through which language is illusorily presented as transparent—towards foregrounding and re-routing signifying processes and oppressive social coding.[9] As an ostentatiously "open" discursive field, the disjunctive text short-circuits passive readership and its maintenance of given social grammars, demanding the co-production rather than the consumption of meaning.[10] In less indirect parries than that with which I began, Goldsmith in particular has staked Conceptual writing on negations of these values of Language poetry. In his introduction to a dossier on Conceptual writing and Flarf in the journal *Poetry* we find: "Start making sense. Disjunction is dead. The fragment, which ruled poetry for the past one hundred years, has left the building…Why atomize, shatter, and splay language into nonsensical shards when you can hoard, store, mold, squeeze, shovel, soil, scrub, package, and cram the stuff into towers of words and castles of language with a stroke of the keyboard…Let's just process what exists. Language as matter; language as material. How much did you say that paragraph weighed?" (315). In an interview with the Finnish poet Leevi Lehto: "It's much more about the wholeness of language, the truth of language, rather than the artifice of fragmentation that is so inherent in much Language writing. It's something that the new generation is very interested in: How to retain semantic sense (without real fragmentation), yet

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[9] See, for instance, Steve McCaffery's "Diminished Reference and the Model Reader"; significantly, McCaffery also critiques Language writing's conscription of the reader to the production of meaning. Another classic essay on this topic is Ron Silliman's "Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World." Again, Dworkin's "Fate of Echo," when it comes to theorizing "uncreative writing," discusses it precisely in terms of diminished reference, largely as theorized by Language writers (but without mention of them) (xliii).

[10] For an interesting discussion of the role of fragmentation in Language poetry, see Michael Clune, "The Poem at the End of Theory." Clune argues that disjunctive Language poetry sets itself up as exemplifying poststructuralist theory and thus as in need of that complementary discourse.

have the language be as alive and foreign as modernist, post-Cagean writing. This is where the whole argument for appropriation comes in. Suddenly, the familiar or quotidian is made unfamiliar or strange, without really blasting apart the sentences. Forget the New Sentence. The Old Sentence, if framed properly, is really odd enough."[11] In an interview for *Bomb Magazine's* blog: "It's the idea that counts, not the reading of it. These books are impossible to read in the conventional sense. 20th century notions of illegibility were commonly bound up with a shattering of syntax and disjunction, but the 21st century's challenge to textual convention may be that of density and weight. The Internet is mostly unreadable not because of the way it is written (mostly normative expository syntax at the top level), but because of its enormous size" ("So What Exactly").

Ironically, as should be evident from my epigraph, Goldsmith's claim on the "unreadable" for Conceptual writing, once again repeats a (borrowed) gesture from the repertoire of Language poetics: Steve McCaffery, for instance, discusses Language writing as "unreadable" in relation both to Barthes' notion of the writerly, anti-hermeneutical work (the reading of which

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[11] See "Interview with Kenneth Goldsmith: Nude Media, Or Benjamin in the Age of Ubiquitous Connectivity." If Goldsmith attempts to make Language poetry look so twentieth-century, Marjorie Perloff's *Unoriginal Genius*, Marjorie Perloff colludes in the endeavor, arguing that Language writing shares with various literary antecedents (and nemeses) an investment in "verbal originality." Placing a premium on "the poet's power to create a unique *parole* from the language pool of the culture" (11), Language Poetry accepts "the primacy of the poet's *inventio* as constructive principle" (9). But "*Inventio* is giving way to appropriation" (11), she pointedly observes, marking "a poetic turn from the resistance model of the 1980s to dialogue—a dialogue with earlier texts or texts in other media, with 'writings through' or *ekphrases* that permit the poet to participate in a larger, more public discourse" (11). Over against Perloff's problematic coding of this shift as a movement from dissensus to rapprochement, we might note that dialogue—in the interest of renovating and re-politicizing the public sphere—was quite literally Language poetry's stated focus (as Perloff herself knows). Beyond the prevalent dialogism or heteroglossia at work in Language texts is a sense of the writer in subversive dialogue with rigid social codes, as well as with the reader.[xi] Likewise, the implicit charge of the strong author-function here ignores Language poetry's insistence on the co-production of meaning with the reader.

is not a recovery or communication of meaning but a further writing), as well as to a more literal unreadability in which the text opens onto a libidinal economy beyond the semiotic.[12] Mutatis mutandis, the new "unreadable" here serves to characterize Conceptual writing as hyper-contemporary, to identify it with an immersive digital culture that is somehow "post-reading," while concomitantly dating (and rendering passé) Language writing, with its obsessive focus on an activated, writerly reader. Very recently, in remarks on his in-progress remake of Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, Goldsmith again pointedly inverts this paradigm, stating that following Benjamin, his work will propose "writing as reading," meaning that his writing will be purely transcription (even as he notes *The Arcades Project* is compulsively readable).[13] A few years earlier, even in the very act of recognizing the historical dialectic of the "absorptive" and the "antiabsorptive," to use Charles Bernstein's well-known terms, Goldsmith had undercut the possibility of reading a Conceptualist work: "Just as new reading strategies had to be developed in order to read difficult modernist works of literature, so new reading strategies are emerging on the web: skimming, data aggregating, the employment of intelligent agents, to name but a few. Our reading habits seem to be imitating the way machines work: we could even say that online, by an inordinate amount of skimming in order to comprehend all the information passing before our eyes, we *parse* text—a binary process of sorting language—more than we *read* it. So this work demands a *thinkership*, not a readership" ("So What Exactly"). Reading in a culture of distraction has become *literally* machinic, thus technically not reading at all. Making free with discursive materials, forms, and techniques that solicit anti-reading, Conceptual writing requires

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[12] See McCaffery, "Language Writing: from Productive to Libidinal Economy." For a discussion of figural uses of illegibility or unreadability, see Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible* xxii.

[13] See Kenneth Goldsmith's post from April 2011 on Harriet, the Poetry Foundation's news and community website, "Rewriting Walter Benjamin's 'The Arcades Project,'" April 30, 2011.

a "thinkership"—a Duchampian "non-retinal" supplement—as its post-literary due. Yet if this contemporizing maneuver generates a thin, positive social agenda for the work—Goldsmith further gives no sense of what a thinkership would be thinking *about*—it also involves misprision of the strengths of Conceptualist projects as it points to certain problems in various self-descriptions and -representations.

For instance, the modeling of Conceptual writing on Conceptual art, Goldsmith's catchy "thinkership" evincing a connection to what has been termed "Idea Art." This medium envy is also readily apparent in Dworkin's masterful introductory essay to the formidable *Against Expression* anthology, "The Fate of Echo," even as Dworkin, in strong contrast to Goldsmith, forthrightly argues for the importance of reading Conceptual writing: "Readers of the present collection should heed the admonishment: noting a method…is no substitute for carefully reading the textual details of a work" (xxxvii). Firming up the connection between Conceptual art and Conceptual writing—"Although the focus of this anthology is resolutely literary, a comparison of the conceptual literature presented here with the range of interventions made by the foundational works of conceptual art is still instructive" (xxiv)—Dworkin goes on to offer brilliant readings of canonical works of Conceptual art. Yet perhaps a more skeptical approach, refining the terms of that earlier movement and questioning its self-representations, and homing in more surgically on its uses of language, would have helped to clarify the stakes of Conceptual writing. Dworkin's own examples demonstrate that Conceptual art used language in three main ways: to articulate an idea, a general schema, for producing works of art; to document a particular realization of an idea; and as incorporated within that realization itself.[14] Dworkin is

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[14] I draw on Liz Kotz' *Words To Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* for this formulation; the latter half of the book draws out these points. Kotz' work will be discussed further below.

especially astute in pointing to Conceptual art's "recursive factual tactic": here the art gives "information about information," treating itself as materials, not representation; and in pieces where language is at center, that language is often doing double-duty in documenting its own material form. Oddly however, his discussion also offers something of a dual historical narrative, in which Conceptual art both progressively dematerializes the art object through the use of language as idea (culminating in Lawrence Weiner's agnosticism regarding whether a work is ever made from a schema) and comes to treat language itself as pure matter (along the lines of Robert Smithson). Conceptual writing picks up from where this second ending leaves off, as Dworkin posits, "rejecting outright the ideologies of disembodied themes and abstracted content. The opacity of language is a conclusion of conceptual art but already a premise for conceptual writing" (xxxvi). He goes on to equate this "opacity" with language treated as "quantifiable data," and as we are then reminded to *read* "textual details," Conceptual writing's materials handling, its reduction of language to matter, surfaces as an intriguingly messier issue. Despite Dworkin's ingenious epigraph from Deleuze and Guattari: "Even concepts are haeccities and events in themselves," "idea" and "concept" are also used as given by Conceptual art (a special point of reference here is Sol LeWitt).

But perhaps more important and more pertinent to this discussion are the burdened terms "context" and "reframing" on which the new Conceptualist project also rests. Drawing on the legacy of Duchamp, Pop art, Conceptual art, and Appropriation art, Conceptual writing relies on such uncreative annexing maneuvers as "nomination," "selection," and "reframing" (xxiv-xxvi). "The intelligent organization or reframing of already extant text is enough," Dworkin writes. "…previously written language comes to be seen and understood in a new light, and so both the anthology as a whole—with its argument for the importance of the institutions within which a

text is presented—and the works it contains are congruent: a context, for both, is everything. The circumstance, as the adage has it, alters the case" (xliv). Citation is necessarily case-sensitive; so, perhaps, is the very definition of "circumstance." Which is to say, if context is "everything," what exactly *is* context?[15] On the post-Derridean assumption that, "There are only contexts without any center of absolute anchoring," Dworkin offers more of a description of methods of reframing than how these methods work, with their readers, to generate new, consequential meanings.[16] Is the pivotal contextual circumstance internal or external to the text

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[15] In an earlier essay "The Imaginary Solution," Dworkin takes up a number of works in print and new media to delineate a contemporary avant-garde genre that involves "the sorting and sifting of databases of found material rearticulated and organized into largely arbitrary and comprehensive systems" (47). Here he elucidates context more thoroughly, one example his discussion of Dan Farrell's *The Inkblot Record*, a work that is an alphabetization of responses to Rorschach tests from psychology textbooks. Farrell's erasure of the contexts in and through which this information was originally instrumentalized, Dworkin argues, reaestheticizes its language, towards deconstructing the sinister data-driven agendas of governmentality. These works stage the failure of the deracination of linguistic content into data and its separability into discrete uniform units: on one hand, as the reader drifts in the text, she inevitably finds haphazard, rhizomatic semantic connections among entries in the resulting lists; on the other, the data also coheres into meaningful patterns that implicate the social structures in which subjects are formed and systems in which the data has been solicited and given, rather than evidencing the pathologies of its immediate individual sources.

[16] Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context" 320. Derrida himself asks, "Is there a rigorous and scientific concept of the *context*?" (310). In an interesting causal reversal, Derrida suggests that citations themselves generate new contexts, rather than that a new context gives a citation a new meaning: "Every sign…as a small or large unity, can be cited…thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion" (320). In "A 'No Man's Land'": Postmodern Citationality in Zukofsky's 'Poem beginning 'The,'" Ming-Qian Ma theorizes Zukofsky's dissolution of the text-context binary along Derridean lines, asserting that, "Zukofsky's poem is one in which the established text-context dichotomy collapses and the conventional function of context is subverted" (55). Ma argues further that Zukofsky's poem effaces itself as a controlling context for its citations and instead features them as utterly essentialized, rather than socially or culturally representative, or even representative of their original sources (57-8). In other words, the poem is made solely of citations (and an index of references) yet forms exactly the opposite of what Barthes calls "a tissue of quotations" in that the poem refuses to be networked. As such the quotes become material texture, "out of which one composes one's own songs" (59). As I will argue below, Conceptual writing gets some traction out of a sense of "context."

(or does Conceptual writing somehow especially spoil this distinction)?[17] If the "mode of strict citation" is key to these enactments of "recontextualization," what do we make of that concomitant pull or stalling of identity?[18] Can reframing be considered a mode of interpretation, or better put, a "mechanical" means of manipulation inevitably both implementing and encouraging further interpretation? Conceptual writing's reframings are further described as reflecting "remix culture": "In the twenty-first century, conceptual poetry thus operates against the background of related vernacular practices, in a climate of pervasive participation and casual appropriation" (xlii) (or, as Goldsmith more problematically puts it in his own introduction to the anthology: "Words very well might be written not to be read but rather to be shared, moved, and manipulated. Books, electronic and otherwise, will continue to flourish. Although the new writing will have an electronic gleam in its eyes, its consequences will be distinctively analog" (xxi).) How does Conceptual writing comment on rather than simply instantiate these practices under the auspices of "literature"? [19]

　　　　Citationality was central to many versions of Language poetics. In Bernstein's work,

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[17] The essay tends to focus on reframing as intra-(para)textual re-presentation: "A work can never really be duplicated by formal facsimile" (xxxvii); "identical procedures rarely produce identical results. Indeed, impersonal procedures tend to magnify subjective choices (to keep with the example of the newspaper, how would different transcribers handle line breaks and page divisions, layouts and fonts, and so on?)" (xxxviii-xxxix).

[18] Jason Christie's "Sampling the Culture," an essay on Goldsmith's *Day*, defines an appropriative practice of "plundergraphia" as a reframing or recontextualization without a supplementation of the cited text itself, yet both contextual change and textual identity are defined tautologically: "Plundergraphia is a more general praxis that situates words in a new context where they are changed by their trans-formation into an entirely different context than that of their original one…the work…has to be retained in its entirety without anything else being added to it" (78).

[19] An appropriative though not a Conceptual work, Tan Lin's *Heath*, as well as the essays surrounding this controversial work, deals more directly with these issues.

Marjorie Perloff notes, we may see a general mass media contamination of language such that every discourse appears as a reified "-ese."[20] In a number of essays, Bruce Andrews underscores the fictive consensus of official discourse, revealing its politics; conversely, he argues, insofar as the social coding and control of difference makes up a unified system, its grammar must be broken down by rejecting representation and improvising rules and individualizing processes of meaning making.[21] Dworkin himself has supplied an exemplary discussion of the "indeterminate citationality" in Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*: "Hejinian transforms fragments of worn-out, quotidian, common language into an extraordinary, unique, and individual text"; "the text further emphasizes its citationality by incorporating apparently quoted material without quotation marks and, conversely…framing some phrases in marks of quotation without apparent significance and without citing a speaker or source."[22] As Dworkin further points out, "Context in *My Life* is all to the point" (70)—the particular brilliance of the text is its use of the repetition of sentences as reframing, producing an openness particularly inviting of participatory readership: "Since the composition of *My Life* is explicitly nonlinear, the likely thematic connections for many sentences are not always clear at first encounter, and the text inscribes within its architectonics a necessary rereading" (72); "Such sentences achieve their economy by serving a double function…they suggest one meaning within local contexts and another meaning when

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[20] As Perloff writes in *Radical Artifice*: "Whereas in, say, the *Pisan Cantos*, individual items (a citation from a letter, an historical narrative, a Latin quotation, a bit of Poundian slang, retain their identity…in Bernstein's poem ["Safe Methods of Business"], the pieces of the puzzle are always already contaminated, bearing…traces of…media discourses (legalese, Wall Street-speak, National Enquirer gossip, and so on)" (197).

[21] See Andrews' "Text & Context" and "Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis" in *Paradise and Method*. Notably, "Text & Context" also hardly discusses "context."

[22] Dworkin, "Penelope Reworking the Twill: Patchwork, Writing, and Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*" 62.

reassembled and reread together" (75). By contrast, Conceptual writing's use of citation is a more documentary affair: it does not so much utilize representative social textures, the discursive commonplace, generalized media-mediatedness, abyssal intertextuality, as exploit the indexical valence of literal citation.[23] As "The Fate of Echo" suggests, "if these poems are not referential in the sense of any conventionally realist diegesis, they point more directly to *the archival record* of popular culture and colloquial speech than any avant-pop potboiler or Wordsworthian ballad ever dreamed" (xlv). As I will discuss further below, instead of blurring the line between the quoted and the seemingly-quoted, Conceptual writing employs actual and often medium-sensitive quotation: even when the source is indeterminate, that is, more in keeping with distributed, corporate, anonymous or automated authorship especially pertinent to web-based material, that indexical quality is there. Further, if an archival ethic is at the core of, for instance, Language writer Susan Howe's work, while other Language poets, too, made use of specified documents and vocabularies, these tend not to be de-personalized, rule-bound (if always subjectively enacted) manipulations or annexations of text.[24]

Notes on Conceptualisms: A Readership v. A "Thinkership"

    Notes on Conceptualisms (2008), a slim volume by Conceptualists Robert Fitterman and Vanessa Place that describes Conceptual writing and situates it in the contemporary cultural landscape, comprises an elegantly presented set of aphoristic notes, numbered, with alphabetical

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[23] See especially Leonard Diepveen's ideas on texture and citation in Language writing, in *Changing Voices* 159-166.

[24] In "George Oppen and the Poetics of Quotation," Peter Nicholls discusses Language poets' engagement both consciously and unconsciously with corrupting specific references, which could also demonstrate writing as a process of reading and memory inherently prone to eroding and changing original materials or as a way of activating subjunctive histories and cracks in texts that might otherwise seem monological and monolithic.

subheads, a format recalling both Sol LeWitt's numbered *Sentences on Conceptual Art* (1969) and scientistic philosophical formats, such as Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Not quite outrageous enough to be a hoax, though it is a kind of performance (including a performance of Conceptualism), the work is written in the rhetoric and idiom of high theory, complete with diagrams, and mentions, among others, Badiou, Lacan, Žižek, and theorist of modernism and gender Christine Buci-Glucksmann. It is playful, arrogant, sometimes contradictory, sometimes hermetic, and quite abstract—the result of two savvy cultural producers crafting a position between, on one hand, a baseline cynicism complected by Adorno and Horkheimer's despairing chapter on the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and theories of the *avant garde* post-Peter Bürger and Paul Mann, and, on the other, an oppositional stance towards media capitalism.

With precursors in, for instance, Goldsmith's week of blog posts at the Poetry Foundation site (2007), *Notes on Conceptualisms* sets out to identify methods of Conceptual writing, the relationship of authors to the materials used and to the texts produced with them, and the impact that textual structures generated by procedures have on the meaning and signification of works. In fact, however, much of Fitterman and Place's thinking revolves around what they call "pure conceptualism," or unadulterated appropriation or reframing of text, a technique both authors have used in a number of works. Most space in *Notes* is given to aperçus about art's capacity for critical cultural work—such as institutional critique—and what undermines it. While Goldsmith claims "unboring boring" antecedents in John Cage and Andy Warhol and Dworkin edited a volume of Vito Acconci's early writings, Fitterman and Place situate their observations only abstractly with regard to conceptual (such as Sol LeWitt), post-conceptual (such as Mike Kelley), and appropriation (such as Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach, and Sherrie Levine) artists,

focusing more intently on *art criticism* on appropriation art produced in the early 1980s by *October*, *Artforum*, and *Art in America* contributors, which coalesced around the term "allegory."

In *Notes*, allegory is first introduced as a tactic for saying slant what would be repressed as straight (13),[25] and then described as "a narrative mediation between image…and meaning" (14); as they state: "Conceptual writing mediates between the written object…and the meaning of the object by framing the writing as a figural object to be narrated…conceptual writing creates an object that creates its own disobjectification" (15-6). A context for these oblique claims is produced by subsequent references to Hal Foster's "Subversive Signs" (1982), Craig Owens' "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism" (1980), and Benjamin

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[25] Barrett Watten's quite dismissive "analysis" of *Notes on Conceptualisms* in "Presentism and Periodization in Language Writing, Conceptual Art, and Conceptual Writing" is entirely based on this one sentence at the very beginning of that work: "Allegorical writing is a writing of its time, saying slant what cannot be said directly, usually because of repressive political regimes or the sacred nature of the message" (13; quoted in Watten 141). For Watten, this definition of "allegory" fails at the task of periodization in which it seems to engage—that is, at grounding allegorical technique in a specific historical moment; thus, the term "allegory," as Watten deflatingly reads it, must refer to "the expansion of meaning by the historical ungrounding of formal means" (142). Conceptual writing thus comes into view as naïve and removed from meaningful historical engagement, in the Adornian dialectical materialist sense. Watten ends his article by noting that his interest in Conceptual writing stems from its "reinterpretation and redeployment of the many available and viable procedures in the historical present in which conceptual artists, Language writers, and conceptual writers (plus post-avant and Flarf) are working" (153). Of course, this knowing redeployment of technique is often precisely what is at stake in Conceptual Writing, as I will discuss further below. As is evident in the very name of the school, Conceptual writing's claims to "newness" and to an avant-gardist "radical break" with historical antecedents is almost always coupled with a self-conscious turn to predecessors – just not the immediate predecessor of the Language School (this disavowal of the immediate predecessor a classic gesture). Watten's leveling of the quite varied movements he lists seems to mark an investment in portraying the Language School as the last viable avant-garde, rather than to engage in the more considered interpretation he is known for. Further, while Watten accuses Goldsmith in particular of using an invalid "technological determinism" as grounding the "newness" of Conceptual Writing, this leaves Watten himself without a means of analyzing how the strategic redeployment of techniques does meaningfully embody historical change (and to a certain extent, a critical purchase on that change) precisely in terms of its interaction with and commentary on the contemporary immersive digital media environment.

Buchloh's "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art" (1982).[26] Buchloh's essay is based on Benjamin's concept of allegory developed in *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* and essays on Baudelaire. As Benjamin writes, "The devaluation of objects in allegory is surpassed in the world of objects itself by the commodity" (cited in Buchloh 166); as Buchloh explains, appropriation practices re-allegorize the allegory of the commodification process. "The allegorical mind," he states, "sides with the object and protests against its devaluation to the status of a commodity by devaluating it a second time in allegorical practice…The repetition of the original act of depletion and the new attribution of meaning redeems the object" (166). Clearly, then, Conceptual Writing is to focus on texts ripe for de-reification through allegorization, though Fitterman and Place incessantly deflate this project: in the wake of what they see as the failure of the oppositional art movements of the twentieth century, they view all such negating maneuvers as pre-destined for reabsorption within capitalist machinery. Of course, this is hardly news. But one way they do mark the here and now is through their programmatic debasement of reading as misguided or irrelevant with regard to Conceptual Writing, which is in turn tied to its status as readymade, with all its purported ambivalence as the sine qua non of the dialectical movement from the liquidation of tradition to institutional recuperation.

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[26] "Allegory occurs whenever one text is doubled by another," Craig Owen writes in "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," yet the semiotic violence of postmodern allegory, as Owen sees it, is that the double maximizes the potential in the allegorical operation not to redeem or establish a relation with a (lost) past, but to usurp it: "[the allegorist] does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured…Rather, he adds another meaning…only to replace: the allegorical meaning supplants an antecedent one" (Part 1: 69). Allegory in Owen's discussion also morphs into "emptying out," as well as into rendering "opaque," "illegible," and, most importantly, undecideable (*pace* Paul de Man): through suggesting "mutually incompatible readings" (Part II: 61), "postmodernism…works to problematize the activity of reference" (Part 2: 80).

Thus, they speak, for instance, of Conceptual Writing as a critical meta-text: "To the degree conceptual writing depends on 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" (39). Likewise, they state: "Allegorical writing (particularly in the form of 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" (20). Given this almost naïve, not fully historicized alignment of their project with readymades (*e.g.* Duchamp's snow-shovel, Levine's re-photographs) as engaged in anti-capitalist irony, in immanent ideological critique, Fitterman and Place's countering cynicism is remarkable: "Consider the retyping of a random issue of *The New York Times* as an act of radical mimesis…[this gesture is a critique] of the leveling and loading medium of media…[and is] inseparable from the replication of the error under critique. Replication is a sign of desire" (20). If authorial appropriation is simultaneously critique of and an active identification, a *fascination,* with its object, so, too, can the viewer's reception be both a critical reading and passive consumption. Quoting Hal Foster's influential statement in "Subversive Signs" that the appropriation artist 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 spectacle" (cited 18-9), they remark: "Note that 'more than' and 'rather than' betray a belief in the segregation or possible segregation of these concepts; conceptualism understands they are hinged" (18). The double-edge of the textual readymade is at its dullest sharpest, however, when Place and Fitterman suggest that the critical interpreter's non-reading is precisely equivalent to the non-reading that contemporary culture already calls

for: "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" (25).[27] Place and Fitterman thus give a new twist to the catchphrase Kenneth Goldsmith invokes when speaking of his work as unreadable.

Indeed, *Notes on Conceptualisms* echoes Goldsmith's over-reliance on a passage from Sol LeWitt's *Paragraphs on Conceptualism* (1967): "In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art."[28] But to take LeWitt's statement as a synecdoche

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[27] In his Foreword to *Notes*, Fitterman also reasserts "readership" as "thinkership": "Conceptual Writing, in fact, might best be defined not by the strategies used but by the expectations of the readership or *thinkership*" (10; italics original). The program description for the 2012 AWP panel on *I'll Drown My Book* reads: "Conceptual writing is an emerging 21st century literary movement that creates poetry and prose concerned with politics but not polemics and foregrounds 'thinkership' as opposed to readership" (101).

[28] Goldsmith, for instance, adapts LeWitt in his brief statement, "Conceptual Poetics": Conceptual writing is more interested in a *thinkership* rather than a readership. Readability is the last thing on this poetry's mind. Conceptual writing is good only when the idea is good; often, the idea is much more interesting than the resultant texts." Likewise, his "Week of Blogs" for the Poetry Foundation states: "What matters is the machine that drives the poem's construction." In the blogs, however, Goldsmith does note a tension between viewing conceptual writing as linguistic materiality and as concept. *Notes* cites Goldsmith's adaptation at 30, drawing a parallel between the concept-machine of the poem with the Internet search engine. LeWitt's statement of radical reduction regarding his art must be taken with a grain of salt. Carrying out LeWitt's instructions may yield, for instance, complex wall drawings that play with perception and placement; they reward phenomenological experience. Then again, by stating that the process is besides the point, LeWitt is not simply critiquing the fetishization of artistic craft, or the art work as mobile commodity (since the works under discussion are executed directly on the gallery wall, making them intransitive). He is espousing, seemingly without irony, a workplace ideology being consolidated in the late 50s and early 60s that strongly bifurcated and hierarchized executive or managerial mental labor and de-skilled working class manual labor,

for Conceptual Art is highly problematic. Both Goldsmith's and Fitterman and Place's thinking in part recapitulates the logic illuminated by Liz Kotz' recent important genealogical work on Conceptual Art, *Words To Be Looked At.* Rather than viewing Conceptual Art as solely defining itself against "retinal" visual art, *Words To Be Looked At* gazes across artistic media to ground Conceptual Art in post-WW II, Western innovations in music, performance art, and poetry. For Kotz, John Cage is an especially seminal figure: Cage radically re-envisioned the musical score by canceling it, most especially in *4'33"*, as a notated representation of the music to be played; the score became instead a set of largely *verbal* directions or instructions and thus autonomous from traditional, specialized musical language and grammar (using, for instance, objective temporal measurements of seconds, rather than measurement in bars and signature). Cage's deracination and restructuring of the score made it a form that could be mobilized (as it mutated) across media, eventually providing the framework for Conceptualism, in which "the work of art has been reconfigured as a specific realization of a general proposition" (194). Conceptualism and other late 1960s art practices thus renovate the ontology of the visual artwork such that it comes to resemble that of music: "Particular materials are merely *specific presentations*…for a general *idea* that is the work" (191), while "the information of a piece is understood as something that can be abstracted from an individual manifestation" (199).

Ironically, Fitterman and Place's focus on "pure conceptualism," or a text based on unadulterated appropriation of another text, is ill-served by their model of Conceptualism as

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from an executive point of view. (See Helen Molesworth, "Work Ethic," 42-43.) In fact, LeWitt's own work was recuperated as commodity in the form of notarized and authenticated prints of his instructions. Much less than he deconstructed the artwork as commodity, he illuminated the process of reification of immaterial intellectual and service commodities. (See Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* 174-5, n.8.) See also Richard Owens' discussion of Conceptual writing along these lines (as associated with crises of overaccumulation) below.

idea-based, or, as Kotz puts it, "a specific realization of a general proposition" (198) – for to re-present a text as it has been given is *not* to use a proposition, directive, or procedure as a tool for processing materials to realize a work. In fact, it is, in a sense, precisely the opposite. Procedural texts themselves cannot be reduced to expendable, mechanistic iterations of a concept: their particularity always already spoils or resists easy re-absorption into the general schema from which they issued, with many procedural texts underscoring the pointed indeterminacy and elasticity with which they embody the general. This is why they should be (or are meant to be) read.[29] Relatedly, we might inquire whether such schema-based or reframing works' de-retinization of literature is really analogous to Conceptual art's de-retinization of visual art. "If we return to the conventional account of conceptual art," Barrett Watten asks, "…what becomes of the dematerialization of the art object, in which art's opticality is transposed to language, when the medium is language itself?" (141). As noted above, Conceptual artists realized their anti-aesthetic by turning to language as the non-sensuous

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[29] See especially Liz Kotz' discussion of Lawrence Weiner towards the end of *Words To Be Looked At* and Dworkin's "Imaginary Solutions" (as well as his comments in his introduction to *Against Expression*, noted above). Dworkin writes of Goldsmith in "Zero Kerning": "Consistently branded, his books come so neatly packaged in single-sentence summations that they seem to render any actual reading redundant, or unnecessary…Measured against the specifics of the particular texts, such tag-lines are of course to some extent inaccurate, and one should always remember Benjamin's warning: 'Never trust what writers say about their own writing.' Indeed, part of the interest of Goldsmith's projects lies precisely in [how] they deviate from the tidiness of their clear protective wrappers" (10). Katie Price's recent talk, "Content is (Never) More than an Extension of Form: Craig Dworkin's *Parse* and the Legacy of Conceptual Art," offers a sharp take on the Conceptual, procedural work *Parse*, which parses Edwin A. Abbott's *How to Parse* (1874) according to Abbott's own system of grammatical analysis. As she states: "With *Parse*, the material object is not to be bypassed on its way to some 'more important' thought; the act of reading itself—as opposed to the ideas of the project alone— becomes vital"; she goes on to show how *Parse* reveals parsing to be a (variable) art rather than a science, bringing into focus the violence (and pleasures) of parsing, as well as diagnosing Abbott's "grammar biases." Most helpfully, Price notes: "The idea may be the machine that makes the art, but once that art is made, it can never again be reduced to just an idea."

medium of the idea, even as language could also be recognized as (also) matter (c.f. the title of

Robert Smithson's 1967 press release for an exhibition of language-based art, "LANGUAGE to

be LOOKED at and/or THINGS to be READ"). Fitterman and Place propose literature's self-

transcendence along similar lines: "In some highly mimetic (*i.e.,* largely appropriative)

conceptual writings, the written word is the visual image" (17): conceptual writing passes

through the merely retinal on its way to becoming non-retinal. Yet if "Art as Idea" subverts or

negates the visual with the verbal and explores discursive problems subtending perception,

aesthetic experience, and definitions and institutions of visual art, Conceptual writing does not

seem to instantiate the reverse. Conceptualist artists particularly invested in the materiality of

language, such as Mel Bochner, were interested in processes of *reading*, in part because they saw

language as mediating or always working in concert with the visual and as the material support

of thought. In this sense, much Conceptual art is *not* an allegorical practice: the text that *is* so

often the art is not meant to be jettisoned in the process of getting to meaning—it is put forth as

materially imbricated with that meaning.[30]

  Notes' other model for understanding the wholesale confiscation of text, the Duchampian

readymade, distorts Duchamp's particular construction of the non-retinal by equating the

"readymade" with "reframing." What is central to the readymade is neither its laying bare of the

act of "nomination" that (un)grounds "art"—the presentation under the auspices of art an

ordinary, mass produced, unaesthetic object—nor its explosion of the divide between life and art.

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[30] On the materiality of language in conceptual art, see Anne Rorimer's entry on Joseph Kosuth in *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965 – 1975*; Liz Kotz's *Words to Be Looked At*; and Joanna Burton's catalog essay for a recent Mel Bochner retrospective. Burton writes, for instance, "Language…will be seen in Bochner's work as the connective glue between otherwise seeming incongruent terms, such as conceptual/material, reductive/additive, internal/external, subject/object, and background/foreground" (14).

A readymade should instead be understood through its peculiar, accompanying linguistic apparatus as well as its context of display. For instance, Duchamp's *Trebuchet* [Trap] (1917) is a coat rack nailed to the floor, its contextual position key to the work just as is its punning title, which plays on the French word "trebucher," "to stumble," also a term in chess for a move that trips one's opponent. Such works, as Marjorie Perloff has argued, are conceptual insofar as they function as interactive, visual-verbal puzzles, in which language delays apprehension of object as the object delays apprehension of language.[31] Dalia Judovitz, in *Unpacking Duchamp*, offers as an interpretation of the readymade an ingenious play on "mechanical reproduction": the readymade plays upon and rhetoricizes artistic conventions and components and as such is less a production than a meta-production or reproduction presuming that literacy; through its various strategies of punning delay, the readymade creates a highly active transitivity around object and language: as a switch for activating this contra-banal performativity, it embodies a conceptual mechanism or machine. To discuss the readymade without reference to reading makes no sense, even as *reading* is coupled with *thinking*, as a process of riddling out meaning.[32]

Such complications thus perhaps reposition the readymade as poised for a "thinkership"—but the readymade is insistently stripped down once again to an operation of bare reframing in Vanessa Place's recent "Afterword" to *I'll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing by Women*. "I have previously identified many forms of conceptualism, ranging from the pure to

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[31] Perloff makes these arguments in chapters on Duchamp in *Radical Artifice* and *21st-Century Modernism*.

[32] Compare also Charles Bernstein's characterization of Language poetry in "Writing and Method": "Writing as a map for the reader to read into, to interpolate from the space of the page out onto a projected field of 'thinking'…So that the meaning of this text is constituted only in collaboration with the reader's active construction of this hypertext" (234-5)

the baroque," Place writes, referring to *Notes.* "I have come to consider conceptualism, *qua*

conceptualism, that is," she continues,

> as writing that does not self-interpret, is not self-reflexive…writing in
> which the content does not dictate the content: what appears on the surface
> of the page is pure textual materiality, no more (and often much less) than
> what you see on the surface of the page. Conversely…conceptualism is
> also writing in which the context is the primary locus of meaning-making.
> I have written elsewhere that all conceptualism is allegorical, that is to say,
> its textual surface (or content) may or may not contain a kind of
> significance, but this surface significance (or content) is deployed against
> or within an extra-textual narrative (or contextual content) that is the
> work's larger (and infinitely mutable) meaning…After all…there remains
> only one who matters—the one who encounters this text or that text in this
> or that textual context, and in this and that contextualizing context only
> one remains—the reader who is the thinker. (446-7)

"Context" here remains undefined even as, poised against "content" and indeed replacing the

content as such, context is entirely accountable for the meaningfulness of the conceptual work.

Is the "textual context" the *here* and *now* of the reader (true of every copy of any text, whether

presented as appropriated or not)? Or is that "contextualizing context" supplied by an allegorical

act of appropriation or reframing, and if so, why and how does such re-presentation transmute

the text? Further, the "thinker" who interacts with this context again becomes the copula for

"reader," while the text here "encountered" is portrayed (impossibly) as utterly divested of cues

for uptake. This may refer to "pure" conceptualism's asceticism in relation to its handling of the

text: Place also notes elsewhere in her commentary on the anthology that some writing in it she

doesn't consider conceptualism in that "much of it dictates its reception, contains within its

writing the way or ways in which it would be read" (447).

I want to suggest, however, not only that unmanipulated readymade works may

nonetheless position their readers, but also that the primary texts chosen for reframing, far from

being "infinitely mutable," may pose productive resistance to travel. "Conceptual

writing…exists—like the readymade—as a radical reframing of the world": in this passage from *Notes,* "world" seems inadvertently substituted for "text," a switch that in fact deconstructs the crucial point about the work of reframing. For perhaps the textual readymade does not exploit but rather *short-circuits* the fungibility of texts among contexts. ("Epistemic contextualism is embedded in every material form insofar as that form is the product of both an articulation and a reception," Place concedes in a recent interview.[33]) Instead of operating the iterability that allows language to travel from context to context, by turns sloughing off and building on prior instances of which none is proper, the Conceptual readymade involves a form of citation that is *indexical*. Like a photograph of language in language, the readymade text does not circulate among contexts promiscuously and anew, but takes its "world" with it. And yet the textual readymade, over against this would be self-effacing documentary effect, also draws attention to its work of mediation, its re-siting and medium translation of the text it captures. Goldsmith has asserted Conceptual writing as a "poetics of flux, celebrating instability and uncertainty": "Disposability, fluidity, and recycling…Today [words are] glued to a page but tomorrow they could re-emerge as a Facebook meme…This new writing is not bound exclusively between the pages of a book; it continually morphs from printed page to web page, from gallery space to science lab, from social spaces of poetry readings to social spaces of blogs"; "Conceptual Writing…uses its own subjectivity to construct a linguistic machine that words may be poured into; it cares little for the outcome."[34] With its blithe frictionlessness, Goldsmith's model for the medium-hopping text is the extensibility of content, through markup coding, in new media. But,

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[33] Place makes this remark in conversation with Edmund Hardy, towards the beginning of "'Nothing that's quite your own': Vanessa Place interviewed."

[34] Goldsmith, "Introduction [Flarf & Conceptual Writing]" 315-316.

of course, what this hyperbolic portrayal of liquidity trades on is a post-medium condition in which recontextualization can hardly register as such, a position to which N. Katherine Hayles' "Translating Media: Why We Should Rethink Textuality" offers the perfect riposte: "The largely unexamined assumption here is that ideas about textuality forged in a print environment can be carried over wholesale to the screen…if 'text' were an inert, nonreactive substance that can be poured from container to container without affecting its essential nature" (267). Because texts are in-formed by the emergent materiality of the media embodying them, medium translation, as Hayles adamantly maintains, impacts reading and meaning.

In contrast to Goldsmith's vision of medium-fluidity, then, I would argue that many Conceptual readymades engage in *aggressive, strategic medium translation*. In a suggestive passage from the beginning of *The Textual Condition*, Jerome McGann writes, "Every text has variants of itself screaming to get out, or antithetical texts waiting to make themselves known. These variants and antitheses appear (and multiply) over time, as the hidden features of the textual media are developed and made explicit" (10). Conceptual readymades *realize these antithetical versions of texts*: despite using found materials, they are highly authored works that appropriate reflexively medium-specific texts and re-mediate them in formats that work against their original purposes. Which means that re-framing may be seen as a dialogic, not to say antagonistic, affair, engaging the past medial incarnation of a text, as well as its pragmatic, interactive context, its world. One electronic work deploying precisely this tactic is Place's "After Lyn Hejinian," featured at the 2010 "Print <3 Digital"-themed Columbia College Printer's Ball.[35] Place's 70-minute work, "composed" on Twitter and screened in the common area of the

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[35] A video of this work may be accessed on the Poetry Foundation website at http://www.poetryfoundation.org/features/video/253.

festival, consists entirely of passages appropriated from the beginning, middle, and end of Lyn

Hejinian's *My Life*. The remediation in tweet format cuts the sentences of *My Life* into 140-

character segments, while Place cites discontinuously from the work, excising parts of the text.

Discussed above in terms of citation and recontextualization, *My Life* is studded with leitmotifs

and repetitions that propose multiple "narratives" or thematic paths to readers who themselves

link its discontinuous units. Offering itself, in Juliana Spahr's formulation, as a locus of

"reciprocity and exchange," *My Life* encourages its reader, as Hejinian writes in the "The

Rejection of Closure," "to cover the distance to the next sentence" (46), indeed to move back and

forth in the text continually emending meaning.[36] Given this particular phenomenology of

reading, which requires a spatial interaction with the full text as a non-linear field, Place's

appropriation comes into view as an aggressive medium translation, as the tweet, used

strategically to isolate and autonomize not even sentences but arbitrary character-packets,

deracinates Hejinian's deliberate, paratactic ensemble as conjunction-to-be-composed, just as the

Twitter format calls for a mode of reading in an economy of distraction and divided attention,

belonging to quite a different social network assemblage. (Likewise, what Spahr calls Hejinian's

"nonpersonal mix of confession and everyday observation" (68), a mode that genericizes her text

to produce a non-egocentric autobiography as cultural critique (77), Place purposely echoes by

using the generic background template for her Twitter feed.[37]) The frisson of "After Lyn

Hejinian" is its debasement of *My Life*, predicated not only on its non-analytic dismantlement of

that text, but also on its invocation and negation of the creative reading practice that, in its

original medium, it invites.

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[36] Juliana Spahr, *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* 70.

[37] Place adumbrated this deliberateness in a description of the project (personal correspondence).

"Radical Mimesis" in the Information Economy

Day, of course, provides another case in point: over against his rhetoric of liquid text flow as if all media were new media, Goldsmith, in "Being Boring," lovingly documents the process of medium translation in which he engaged as he digitized an issue of the newspaper in newsprint—if, ironically, only to choose the codex as the appropriate output device for the project. "It became this wild sort of obsession to peel the text off the page of the newspaper and force it into the fluid medium of the digital," he writes. "I felt like I was taking the newspaper, giving it a good shake, and watching as the letters tumbled off the page into a big pile, transforming the static language that was glued to the page into moveable type." Darren Wershler-Henry has discussed how the epigraph to *Day*—Truman Capote's slur on Jack Kerouac: "That's not writing. That's typing"—does not actually describe the production of the book, as Goldsmith OCR'd it, noting that "computing" as "flow" calls for a different model of authorship than a typewritten text[38]; Goldsmith himself states he did both, albeit typing not on a (Romantic) typewriter but into a word processing document: "Everywhere there was a bit of text in the paper, I grabbed it…If it could be considered text, I had to have it. Even if there was, say, an ad for a car, I took a magnifying glass and grabbed the text off the license plate. Between retyping and OCR'ing, I finished the book in a year" ("Being Boring"). Craig Dworkin, by contrast, underscores Goldsmith's medium translation in terms of the book: "At the micro-level, [*Day*'s] distinctive facture arises from a peculiar textual democratization, reducing the newspaper's patchwork carnival of fonts and typefaces to the book page's uniform print-block of equal-weight twelve-point Times" ("Zero Kerning" 18), while Christopher Schmidt, under the

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[38] Darren Wershler-Henry, "Uncreative is the New Creative: Kenneth Goldsmith Not Typing" 165.

impression that Goldsmith did in fact ("slavishly"(-cum-heroically)) re-type the entire

newspaper, argues that he overworked himself as a reader: he has "read the newspaper like a

book (doggedly left-to-right, rather than scattershot, as one might read a newspaper), and in the

process, produced a book."[39] According to Schmidt, this extreme makeover of the newspaper

into literature amounts to a critique of the print commodity's obsolescence, reminding us of the

labor creating the newspaper requires on a daily basis. Yet this valorized immersive reading

germane to the book medium, representative of an effaced labor process, is oddly enough

congruent, to turn back to Wershler-Henry, to a mode of "reading" even more debased than the

"scanning" of headlines, the reproduction of text by scanner. If *Day* is, among other things, a

way of representing machinic versus distractive scanning, Goldsmith, with his use of a

magnifying glass, in fact aims above the probable capabilities of any scanner to "grab" text,

copying it too perfectly in a kind of inversion of the Duchampian *infra mince*.

    Day emerges, then, as a work that, rather than glibly reducible to idea, both demands to

be read and is, centrally, *about* reading in the variety of modes pertinent to our contemporary

media ecology.[40] Its use of strategic medium translation necessarily invokes the initial

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[39] Schmidt, "The Waste Management Poetics of Kenneth Goldsmith" 26. It should be noted that
Goldsmith has considerably abetted this misapprehension regarding the production of *Day*.
Wershler-Henry argues that Goldsmith decided to forgo the considerable cultural cachet that
would be attached to this performance of typing in a gallery setting. Yet Goldsmith's multiple
narratives of how the work got made do not sacrifice this fetishization of durational, effortful
process (which, moreover, is couched in terms of reading): "In New York, after 'reading' for 10
minutes, we throw the *New York Times* aside and we've already read the paper. Of course, we
haven't read the paper, not even the smallest fraction of it. When I retyped the *New York Times*,
for the first time in my life, I really read and reread the *entire* paper, front to back, including the
fine print that is always ignored" ("Nude Media").

[40] Jason Christie offers an excellent description of *Day*'s provocations along these lines, but
winds up suggesting the book form of the work should not be read: "The idea of transporting a
quotidian and time-sensitive object such as the newspaper into a posterity-ridden space like that
of the book challenges our sense of utility. Words are meant to be read. Words don't have

situatedness of the readymade text in a particular medium-as-an-extended field: medium

considered as an assemblage that includes production, publication, promotion, distribution,

consumption, institutional intake, as well as the material vehicle of the text. Medium translation

is one of an array of techniques of, to use Fitterman and Place's helpful term, "radical mimesis"

that double, displace, draw attention to, comment on, and/or deconstruct the nodes and circuits of

the information economy; such mimesis, too, enables "transference," as Caroline Bergvall seems

to suggest.[41] Conceptual writing's "radical mimesis" also gives onto problematics of labor,

valorization, commodity forms and temporalities that penetrate and generate our contemporary

immersive media environment, positioning authorial and artistic labor within and as reflective of

this economic context. Removing us from the misguided endgame of explosion/recuperation

associated with the readymade that always already condemns it to failure, the paradigm of

radical mimesis involves, as a number of art critics and historians have suggested, a shadowing

and complicating of past and present economic realities and cultural practices and objects.[42]

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expiration dates. So, a newspaper that is two days old is already redundant by the simple fact of
the two intervening days' issues of the newspaper that are each supposedly up-to-date up to their
respective dates of issue. Books are meant to blanket the social aporia generated by newspapers'
attempt at total coverage and provide a retrospective, albeit revisionist picture of a given
historical moment. Books are meant to be read at any time, irrespective of 'when' they are
written or published. But the deceptively honest question remains: how fruitful is it to read a
newspaper as a book when it is continuously more and more out-of-date? Should such a book be
read at all? I realize to some people it is almost sacrilegious to suggest that a book should not be
read, that a book's function is other than to be read, but the question nonetheless remains" (81-
2).

[41] Bergvall, "Foreward: The Conceptual Twist" 18.

[42] See, for instance, Miwon Kwon, "Exchange Rate: On Obligation and Reciprocity in Some Art
of the 1960s and After," as well as Molesworth, "Work Avoidance," and "Work Ethic," where
she writes: "In recent years, there has been a return to artistic strategies of the 1960s…one reason
for this revived interest is that the early twenty-first century has also been marked by radical
transformations of the global labor force. As commodities are now almost exclusively produced
in developing and non-Western nations, the labor of developed nations has increasingly become
the management of information and the production of experience. Experiments in Conceptual

In a version of the poetics of general economy, Goldsmith writes in "Uncreativity as Creative Practice": "I'm interested in a valueless practice. Nothing has less value than yesterday's news…I'm interested in quantifying and concretizing the vast amount of "nutritionless" language; I'm also interested in the process itself being equally nutritionless."[43] If the purity of this expenditure is challenged by its neo-Dada cachet, as well as by Goldsmith's own testimony about his process as pedagogically and otherwise rewarding, in a recent talk Richard Owens in turn characterizes Conceptual writing as styling itself along lines of "fictitious capital," "disarticulated from processes of production" as it exploits the results of prior productive labor, hyper-inflating its recycled reproductions.[44] Owens further notes, vis-à-vis Goldsmith's "Information Management," a tendency to "privilege curatorial and administrative practices" involving "the ability to manage, circulate, and reframe" writing otherwise characterized as a "worthless heap," thus aligning the Conceptualist with "an executive position…along a vertical axis of diversified tasks within production" as opposed to "the labor of making at the ground level."[45] Owens' argument is complicated both by the distributed (and potentially automated) "primary" authorship of some of these texts as well as a consideration as *labor* of the "immaterial labor," as termed by Maurizio Lazzarato, and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, to

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and Performance art of the 1960s seem particularly germane in this context and may even offer strategies for understanding, coping with, and resisting these recent developments in our ever more globalized economy" (19).

[43] See Steve McCaffery's Bataille-based, anti-productivist model of textuality in "Writing as General Economy" and "Language Writing: from Productive to Libidinal Economy."

[44] Richard Owens, "Finance Innovation Commodity Culture" (talk).

[45] Owens' position overlaps with my note about Sol LeWitt above.

which he alludes. [46] Over against his executive posturing, Goldsmith elsewhere characterizes his

artistic labor as congruent to that of the digital sweatshop: "I've transformed from a writer into an

information manager, adept at the skills of replicating, organizing, mirroring, archiving,

hoarding, storing, reprinting, bootlegging, plundering, and transferring. I've needed to acquire a

whole new skill set: I've become a master typist, an exacting cut-and-paster, and an OCR demon.

There's nothing I love more than transcription; I find few things more satisfying than collation"

("Being Boring"). This is not clean, managerial reproduction, given that Goldsmith's description

points beyond his own practice to the decidedly material conditions of, as Wershler-Henry notes,

"a globalized milieu where multinational corporations routinely outsource the digitization of

their print archives to firms in India, China and the Philippines" (163). In this self-portrait of

poetic reskilling, creative class transcodes itself (even slums) as data entry, even as its ludic

mimesis of the dirty work of the information economy both draws attention to production

processes and problematizes what counts as artistic or authorial effort; what seems at stake here

is its staging and provocation of "anxieties that surround changing definitions and divisions of

labor" and valorization.[47]

 Replaying what Benjamin Buchloh dubbed Conceptual Art's "aesthetic of

administration" from vantages of executive *and* office drudge, the new Conceptualists do not

simply appropriate but appropriate appropriation, highly conscious both that they revisit aesthetic

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[46] Indeed, in "Immaterial Labour," Lazzarato specifically considers "immaterial labor" as a
"transformation of working-class labor."

[47] Molesworth, "Work Ethic" 48.

strategies and that the 2.0 scenario calls for these repetitions with a difference.[48] This historicity

is shed in Nicholas Bourriard's discussion of "postproduction" in contemporary art: he describes

appropriative practices as a mode of coping with the destabilizing, chaotic epistemic and social

conditions produced by the Internet.[49] In one version of postproduction, artists seize pre-existing

forms by accessibly repurposing them rather than referring to their history. In another version,

"navigation," artists become cultural purveyors or curators who may be thought of as service

workers "imagining links" among denuded particulars, thus creating "likely relations between

disparate sites"; they "project scripts" onto culture to make the welter signify, to give some

subset of it relevance and currency (18). With navigation, as with the customized or

personalized reconstitution of de-historicized forms for purposes of social bonding, artists

perform affective labor that is refused by much Conceptual writing.[50] Robert Fitterman

distinctly rejects speaking as a representative or docent or fashioning experiential works that

program affective response. When asked in an interview with *Coldfront* magazine what his five

favorite bands are, Fitterman states, "My tastes are broad and indelicate"; when asked for his five

favorite films, Fitterman literally pastes in the schedule for a Cineplex. In declining to treat his

readymade materials as open forms for connectivity and identification, Fitterman further refuses

to perform experience-making services that are part and parcel of the contemporary agenda for

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[48] See Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions." Dworkin notes that Goldsmith "appropriates the tactic of appropriation" from Appropriation art in "Fate of Echo" xli.

[49] See the "Introduction" to Bourriard's *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*.

[50] For a discussion of artists under the rubric of service workers, see Andrea Fraser, "What's Intangible, Transitory, Mediating, Participatory, and Rendered in the Public Sphere?"

art—in other words, he is not in the business of producing livable, immediately cathectable forms.[51]

Radical mimesis allows for immanent critique, negativity, and parody, or may instantiate forms of refusal; it is at core a mode of exploration that seems particularly appropriate to this moment of extreme change in the face of new media economy and culture. I see such practice as complementary to Jacques Ranciere's call for a "redistribution of the sensible," insofar as it encourages to us to mix modalities of perception to view business as usual and thus allows us a better purchase on the distribution of the sensible as it stands.[52] Further, if radical mimesis can function as illuminating iteration or simulation of social phenomena, a replay at once in quotation marks and itself "a real instance," the use of readymades can also mobilize a referential function that not only reveals that exact citation exceeds itself, the text dragging its "proper" context with it, but also, of course, works as a recontextualization that is palimpsestic, over against Bourriard's notion of a deracinated cultural commons inviting "sharing," authentic and stabilized subjective expression, and responsibility-less use.

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[51] For a preliminary discussion of "affective labor," see Michael Hardt, "Affective Labor." It should be noted that Fitterman's post-9/11 work "This Window Makes Me Feel" and his recent book *Holocaust Museum* explore quite different but highly affectively charged materials and are themselves quite affecting. His deadpan appropriative treatment drastically counteracts or pierces through the publicly regulated feeling surrounding these materials, while it also suspends sentimentality not merely to ironize it but to complicate it and hold it up for inspection. (These materials will be the topic of another essay.) My thanks to Rodney Koeneke for discussion of this point.

[52] The readymade as (re-)framing mechanism is salient to Ranciere's concept of the "regime of the aesthetic" in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, particularly the section "The Distribution of the Sensible," and in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, the sections "Lyotard and the Aesthetics of the Sublime: a Counter-reading of Kant" and "The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics." The "aesthetic regime" is a modality of art as a posited, autonomous zone, a politicized, contemplative common space or heterotopia for exercising disinterested, dis-alienated relationality to the objects there annexed, working towards a re-distribution of the sensible.

I want to turn, then, to Robert Fitterman's practices of radical mimesis in four recent Conceptualist works: *Rob the Plagiarist*; *Metropolis XXX: The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*; *Rob's Word Shop*; and *Sprawl*. Attending carefully to these works will draw out the ways in which Conceptualist writing, even in the form of the textual readymade, demands a complex engagement of reading as it maintains social and political negativity.

Rob the Plagiarist: Others Writing By Robert Fitterman 2000 – 2008 (2009)

Guy Debord and Gil Wolman's "Methods of Detournement" (1956), after praising Lautreamont's prescient plagiarism in *Maldoror*, notes, "There is not much future in the detournement of complete novels" (11). But it does suggest that canonical works be retitled with titles from forgotten mass media ephemera. Fitterman's *Rob the Plagiarist* uses a version of this strategy by appropriating for its own the cover of Dan Brown's mass-market novel *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), complete with its promotional material: "Coming Soon: A Major Motion Picture"; "A #1 Bestseller Worldwide." (The image is actually a slight alteration that ridicules the esoterism of *The Da Vinci Code* by swirling plainly iconic visual codes over the Mona Lisa's face. The design, we might further note, doubles Du Champ's "L.H.O.O.Q.") *Rob the Plagiarist*'s back cover, which features a photograph of Fitterman as poet-author, at once gentleman scholar and corporate executive, flanked by books, reminds us, with its simulative mimesis of the author photo, that such conventions not only serve to bond book to originating author, but also to authorize the book for commerce. The book also contains the familiar promotional inserts before the title-leaf: here "Praise for *Rob the Plagiarist*" is copied precisely from *The Da Vinci Code*, but for the replacement of Fitterman's title for the original in each

blurb. ("Real" blurbs for the book can be found on its last interior page.) So, too, the epigraph of the first section of the book is a long exact citation from the first chapter of the novel.

Fitterman's radical mimesis of *The Da Vinci Code* reminds us that poetry in general, and the small press publication in particular, is inimical to such mass media. At the same time, his mapping of the mass-market paperback *directly onto the site of poetry* forces us to see that if poetry in contemporary America rarely achieves the commodifiability of other cultural forms, our encounters with poems themselves are nonetheless mediated by external networks of valorization. In turn, cited materials become ciphers for lyrics—ersatzes that have a "reveal-codes" function, allowing us to see that what we more properly call "poetry" is pre-read or unread, doesn't need to be read, in that it has already accrued its value and authority by virtue of how its positioned within institutional networks or by means of the auspices of brand-like authorship.[53] Yet while such citations can be likened to blank counters (like Allan McCullom's *Plaster Surrogates*, sets of framed, ersatz, black-square "paintings"), MacGuffins that set a system in motion and make its dynamics visible, they can also more literally enact the "displacement of art by its own support, by its own spectacle" (Foster, "Subversive Signs" 105), as happens in the poem "[READING]," which cites the (outdated) promotional materials/calendar for the Line Reading series, among others, including (painfully) the authors' bios and credentials—perhaps compulsively readable for other poets. Similar is "National Laureate," which under the name of each of the fifty states cites a few verbatim lines from that state's poet laureate. Such poems of poetry's institutionality are coupled with poems that denaturalize literature as subjective expression, such as "The Sun Also Also Rises," which

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[53] My insights coincide with those offered by Thom Donovan in his review of Fitterman and Place's *Notes on Conceptualisms*.

collects together the sentences beginning with the pronoun "I" from Hemingway's novel.
Likewise, the epigraph of the book's second section is the opening of Dickens' *Great Expectations*, already famously plagiarized by Kathy Acker in her book *Great Expectations*—plagiarism itself is already mediated by, routed through, prior plagiarism.

Metropolis XXX: The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (2004)

Projects of Conceptual Writing often work with database sources and/or with texts that present themselves or can be read as totalizing systems. Here, it would seem, authors use modes of composition appropriate to the digital age. Yet as Craig Dworkin convincingly argues in "Imaginary Solutions," these works are best understood in light of a non-linear view of literary experimentalism. Indeed, Dworkin focuses in on "the radical dilation of modernist experiments by twenty-first century writers, who magnify and distend what were the tentative, occasional, and local tactics of early modernism into aggressive, explicit, and comprehensive strategies of textual production…these…works are less a belated or revised modernism than a kind of modernism *in extremis*" (31). As it turns out, certain analog projects—in their 'pataphysically perverse, deconstructive uses of the database and of the techniques and ideologies of information systematization, management, and presentation—were "proleptic: their striking forms anticipate the computerized new media that would seem to be their ideal vehicle" (30). The exaggeration and hyperbolic consummation of such strategies is thus anything but nostalgic—which tactic could more befit our postmodern situation of Total Information Awareness?

Edward Gibbon's monumental *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-89) is a totalizing project of history about the unraveling of a project of total empire. Yet the textual totality Gibbon presents must be considered stubbornly analog: averse to total information, the

book's main achievement was in selecting from among a massive stock of facts to produce a coherent thematic narrative of decline interpolated with exposition of its underlying causality. Fitterman considers his *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (2004), an installment of his epic work *Metropolis*, an "updated version" of Gibbon's original, and I am tempted to read his poetics in this work as an analogization of digital culture. Initially to have been titled *The Decline and Fall (Sale) of the Roman Empire*, the book distantly echoes Gibbon's reiteration of the classical explanation for Rome's decline: the loss of civic virtue, as bolstered by his representation of the Praetorian guard auctioning off the empire to the highest bidder. As Lytle Shaw has noted, Fitterman's *Decline and Fall* foregrounds how contemporary urban space is mediated by a "digital metropolis" that grounds itself by simulating an older regime of face-to-face encounters, "[operating] as a kind of ghostly afterlife of previous urban interactions" (44). (An actual urban space, we might note, is thus haunted by this haunting.) On a larger scale than the polis, Fitterman's "B9D" sections feature a firm that does global executive outsourcing; Gibbon himself saw the Roman Empire's outsourcing of defense to foreign mercenaries as a cause of its downfall.

But perhaps the book's main valence of resistance to network capitalism instead lies in its implied anti-totalitarian stance towards the Internet. Gibbon himself included in his history a running commentary comparing Roman vicissitudes with contemporary British ones; Fitterman in turn does not simply allegorize twenty-first century America as a decadent, collapsing Rome, but complicates this parallel by proposing and problematizing the Internet as a reflection of the imperial American social totality, what Shaw calls "an imagining of a seemingly unpicturable imperial reality" (44), as well as its main totalizing instrument. If the Internet is mainly viewed as a sublime object because it is incomprehensibly large, though comprehensively systemic and

reflexive, Fitterman subtly suggests that we might consider the virtual environment more an instantiation of a Žižekian kernel of the real, a resistance to totalization.[54]

This program is carried out within an ironically totalizing, tightly structured form: just as Gibbon is thought to have inaugurated modern historiography with his preference for and extensive use of primary sources, so does Fitterman do away with mediation, the entire work assembling "large, unmodified chunks" of text from a gamut of Internet commerce sites, a representative sampling of hyper-contemporary discourses of commodification. Fitterman's 30 chapters do not exactly mirror Gibbon's original schema—though the book does contain chapters featuring Goths, popes, and the Senate; instead it is designed as an internal symmetry, with each of 15 chapters having a duplicate, thus totalizing itself through this internal reflection. Many of these doubled chapters repeat with the difference that actual price tags or more explicit commodification come to replace initial sales pitches. For instance, the first "Rubber Ducks" chapter gives directions for display: "Rubber Duck Alignment: Side-by-Side Lineup / Made popular by the Radio City Rockettes, this method of lining up is best at promoting a risqué attitude" (39); the second one is a list of prices: "Sunny Duck (beak color may vary) $3.95…Scuba Duck $3.95/Referee Duck $3.95/Blues Brothers Duck $6.95," etc. (46). The first time around, adumbrating Gibbon's famous chapters on the rise of Christianity, the "Popes" section comprises a compilation of end-time prophecies of saints and popes updated for the twenty-first century; the second time Christianity becomes farce, reduced to a selection of items from a "product directory" at www.catholicsupply.com.

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[54] See, for instance, Slavoj Zizek's discussion of this kernel in the first chapter of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.

A particularly brilliant feature of Fitterman's selections is the various totalizing aspirations of each site, from representations of commodity universes; to products that are themselves universes—a cruise ship, a New Testament-themed mini-golf course, "protective packaging systems"; to meta-business listings—the titles of booths at a business expo for other business expos to solicit participants; to firms with a global reach—a European telecom research partnership. If Baudrillard was one of the first to articulate a fallen sociability in the form of information networks whose nodes interpenetrate each other without resistance, this paranoiac nightmare takes on more the valence of an imperial dream evinced in these sites of the total capillarity of Internet capitalism, conscripting every possible customer in its universal embrace.[55]

Rob's Word Shop (2010)

Enlarging on his own practice of radical mimesis, in May 2010, in the Bowery in New York City, Fitterman opened a storefront enterprise called "Rob's Word Shop," only a few blocks from where, in 1961, Claes Oldenburg had installed "The Store," where he sold sculptural replicas of mundane commodities. Fitterman instead purveyed words, written with a black Sharpie at the time of transaction on paper stamped and signed with authenticating certification. Individual letters could be purchased for fifty cents, while full words cost a dollar, he and his clientele often collaborating on the purchase choice as in any boutique. With its nod to Oldenburg and its use of archaic exchange mechanisms—rather out-dated receipts and stamps—

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[55] As Jean Baudrillard described in his eerily proleptic *The Ecstasy of Communication*: "Consumer society lived also under the sign of alienation, as a society of the spectacle" (150); but something has changed: "In place of the reflexive transcendence of mirror and scene [of the spectacle], there is a nonreflecting surface…where…the smooth operation surface of communication [unfold]…the…period of production and consumption gives way to the 'proteinic' era of networks, to the narcissistic and protean era of connections, contact, contiguity, feedback and generalized interface that goes with the universe of communication" (146).

and prices, Rob's Word Shop was not a nostalgic quasi-reenactment but an ingenius, palimpsestic, ludic mimetic practice, simultaneously simulative and actual, implicating the actual as simulated, that drew attention to history and change in the arts and in the city at large. Fitterman's sold words, amounting almost to a counterfeiting operation, mime the commodification of language in cultural forms from advertising to literature to legal documents, trading language as commons and the gift economy of everyday verbal mediation for commerce. If they point up the contemporary trend towards the abyssal abstraction of commodities, at the same time, these almost homespun language goods very cleverly, cannily mimic the ontological change in the work of art initiated by Warhol's iterative factory editioning of artworks and morphed by Conceptual art's model of the score-realization structure (for instance, Sol LeWitt's authentication and sale of copies of typed instructions for the outsourced production of his works). They not only remind us that art is a special commodity of speculative or pure exchange value, but also that this shift to iterability became a nexus of capitalization in art.

Sprawl: Metropolis 30A (2010)

The greater part of Fitterman's 2010 work *Sprawl*, again entirely comprised of swathes of appropriated Internet text slightly adapted, presents itself as a map—approaching a 1:1 representation—of "Indian Mound Mall." While on one hand, the bulk of the book's structure is based on the physical site of the mall—Southgate Parking Garage, Levels 1-3, the Atrium, the Food Court, and the Cineplex—its textual mimesis of the mall's flora and fauna derives from the user-generated content of shopping chat rooms that vet the vendors and review the films. Albeit a slim volume, *Sprawl* may be viewed as a version of Walter Benjamin's mammoth, labyrinthine *Arcades Project*, which documents the 19th-century Parisian shopping arcades and a culture

becoming saturated with and conditioned by modern commodity fetishism. Benjamin's iconoclastic sociological method in the work was precisely one of radicalizing citation: the *Arcades Project* was meant to "develop the art of citing," as he put it, "without quotation marks" (458); it is an elaborate system of quoted passages taken from hundreds of sources, organized into coded, cross-referenced dossiers and presented almost without buffering and orienting commentary, whereby he creates a "textual arcade."[56] Echoing Benjamin with its mall-mirroring architectonic, *Sprawl* also participates in the radically mimetic textual economies of the new ecopoetry, which, as Marcella Durand theorizes, "[takes] into itself ecological processes" (117): "Close concentration upon systems as systems can lead to the animation of poetic processes…the incipient and dynamic idea of poetry as ecosystem itself" (118). If, as David Buuck asserts, "The mall is the nature park, the horizon of the new pastoral. Poetics is the engaged navigation of such conflicted terrains" (18), Fitterman registers the mall as ecosystem, realizing an effective blurring or meshing of real and virtual space. *Sprawl* replicates how the society of the spectacle, the mall long one of its most potent sites, has mutated through Internet culture 2.0, with commodity spectacle before the passive consumer replaced by ever-more insidious feedback loops in which shopping endlessly reflects on itself.

Benjamin saw his *Arcades Project* as emancipatory, as James Rolleston argues: the work mined revenants of commodity culture that seemed to promise an egalitarian society, in order to blast them (as shrapnel) into that culture's newer, fascistic organization to foment revolution.[57] *Sprawl* is, by contrast, a bleak work. Indeed, Fitterman himself has written a piece reflecting on

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[56] Marjorie Perloff, "Phantasmagorias of the Marketplace: Citational Poetics in Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*," in *Unoriginal Genius* 27.

[57] See James L. Rolleston, "The Politics of Quotation: Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*."

the project as an ethical failure because of its potential condescension towards its source

materials, a problem he considered several strategies for resolving but which in turn he didn't

implement because they produced further problems compromising the project as a whole.[58] I

would argue that while *Sprawl* is a work of strategic medium translation, this re-presentation of

readymade text uses the codex reframing as a means of critical suspension—or better put, as a

means of sublation, of simultaneous preservation and cancelation. As Benjamin writes of

citation: "In the quotation that both saves and punishes, language proves the matrix of justice. It

summons the word by its name, wrenches it destructively from its context, but precisely calls it

back to its origin."[59] Here we might focus on the poem "Directory": almost radiantly negative, it

is an inert verbatim citation of the complete "unauthored" mall directory, not omitting the dead

column of the chain stores' grid assignments:

    Street Level

J. Crew	N101
Macy's	N104
Payless ShoeSource	R114
Kate Spade	E112
Coach	E152
H & M	E116 (15)

Suspending its given, transitive and pragmatic function to allow for a reflexive, critical stance,

"Directory" brings the mall directory into view as a triumphal mapping of and locating tool

within a site that is a globally inflected and overwritten non-site. "Directory" opens the open-

secret of the map as an info-mechanism of the abstract time-space peculiar to the amnesiac

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[58] See Fitterman, "Failure: A Postconceptual Poem."

[59] From Walter Benjamin, "Karl Krauss"; cited in Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius* 4.

presentism of an obsessively consumerist culture under new media capitalism, a minor yet also representative genre within a systematic apparatus for deracinating and delocalizing social relations and social place. Indeed, this piece is preceded in the book by a citation of the mall's promotional materials entitled: "Welcome to Indian Mound Mall," which begins: "When you come to Indian Mound Mall, you've come to history!" (13). Pointedly, Fitterman's mode of citationality is not about excavating the site but echoes the mall's own history-annihilating gesture in, as Edmund Hardy formulates regarding the Conceptual readymade, "a needful faux originary archaeology or prehistory of the present moment's spectral afterlife" ("Nothing"). The mall directory readymade further functions as a synecdoche for and mini-treatise on how we find things now—the url and GPS—on space as exhaustively abstracted, contemporaneous, transparent, searchable, controlled, totalized, and systematized.

"Directory" has had at least two other published incarnations, one in the section of the July 2009 issue of *Poetry* devoted to Conceptual Writing and one, identikit, in the Poetry Foundation's database of poets and their representative poems. Both differ strikingly from the version found in *Sprawl*. Here the collection of brand and meta-brand signifiers has been reduced to a sub-set of franchises, names shuffled and repeated a few times:

    Hickory Farms
    GNC
    The Body Shop
    Eddie Bauer
    Payless ShoeSource
    Circuit City
    Kay Jewelers
    Gymboree

    The Body Shop
    Hickory Farms
    Coach

Macy's
GNC
Circuit City
Sears   (335)

The poem stages not only the Minimalist installation aesthetic of the serial rearrangement of

units whose production was outsourced to industrial manufacturers, but also Pop Art's (and

Conceptual Art's) deconstruction of this aesthetic, which borrowed its logic of arrangement only

to turn from phenomenologically engaging the viewer's relation to object and space to

semiotically engaging the viewer's relation to commodities and mass media, with their modes of

ubiquity and displacement. Stan Apps has observed regarding this version of the poem:

"Consumerist language is constantly replaced, ever-fresh, and thereby enacts a perpetual present

that is more imaginatively powerful than the continuous past evoked by traditional poetry…Of

course, the names are beautiful. Using unadulterated direct observation, Fitterman makes

available to us the linguistic beauty that is the backbone and deep structure of the consumerist

environment."[60] Vanessa Place has stated: "The lyric tells you now to think about then now, the

now coming after the then; the conceptual is you now, thinking you now" ("Nothing"). To the

contrary, lyric might itself be characterized as a technology for triggering "a perpetual present":

"Directory" might then be thought of as a deconstructive lyricism that while it forces its reader to

reflect on the present moment of reading, also estranges and arrests history-scrubbing

consumerist language practices motored by immediate obsolescence. If Fitterman's repetition of

store names draws them into patterns of rhythm and rhyme, this is hardly to point to their innate,

seductive beauty. Rather than aestheticizing these names and remaking them into properly

sweetened poetic materials, the poem suggests that the contact between such prosodic modes and

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[60] Stan Apps, "Review of Poetry Magazine July / August 2009 (part 2)," from his Freewill
Applicator Blog, 6/30/09.

the materiality of language is deadeningly mediated by the phantasmatic culture of conspicuous consumption. A reflection on what it posits as an epochal change in the possibility of poetry, not a harnessing of readymade effluvia for beauty.

Fitterman's works constitute an anti-nostalgic and timely re-iteration of appropriation strategies and engagement in modes of radical mimesis that critically examine capitalism under digital culture, mounting an agenda of changing the distribution of the sensible not by making the invisible visible but by proposing counter-reading to ambient distraction and ever-more insidious textual instrumentalities in a culture saturated with marketing and deluged by information. In looking to the "uncompleted past" of postmodern appropriation art in relation to the institution of poetry, in foregrounding the referential function of his citations and the historicity of his tactics, in refusing to provide directly affective platforms for his audience in very contemporary nexes of interactive consumption, Fitterman's methods involve creating a political nonsynchronicity based on underscoring "a contradictory coexistence of modes in any one cultural present."[61] Their often unmitigated negativity makes them particularly recalcitrant to recuperation, if not to reading.

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[61] Both phrases are from Hal Foster, "Readings in Cultural Resistance" 178.