

MY SHARONA

The branch of conceptual poetry that interests me most is radical appropriation—how it echoes larger social and cultural concerns about piracy, open sourcing, repurposing, and navigating new information streams.

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I prefer the term *conceptual poetry* to *conceptual writing*. Many poets working with these strategies insist that their works be taken on in a poetry context, even though the texts may not look or sound like poetry—they may say: *I publish with poetry presses, I read at poetry events, I study poetry, my friends are poets, so this work that I'm doing is poetry*. The distinction matters because the same sorts of strategies carried over to fiction and visual art have different impacts. Strategies used in conceptual poetry and radical appropriation point to a specific conversation that is happening in poetry.

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For my own writing, I prefer a *muddy* conceptualism, a *sorta* or *kinda* conceptualism where procedures and constraints fail or collapse, where the author intrudes clumsily, where the poet orchestrates language.

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The repurposing of language has been embraced by contemporary poets because: a) a massive inundation of language and data has entered our worlds via new technologies; b) we have an expanded toolset with word processing technologies that allow us to lift and repurpose large chunks of language for many compositional needs—some that resist close reading.

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Readers and writers of innovative poetry are accustomed to reading the *frame* (form) itself as content. For instance, a poem that scatters only ten words on a white page has already expressed a considerable amount of information before we focus on the content of the words. In this case, the reader's retinal experience has already contributed to the *meaning* of the poem. In radical appropriation, the *reframing* asks the reader to utilize and/or re-imagine a similar conceptual shift in thinking and reading.

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By extension, one of the distinguishing characteristics of radical appropriation and conceptual poetry is length. Many of these single poems are exhaustive and book-length; they mirror the constant stream of language that enters our daily lives and the limitless mass of textual information available to every user of the web. The poem-as-book has become a defining feature of radical appropriation, just as the line or the page had become defining formal features of poetry in other eras.

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Radically appropriated texts trigger another set of reading strategies where the reader discovers that the most poetic aspect of the poem is not necessarily *in* the poem itself but in the idea or concept surrounding it—the pretext. This pretext is open-ended by nature and requires the reader’s engagement to take flight. To a large degree, students of contemporary poetry and art are trained and practiced in this co-habitation. Students and scholars of poetry bring with them a full array of theoretical tools that are readily applied when a text is as porous as most appropriated texts are. A radically appropriated or conceptual poem leans heavily on an active reader.

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The poem-as-book also challenges more conventional notions of labor and craft, as cheaper and quicker publishing technologies become available.

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New reading strategies are familiar to us in skimming texts everyday and in knowing a book by its context without having actually read it. Why would a reader want to closely read 100 pages of pharmaceutical label warnings? And yet, the *idea* of over-inclusion reaches for another meaning that is full of potential if framed compellingly.

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As I’ve stated elsewhere: *I’m interested in subjectivity, it just doesn’t have to be my own.* As someone coming of age in the 1970s, I’m interested in how identity/self is mediated or constructed. I am who the ad says I am even when I’m not. For me, a poetics of the *self* and

personal experience is suspicious if it doesn't implicate the foundational question of how this *self* has been constructed.

As such, terms like *sincere, ironic, authentic*, etc. have become increasingly tired and insufficient to describe what occurs in radical appropriation. Often, radical appropriation highlights the blur between bifurcated positions of the sincere, the hoax, the authentic, etc.

I recently stumbled upon this quote from Carl Rakosi that I underlined many years ago: "If one could write like St. Augustine, not for the eyes of readers but for God, he would always give an honest accounting from the depths of his nature. But today one has to settle for the audience in one's self. It has the same standards, but it is mortal and easily intimidated. At the prospect of an outer audience, it immediately starts to play games." My how poetry, or *my* poetry, has changed since this 1975 quote! At large, poetry continues to privilege a very narrow manifestation of the human spirit. The journey into the author's authentic or mystical self is privileged over a poetry that reaches to reflect not a private conversation but a public one.

There's an old saw in which the avant-garde is cold and impersonal, and it'll be toppled by *real* poetry that speaks from the heart. But too often these counter movements return to a self-satisfied humanism *without* having altered the forms of expression that are already familiar and comfortable. So while the desire may be to become more accessible and politically relevant, one might ask accessible to whom? To my mind, the most useful political engagement we can hope for as culture makers is to participate in an arena of ideas with other thinkers, readers, scholars, and artists who are furthering vital ways to document, reflect, and even shape our culture. These communities are both local and global, but their histories—in relation to poetry—are specific to their geographies. These arenas are many.

The split between a poetry of desires and a poetry of ideas is misleading... a poetry of desires *via* ideas, maybe.

Radical appropriation of language enables poets to directly mirror the culture of mass production and information streams. Curiously, early avant-garde writers of the mechanical age used similar techniques to respond to rapid developments in technology (Marinetti, Duchamp, Benjamin, Tzara, Breton, Khlebnikov), but their experiments were quickly overshadowed by the dominance of the Modernist Poets (Pound, Stein, Eliot, Stevens, etc.) who fore-fronted materiality and collage—but with much less mimicry of mass production and technology.

Is radical appropriation in poetry Neo-Futurist then? No more than the 1960s Appropriation Art was—instead of mimicking machines, appropriation poetry mimics the effect of machines and technology in our everyday lives. These concerns are social, political, historical, emotional, personal... how can they not be?

By writing *Made From The Best Things on Earth* a bunch of times in my poem doesn't mean that I take ownership of Snapple or their slogan *Made From The Best Things on Earth* or that I'm critiquing Snapple's *Made From The Best Things on Earth*, but, rather, the language of *Made From The Best Things on Earth* is already flattened and bankrupt, and by my repurposing of the phrase *Made From The Best Things on Earth* I'm highlighting that bankruptcy and, as such, taking back some of the aura of the phrase.

That phrase, by the way, *Made From The Best Things on Earth*, was made much easier to produce by the simple use of *command/c* for cut and then *command/v* for paste. I hardly had to think about the words themselves at all, I thought about the phrase itself only slightly, but I thought about the act of repetition and borrowing a lot.

To repurpose and bastardize Ralph Waldo Emerson quoting a Persian proverb: *A devalued fig tree looking upon a devalued fig tree, becomes fruitful.*

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No single art or poetry strategy is inherently more politically charged than another. This is true of dislocation, appropriation, collaboration, etc. However, the collective force of these conversations can enact change in the art of poetry and those changes are not easily measured nor easily dismissed. The trick is: these new strategies need to have the capacity to sustain a dynamic conversation.

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It would be sad and surprising if poetry and its dissemination had *not* had a significant shift in the last 20 years given that the language landscape has been thoroughly transformed by the web and other new language-based technologies. Poets have the opportunity to be central to a conversation about how this new language landscape has altered our lives.