***Notes on Conceptualisms* by Vanessa Place & Robert Fitterman**
Ugly Duckling Presse, 2009

Reviewed by Karla Kelsey

As Ron Silliman notes in his June 3rd 2009 blog post devoted to Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman's *Notes on Conceptualisms,* while this attractive, pocket-sized, sky blue book from Ugly Duckling Presse appears to be unimposing, it makes a big noise. The currency of the topic might account for some of the sound, but the intensity and quality of the blast directly results from the book's density of ambition and content. Packed into its 76 delicately set pages are four sections: Fitterman's Forward outlining the genesis of the project; the propositional collaboration between the two authors titled "Notes on Conceptualisms;" Place's theorization of the image named "Ventouses;" and an Appendix of further reading suggestions. I will focus this essay on the collaborative section, "Notes on Conceptualisms," which takes up the bulk of the book, and for which the volume is named.

Readers familiar with the history of the term "conceptual writing" will hear the text more accurately than those new to the idea. The term "conceptual writing," as a classification, is a 21st century phenomenon. However, the driving notion—the creation of artwork wherein the "art" resides in the idea of the piece rather than in the art object that results from the execution of the idea—is not a new phenomenon. The labeling of such visual artwork as "conceptual" began with experimental visual art of the 1960s and 70s, carrying through to Neo-Conceptual work of the 80s and 90s.

In their volume, Place and Fitterman often refer to the artists and theorists of Conceptual Art, but they do not provide readers with an explicit history of the term "conceptual writing." Some readers may find this absence to be disappointing or even puzzling, given the fact that readers who have this history, and who can distinguish the source of certain lines of thought, will derive the most benefit from the volume. Readers aware of the history of the term will clearly see the places where Place and Fitterman join and depart from an already established context.

In addition, while the authors of "Notes" often reference the conceptual work of Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith (the writers who coined the movement and first began to theorize the term), the authors of "Notes" do not explicitly attribute particular ideas to Dworkin and Goldsmith even though much of "Notes" is deep in conversation with this source. However, there are many significant reasons Place and Fitterman may have decided to omit an explicit recounting of this history. For example, the currency of the subject may make a rehearsal of context irrelevant; the easy access readers have to Dworkin and Goldsmith's texts online would make the summarizing of their thoughts (at best) second rate; the desire to define conceptual writing otherwise than have Goldsmith and

Dworkin may render address of their theories too consuming; the spare, propositional form and style of "Notes" may place such tracing of context outside of the project's scope. Although Place and Fitterman have chosen not to recount the history of the term I will do so—in brief—to set a context in which we can more clearly hear the work.

A Brief History of the Term

The term "conceptual writing" cribs its name from Conceptual Art and came into the lexicon in 2003 with the birth of the UbuWeb *Anthology of Conceptual Writing* edited and introduced by Craig Dworkin. In his tight, immaculate Introduction, Dworkin employs the term to designate what he sees as an already existing and currently proliferating tradition of "non-expressive poetry," which stands as an alternative to the tradition of expressive poetry handed down from Romanticism. Dworkin tells us that instead of seeking to express the "emotional truth of the self," conceptual writers manifest tensions between "materiality and concept" wherein "the idea is more important than anything else as a writing in which the idea cannot be separated from the writing itself: in which the instance of writing is inextricably intertwined with the idea of Writing: the material practice of écriture." The texts in the anthology consist of literary writing that would qualify as Conceptual Art or Conceptual Art that employs text as its major mode. The lion's share of the texts in the anthology are pre-21st century works from writers associated with movements such as OuLiPo, Fluxus, and Language Poetry, and from well-known Conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth, John Baldessari, and Robert Rauschenberg.

While Dworkin's UbuWeb anthology coins the category "conceptual writing," and delineates a lineage shared by visual, sound, and literary artists, Kenneth Goldsmith has been at the forefront of describing the conceptual writing movement as it has shaped itself in the 21st century. Goldsmith's writings on the topic not only make engaging reading material, but they have been prominently and accessibly displayed via his posts for the Poetry Foundation's Harriet blog, thus introducing the movement to mainstream audiences. While I will treat you to sound bites of Goldmsith's ideas, you can find original posts here: http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/author/kgoldsmith/

According to Goldsmith's "Conceptual Poetics 'Journal' Dispatch" for the Poetry Foundation dated January 26, 2007, this movement
obstinately makes no claims on originality. On the contrary, it employs intentionally self and ego effacing tactics using uncreativity, unoriginality, illegibility, appropriation, plagiarism, fraud, theft, and falsification as its precepts; information management, word processing, databasing, and extreme process as its methodologies; and boredom, valuelessness, and nutritionlessness as its ethos. Language as material, language as process, language as something to be shoveled into a machine and spread across pages, only to be discarded and recycled once again. Language as junk, language as detritus. Nutritionless

language, meaningless language, unloved language, *entartete sprache,* everyday speech, illegibility, unreadability, machinistic repetition. Obsessive archiving & cataloging, the debased language of media & advertising; language more concerned with quantity than quality.

Goldsmith's work provides excellent example of these uncreative tactics, and Place and Fitterman often cite one of his books, *Day,* to illustrate particular facets of conceptual writing. For example, in creating the 900-page *Day,* Goldsmith re-typed the September 1, 2000 copy of *The New York Times*. Such a project exemplifies tactics of uncreativity, unoriginality, appropriation, plagiarism, information management, and word processing, along with the ethos of boredom, valuelessness, and nutritionalessness. Goldsmith asserts that, as the art of Conceptual Art is in the idea, not in the manufacture and consumption of the art object, conceptual writing is writing that does not need to be read. *Day* provides an example of this because the interesting things to be thought and said about the project are predicated on the concept, not on the words of the book itself: we've already consumed those in newspaper form. Such works demand not readership, but "thinkership"—a term invented by David Antin and used by Dworkin, Goldsmith, Place, and Fitterman—all—to describe the type of response conceptual writing gears towards.

Notes on "Notes"

Given the landscapes surrounding conceptual writing—Dworkin's writing-as-art-art-as-writing and Goldsmith's language-as-junkpile—the austere literary-philosophico tone of "Notes on Conceptualisms" immediately indicates Place and Fitterman's fresh contribution to the subject. Their work adds yet another line to the conversation rather than simply entrenching what has already been said by others. Built in the style of Wittgenstein's propositional masterpiece, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, "Notes on Conceptualisms" manages to be both concise and airy.

Created of 12 propositions and their supporting elaborations, "Notes" results in a concision that demands serious attention. By employing the form of the direct statement, Place and Fitterman create an authoritative tone which charms and lulls the reader into head-nodding agreement with such assertions as such as proposition 1: "Conceptual writing is allegorical writing" (13) and statement 9a1: "There are two fundamental mimetic responses: fidelity and infidelity. Fidelity is an advantage of maturity, infidelity of immaturity. Fidelity is a problem of maturity, infidelity of immaturity" (41). Even after having read the work several times over, I found myself often nodding "yes" to statements that I didn't, in retrospect, know that I fully understood or necessarily agreed with. Such is the power of propositional statement and logical tone.

At the same time, Place and Fitterman imbue the volume with a remarkable airiness that requires readers to question and undercut their own impulse

towards blind agreement—and in this tension the genius of the project resides. For example, while the direct statement form of 9a1 wears the hat of authority, the second and third sentences of the proposition create a near contradiction. These sentences (again) read: "Fidelity is an advantage of maturity, infidelity of immaturity. Fidelity is a problem of maturity, infidelity of immaturity." Each trait (fidelity or infidelity in representation) is seen to be both an "advantage of" AND a "problem of" their respective relationships to maturity and immaturity. As we do not usually consider advantageous things to be "problems," this notion of problematic advantage, or the advantage that is also a problem, becomes a mental tongue twister, dislodging the fixity implied by the proposition's logical, straightforward tone. Such moments of displacement are common in "Notes on Conceptualisms" and playfully (in the most serious of fashions) kick the reader out of head-nodding acquiescence and into a mode of thought geared towards teasing out multiple meanings.

As with all well-crafted works, this stylistic tension does not only reside on the surface of the text, but indicates a fundamental tension within the project as a whole: on all levels "Notes on Conceptualisms" works towards the opposite impulses of definition and inclusion. As such, the stylistic impulse towards direct, concise proposition furthers the definitional aspect of the project. At the very same time, the underlying impulse to pry open definition in service of inclusion supports the airy, stylistic drive towards playful dislodgement and polyphonic meaning. It is this intentional, oppositional movement towards definition and inclusion that I want to focus on now, because it is one of the most individuating elements of the book, and because it is the element underlying much that promises to bother readers.

From the very first proposition of the work the tension between definition and inclusion rises to the forefront of the project. Proposition 1, "Conceptual writing is allegorical writing," bears great significance because it not only constitutes the first statement of the book, but it is primary in that it sets the stage for the entire book: all of the essay's subsequent propositions can be traced back to a relation to allegory. Obviously, the construction of this statement is definitional: "x is y" is the most basic form of definition possible. And, in many ways, this definitional action, like all definitional action, excludes. The statement means that conceptual writing is not (for example) symbolic writing, it is not purely imageless writing, and it is not writing situated in a particular genre. However, at the same time, rather than constricting the field of conceptual writing, the work that Place and Fitterman do with the notion of conceptual-writing-as-allegory creates a classification that operates expansively in two fundamental ways.

The First Fundamental Expansion:

As Angus Fletcher, author of *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode,* observes, the notion of "allegory" is, itself, protean and expansive, shifting in definition and employment throughout literary history. Allegory employs many

means to its ends of saying one thing while meaning another and "destroys the normal expectation we have about language, that our words 'mean what they say'" (Fletcher 2). In addition, allegory operates as both a mode of reading and a mode of writing. Allegory itself is of a definition that one is better off tracing rather than pinning down: allegory has many possible ways to mean.

Place and Fitterman acknowledge the protean nature of the mode in statement 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)" (13).

The authors render this dense list of feature and function useful by employing it to suggest the many ways conceptual writing comes to mean. This is important, for it is easy to say that the meaning of conceptual work resides in its idea, rather than in its object, but difficult to do the thinkership that begins to piece together how so, and why, and so what does it matter that this happens. Place and Fitterman show us that the notion of allegory can help us towards such thinkership, and the bulk of "Notes" reads as a guide to using allegory as a vehicle for thinking through constellations of meaning. In this way the book addresses the way that conceptual writing comes to mean in its relationship to elements such as narrative, the written object, the body, feminism, completeness, context, and representation.

It is important to note that Place and Fitterman's method of guiding is, itself, open and inclusive. While they are concise in saying particular things about (for example) the constellation of conceptual writing, allegory, and narrative, they work hard to keep the nature of the relationship between these elements flexible, open, and plural. For example, proposition 2 addresses the ways in which conceptual writing, as allegory, means through narrative. Place and Fitterman write: "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" (15).

This statement manages to be both particular and expansive because, while asserting that narrative takes place in all allegorical writing (a particular claim), the statement asserts that there are many locations narrative can inhabit. Narrative may be what the writer "says" on the surface level of the text. As such, narrative becomes the object that must be thought through in order for the reader to construct allegorical meaning. Or, narrative may be the pre-textual story that the writer uses as the basis for the textual object. In this way we can consider the "idea" of the conceptual work to be the narrative of focus. Or, the narrative might

be the path through the piece, the interpretation of the text created by those engaging with the work. Any given work of allegorical writing might have narrative operating on one or more levels at the same time. The flexibility of the term "allegory," and Place and Fitterman's elastic use of the concept, allow us to see the possibility of many different forms of making meaning.

The Second Fundamental Expansion:

The plural form of "conceptualism" employed by the work's title indicates the second way in which "Notes on Conceptualisms" operates as an expansive text. Under Place and Fitterman's definition of conceptual-writing-as-allegorical-writing, many different modes of work can be classified as "conceptual." Obviously, "conceptualisms" means to include non-literary genres of art making, but it also includes modes of writing that, it seems, would not be admitted into the fold by other definitions. While Place and Fitterman's "conceptualisms" has room for what they term "pure" conceptual writing (writing wherein the materiality of text operates as visual Conceptual Art (Dworkin) or writing wherein concept or idea takes precedence over the body and execution of the writing (Goldsmith)), Place and Fitterman open the field to include what they term "impure" or "post-conceptual" writing. In section 3b Place and Fitterman directly address the nature of "impure" conceptual work and the place it has under their umbrella:
What is an "impure" conceptualism or post-conceptualism in writing? A post-conceptualism might invite more interventionist editing of appropriated source material and more direct treatment of the self in relation to the "object," as in post-conceptual visual art where the self re-emerges, albeit alienated or distorted (see Paul McCarthy) (21).

And
Adding on to and/or editing the source material is more a strategy of post-conceptualism; so is reneging on the faithful execution of the initial concept. The most impure conceptualism may manifest in a symptomatic textual excess/extravagance such as the baroque (22).

If we know our history of the term we can see that this definition and description of strategy provides many points of departure from what Place and Fitterman call "pure" conceptual work—conceptual writing as it is theorized by Dworkin and Goldsmith. For example, Dworkin's Introduction to the UbuWeb anthology begins by contrasting the nature of conceptual writing with the ethos of subjectivity that drives writing in the (normative) Romantic tradition. Under this rubric conceptual writing is born out of asking and answering such questions as "what would a non-expressive poetry look like? A poetry of the intellect rather than emotions? One in which the substitutions at the heart of metaphor and image were replace by the direct presentation of language itself, with 'spontaneous overflow' supplanted by meticulous procedure and exhaustively logical process?"

From considering these questions we can clearly see that Dworkin's framing of conceptual writing shows the movement to be one that pulls away from focusing writing on the question of subjectivity. As such, the UbuWeb notion of conceptual writing seems to have little room for the "impure" conceptual focus on what Place and Fitterman call "a direct treatment of the self in relation to the 'object,' as in post-conceptual visual art where the self re-emerges." Where "impure" conceptual writing might invest in re-emergent selves, "pure" conceptual writing seems to ask us to build writing and reading strategies that invest otherwise than in questions of the self, be they questions of "re-emergent," emergent, submerged, or merged subjectivities.

Furthermore, the "impure" conceptualist strategy of "interventionist editing" assumes that the textual object resulting from the conceptual idea is, itself, a thing of value that might be made better or differently or more meaningfully than it otherwise would be if the author strictly followed the rules of concept. Compare this emphasis on editing the made object with Dworkin's assertion that the test of conceptual writing is "no longer whether it could have been done better (the question of the workshop), but whether it could conceivably have been done otherwise." Employing "interventionist editing" tactics implies that, well, yes, this particular work of writing could have been done otherwise, and that there is a good to be had from making it better. Place and Fitterman assert that such work might still qualify as "conceptual" nevertheless. In addition, such strategies emphasize the result of writing—emphasize a thing that will be read, engaged with, and evaluated by an aesthetic standard that is antithetical to the "pure" conceptualist emphasis on concept over resulting object, on an ethos of the boring, the valueless, and the nutritionless.

Some readers may worry that in pluralizing conceptual writing to include elements such as interest in subjectivity and investment in improving the resulting written object, Place and Fitterman water down the ultimate value of conceptual writing practices. Rather than shrinking away from this worry, Place and Fitterman ask themselves: "Do these broken promises point to a failure in a conceptual writing text?" The answer that they give is: "Failure is the goal of conceptual writing." So, in virtue of the fact that they fail to achieve the goals of "pure" conceptualism, "impure" conceptualisms gain a place within the movement.

Whether or not you buy this response, Place and Fitterman's forays into the "impure" bring intriguing questions and quandaries to the table. The resulting volume takes on the relationship of conceptual work to such elements as feminism, ethics, representation, commoditization, failure, possibility, and of course, allegory. I encourage you to believe the testimonials of Ron Silliman, Marjorie Perloff, Mary Kelly, Kenneth Goldsmith, and Christian Bök declaring that this book is well worth the read.

I focus exclusively on "Notes" with not inconsiderable regret, for Vanessa Place's "Ventouses" is a remarkable piece well worth any reviewer's attention. "Ventouses," a meditation on image making and image meaning, provides an elegant example of what "thinkership" (a concept I address later in this review) might entail, and speaks to the fundamental inclusiveness that orients the entire project of *Notes on Conceptualisms.*

This last reason intrigues me most, particularly when I consider the abstract, propositional nature of the text. Bracketing off the history of how these terms have come to be applied to particular forms of art making allows the book to function on a more abstract, formal level. While such a bracketing is not popular to the point of being nearly unacceptable in today's marketplace of ideas, I think a strong argument might be made for its benefit and necessity to this particular project.

Readers interested in the movement will be delighted to know that Goldsmith and Dworkin are currently completing editorial work on an anthology of conceptual writing titled *Against Expression* to be published by Northwestern University Press in 2010.

While I was lulled into head-nodding agreement, I can imagine that readers of a different temperament might respond to the style of "Notes" in the opposite manner. Such a reader might become enraged by the authors' propensity towards making complex-sounding assertions without providing foundational arguments. Such a reader would likely find him or herself constantly disagreeing with the propositions made in "Notes." However, I think that readers of this temperament would be thrown, just as easily as the head-nodders, out of this habit of disagreement by the airiness of the volume. For readers of this temperament the essay's dry, wry sensibility might be the catalyst for ejection. For example, consider the following monologue of mental process:

Ok, ok, ok, yes yes, this is very smart. Very very smart ok moving on 'There are two fundamental mimetic responses: fidelity and infidelity' *yes yes, I see like "realism" and "surrealism" I see, but well, which would count as "fidelity" and which would count as "infidelity" well I suppose it would depend on what one was working to be mimetic of, what one was representing right? right? well carrying on* "Fidelity is an advantage of maturity, infidelity of immaturity" *oh yes, I would say, I would say this is very true in general I mean how many people cannot be faithful to anything because they are so damned immature, yes I see what Place and Fitterman are saying as in life, language right? hee-hee-hee or is that counter-conceptual! oh well and then going on, yes, yes,* " Fidelity is a problem of maturity, infidelity of immaturity" *oh. Oh. Heh. Oh. How can "fidelity" be a "problem?" we just said that it was an "advantage" I mean isn't it always an advantage...I mean if I have an "advantage" over my opponent I would never consider that a "problem" I would consider such an advantage a "joy" a "boon" a "cause for celebration" not a "problem." Jeeze. I don't really understand what are*

they saying are they saying that these values are relative, that in some instances fidelity is an advantage and in other instances fidelity is a problem, the way that I have a "problem" with the way that a realist painting purports to represent "reality" but then I look at the painting and say this is no reality that I have ever known and what do you all mean by "reality" anyways. Huh? Or perhaps I have it wrong about what "problem" means perhaps we should think of "problem" as "puzzle" as "conundrum" so while fidelity is an "advantage" to be had of maturity, how to fully develop how to fully inhabit that advantage is the puzzle of maturity, the task that resides in maturity—

And so on and so forth.
It is worth noting that Fitterman narrates such a process of inclusion and exclusion in his Forward as explanation for the genesis of the book project: "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 I were engaged in a conversation about the poetics of erasure techniques. There was some question as to whether or not erasure strategies would fit under the rubric of conceptual writing. Depends on the end result, we agreed, more than the writing strategy itself..." (9) and so on. As with any movement, the construction of "conceptual writing" as a movement depends, and has depended on, these lines of inclusion and exclusion of works and processes. Such delineation makes the contribution of the expansive and theoretical work of *Notes on Conceptualisms* that much more significant and controversial for this movement is (and may very well always be) still coming into formation.

In the end, perhaps the most useful way of thinking about these definitions and theories of conceptual writing is through the sets of questions that they ask—or the sets of questions we feel are apt to ask of the object/project of writing.