Foreword

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

What follows, then, is a collection of notes, aphorisms, quotes and inquiries on conceptual writing. We have co-authored this text through correspondence, shared reading interests, and similar explorations. *Notes on Conceptualisms* is far from a definitive text, and much closer to a primer, a purposefully incomplete starting place, where readers, we hope, can enter so as to participate in the shaping of these ideas: to add, subtract, multiply.

We chose the title *Notes on Conceptualisms* after much deliberating. We are painfully aware that Conceptual Art was termed nearly half a century ago, and much of what we address might equally be called post-conceptual or neo-conceptual (to borrow terms from the visual arts). We interchangeably use the terms: allegory, impure conceptualism, appropriation, among others. But since we have no previously defined moment of conceptual writing in poetry, the term *conceptual writing*, as an umbrella, seems like a good place to start. In our explorations, we consider a broad range of strategies under the rubric of conceptual writing: appropriation, sampling, piracy, *flarf*, erasure, constraint, identity theft, etc. Conceptual writing, in fact, might be better defined *not* by the strategies used but by the expectations of the readership or *thinkership* received.

Our co-authored text is followed by Vanessa Place's essay "Ventouses," another genesis of this project and of *Ugly Duckling Presse*'s interest in it. Also, the text is followed by a brief Appendix, which lists several categorical examples of conceptual writing today. These examples are in no way meant to suggest a complete list of writers and poets working in conceptual writing strategies, but, rather, to suggest a short reading list as a starting point.

Robert Fitterman

Notes on Conceptualisms

1. Conceptual writing is allegorical writing.

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

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

For the allegorist, the author-artist uses the full array of possibilities—found and created—to collage a world that parallels the new production (collectively) of objects as commodity.

Words are objects.

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

$$
\begin{array}{ccc}
\nwarrow & \uparrow & \nearrow \\
\leftarrow & A & \rightarrow \\
\swarrow & \downarrow & \searrow
\end{array}
\qquad
\begin{array}{ccc}
\searrow & \downarrow & \swarrow \\
\rightarrow & S & \leftarrow \\
\nearrow & \uparrow & \nwarrow
\end{array}
$$

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

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

All conceptual writing is allegorical writing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Production	Mode	Material	Post
Pure appropriation	+		+
Hybrid/impure	+	+	+
Baroque		+	+

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

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

2d. Sophocles wanted a true language in which things were ontologically nominal. This is true in fiction and history.
Fiction meaning poetry.
Poetry meaning history.
History meaning the future state of having been.
This is the job of Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*.

2e. In his essay "Subversive Signs," Hal Foster remarks that the appropriation artist (visual) is "a manipulator of signs more than a producer of art objects, and the viewer an active reader of messages rather than a passive contemplator of the aesthetic or consumer of the spectacular."

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