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Not to Bring Peace, But a Mirror: A Consideration of Conceptual Poetry

Matthew William Francis Constantino
Bard College

Not to Bring Peace, But a Mirror:
A Consideration of Conceptual Poetry

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by

Matt Constantino

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EXIT

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Introduction

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living— especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared. By way of atonement he will be plagued by dreams such as that he is no longer living at all.

— Theodor Adorno[1]

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On March 13th of 2015, Kenneth Goldsmith performed a poem titled *The Body of Michael Brown* at Interrupt 3, a conference hosted by Brown University that advertised itself as "highlight[ing] text and/or/as image, art and/or/as language, with a particular investment in digitally mediated language art."[2] The text of Goldsmith's poem draws entirely (and all but unaltered) from the Saint Louis County autopsy report prepared in the days following Michael's shooting by Darren Wilson, a police officer in the Ferguson, Missouri department.[3] Writing just over a year after the murder, I can already feel myself reaching to remember learning of the first reports that an unarmed black teenager from a majority-black town had been shot six times by a white police officer from a majority-white department; to remember the names of those witnesses who swore Michael had

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[1] Adorno, Theodor W. "Cultural Criticism and Society." *Negative Dialectics*. Trans. E. B. Ashton. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973. 362-363. Print.

[2] "About Interrupt 3." Interrupt 3. *Brown University*. Web. 14 September 2015.

[3] St. Louis Dispatch Daily. "PDF: Autopsy Report for Michael Brown." 21 October 2014. Web. 7 September 2015.

These documents were eventually given an official release, along with several others, in December of 2014, after a jury refused to indict Wilson. But the county autopsy was leaked in October to the St. Louis Dispatch-Daily, and remains available on their website: http://www.stltoday.com/online/pdf-autopsy-report-for-michael-brown/pdf_ce018d0c-5998-11e4-b700-001a4bcf6878.html.

died with his hands up in surrender; to remember the majority-white grand jury who refused to indict Wilson on any charges; to remember the soldiers of the National Guard who were sent to command posts even before the refusal to indict was announced in order to contain the riots and burning that followed for months.[4] Perhaps it will soon prove difficult to remember even these general details because of how common this particular narrative of police violence is now— and very well may remain— and how many names (and bodies, and reports) were available to Goldsmith for the performance of what he says he knew would be "a provocative gesture."[5] For now, though, it is difficult to articulate the weight of Michael Brown's death, and the emergency of racialized state violence to which he gave another face. And yet we must try: for those of us who live in white bodies, the question of how we "go on living," as Adorno would put it, is in large part a question of how we relate (and relate to) the narratives of crisis belonging to people of color.

I won't take the bait and compare this crisis to some sort of analogous one in poetry. But I doubt it will surprise anyone, and least of all Goldsmith, that *The Body of Michael Brown* was received with confusion and anger, circling in large part around the transformation at hand, by which the report of a young black man's murder, the anodyne report of a killing— word and deed commissioned by the state— became the performance of a celebrated white poet for the entertainment of a mostly white audience at an Ivy League university language arts conference. That transformation begins with the imposition of a poetic choice upon a legal obligation. Thus did the autopsy of

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[4] Bosman, Julie, and Monica Davey. "Protests Flare After Ferguson Police Officer Is Not Indicted." *The New York Times* 24 November 2014. Web.

[5] Wilkinson, Alec. "Something Borrowed." *The New Yorker* 5 October 2015. Web.

Michael Brown— a document whose creation depends on the mandate of the state, its object and author serving as victim and factotum in the ongoing maintenance of that state— become the object of a poetic "procedure" by which its "matter" and "materiality" as language are to be exposed in the hands and voice of Goldsmith.[6] The "provocative" effect of all this is as Goldsmith says: that of "a mirror to the mechanics of our culture."[7] We are speaking, then, of a culture in which the state will condone the killing of an unarmed man and a poet will elect to regard the program of the man's killing as a mirror that he might hold up to our culture— for which the poet expects, if not praise and attention, his speaker's fee.[8] To an audience already witness to the unending television hours and webspace dedicated to the facts (and plenty else) of Michael Brown's story, what else was there left to be revealed but those mechanics— the tortured man's scream rented out to he who was spared? Perhaps what Goldsmith forgot is that even he who holds up a mirror has a reflection; he too lives by the mechanics of whatever culture reflects as his backdrop. Those mechanics, by which Goldsmith arrived at Interrupt 3 as a headline performer in the first place, are what order the cynical parallel procedures at work— black body worked over as state enemy, black autopsy worked over as white art— each presenting its radical imbalance in autonomy. In the absence of any editing moves beyond the slightest of emendations, Goldsmith's "procedure"

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[6] Goldsmith, Kenneth. "Flarf is Dionysus. Conceptual Writing is Apollo." *Poetry* July/August 2009. Web.

[7] Sandhu, Sukhdev. "Kenneth Goldsmith interview: 'I wanted to take Walter Benjamin off the pedestal and on to the coffee table.'" *The Guardian* 21 November 2015. Web. 9 October 2015.

[8] In response to the uproar that greeted news of his performance, Goldsmith claimed on Facebook he would donate his speaker's fee to Michael Brown's family. What a charmer.

For his post: Goldsmith, Kenneth. "I am requesting that Brown University not make public the recording of my performance of 'The Body of Michael Brown.' There's been too much pain for many people around this and I do not wish to cause any more. My speaker's fee from the Interrupt 3 event will be donated to the family of Michael Brown." 16 March 2015. Web. 16 March 2015.

intercedes only insofar as it provides a human messenger— the materiality of a body and voice in performance standing in for the state. The resemblance is unflattering.

Perhaps this parallel could have been underplayed in the hands of another poet. But to simply call Goldsmith a "rich poet," as Josef Kaplan memorably puts it in *Kill List,* does not suggest the expanse of the space between the performer and *The Body*.[9] For better or for worse, Goldsmith has "received more attention lately than any other living poet," to hear Cathy Park Hong tell it. And in case we might mistake her comment for one dismissing the man and his work as a passing fad, she cements: "Academia has canonized him." Conceptual poetry, *The New Yorker* tells us, may have been born of Goldsmith and two other men talking in a bar in Buffalo— but it was Goldsmith who became "as famous as an experimental poet usually gets" off the stuff.[10] And indeed, for a poet who sees his experiment as "fusing the avant-garde impulses of the last century with the technologies of the present," Goldsmith nurses that habit of formal employment with elite institutions (Princeton, UPenn), whose most radical *avances* of this century have been in the new feudalism, investing their endowments with the same private lenders who issue debts to students— debts that have become necessary for many to take on in the face of historic tuition increases at those same institutions.[11] [12]

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[9] Kaplan, Josef. *Kill List*. Baltimore: Cars Are Real, 2013. 22. Print.

[10] Alec Wilkinson. "Something Borrowed."

[11] Kenneth Goldsmith. "Flarf is Dionysus. Conceptual Writing is Apollo."

[12] I feel it's worth noting that not all institutions are equally elite: while Harvard and its ilk quietly take their double dip, we are living too in a time when many public universities are being dismantled, defunded, and subjected to the demands of a political economy all too facile to the shifting responsibility wherein education, that public investment in ourselves, becomes education, that private venture to be paid in debts or inheritance.

If you're interested, a good starting place for researching the double-dip endowment investment scheme can be found here: Grim, Ryan and Shahien Nasiripoour. "Sallie Mae Profit Boosts College Endowments And Pension Funds As Students Pay More." *The Huffington Post* 9 May 2013. Web. 14 October 2015.

You can see where this is going by now: we are discussing a poet who gave a reading in 2011 at the White House of a president who possesses a literal kill list, the execution of which is entrusted to unmanned aerials— speaking of Goldsmith's "technologies of the present—" and the intended victims of which are almost all men of color.[13] [14] So when Calvin Bedient writes that Goldsmith and his fellow Conceptualists "openly make a bid to take over the place and honors of the [elite] institution" and their writing "ignores the capitalist establishment as such," we need not take his word for it.[15] Goldsmith's literary celebrity commands an influence that sits easily with (where it does not derive directly from) those centers of power and social control by which the state can take a life by debts, imprisonment, or killing— all fates awaiting people of color with the greatest frequencies. Standing above the body of Michael Brown (or in front of Brown's projected photograph) in his dandy's uniform, Goldsmith conjures a practically diagrammatic effect. Insofar as he intercedes beyond repetition of the documentation of Brown's body — that last step in the process by which the state takes a life— the poet cuts an imposing, profligate figure afront all else. His dashing affect evokes neither the sobriety of the mourner, nor the vim of the advocate, nor the dexterity of the coroner: rather, he seeks to provoke you with his mimetic gesture into "embrac[ing] your guilty pleasure."

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[13] I have deliberately avoided the president's name here out of a desire to avoid invoking the myth of personality that attends to that office. Here, it is only his faceless power— as commander in chief, as executor of a kill list— that concerns me.

For a video of Kenneth Goldsmith's White House performance: Poetryfilmfestival's channel. "Kenneth Goldsmith reads poetry at White House Poetry Night." Online video clip. *YouTube*. Youtube, 12 May 2011 Web. 12 May 2011.

[14] Becker, Jo, and Scott Shane. "Secret 'Kill List' Proves a Test of Obama's Principles and Will." *The New York Times* 29 May 2012. Web. 29 May 2012.

[15] Bedient, Calvin. "Against Conceptualism." *Boston Review* 24 July 2013. Web.

By which he means indulging his: “your identity is not your own,” he instructs.[16] By way of his Conceptualist play, it is his.

It’s this, er, impishness— and, yes, the signature look— that makes Goldsmith’s claims of writing only through a thoroughly dissociated self a hard swallow. “Identity, for one, is up for grabs,” he writes, which is perhaps a point one has to go out of his way to make if he is a famous writer known for his extravagant physical comportment (pay no attention to that man behind the mirror).[17] But it is not a point one needs to make about the marginalized identity of a dead eighteen-year-old whose identity was never anything but “up for grabs.” Lest we forget: Michael Brown's presence was one that made a six-foot-four armed police officer feel “a child” to his “Hulk Hogan,” his identity a contingent one in a “town… characterized by deep-seated racism,” where “local authorities targeted black residents, arresting them disproportionately and fining them excessively,” as goes the Department of Justice report.[18] [19] If Goldsmith is a poet whose work ventures the identities of those whose lives have already been ventured in the gravest of senses, then I fear our impending arrival at the conclusion that all this was an exercise in that “coldness” and “bourgeois subjectivity” of Adorno’s— a flourished underlining of Kenneth Goldsmith’s “mere survival,” as well as whatever other privileges he enjoys— a hideous subject-object mistake, an exercise of his racial privilege where

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[16] Kenneth Goldsmith. “Flarf is Dionysus. Conceptual Writing is Apollo.”

And so we’re clear I’m not taking this quote out of context: “Flarf is Larry Rivers. Conceptual Writing is Andy Warhol. No matter. They’re two sides of the same coin. Choose your poison and embrace your guilty pleasure.”

[17] *ibid*

[18] Harris, Andrew, and Edvard Pettersson. “Ferguson Officer Darren Wilson Told Grand Jury He Feared for His Life.” *Bloomberg* 25 November 2014. Web.

[19] Halpern, Jake. “The Cop.” *The New Yorker* 10 August 2015. Web.

perhaps he had meant to expose yours— the mirror pointed the wrong way.

You see how quickly one can reach such an awful interpretation (nor did we rush). So what I want to do in this paper is to take the temperature of this new, Conceptual poetry. If this is a poetry that sets out to "us[e] its own subjectivity to construct a linguistic machine that words may be poured into" and "cares little for the outcome," as Goldsmith has written, then it is still left to question why this political ideology of bourgeois subjectivity, idolatry of the technological— the order of the machine— and elitism (racial and otherwise) commands Goldsmith's procedures.[20] How did we arrive at such a machine? And can such a machine only reinscribe the force and law of its creators, however "uncreative?"[21] In this paper, we'll work to answer these questions by looking at the work and world of Goldsmith and his Conceptualist contemporaries. We'll look to some criticism and interviews as a means of working out their stated motives, and we'll look to some of their poems as a means of testing those motives in process. Finally, we'll look to creators whose work outside of the Conceptualist scheme nonetheless elaborates where it joins in and illuminates where it departs. My governing interests in all this are the supposedly objective procedures of the uncreative creator, the equalizing cultural mirror of their work, and the prized literary celebrity to which they cling that belies the whole trick. They are as apparent in *The Body of Michael Brown* as they are in this quote from Vanessa Place:

> Conceptualist poetry decapitates the poet. That said, we are not fools. As Andrea Fraser has pointed out, there is no longer an institutional critique, simply institutional relations. Kenneth Goldsmith has famously read at the White House;

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[20] Kenneth Goldsmith. "Flarf is Dionysus. Conceptual Writing is Apollo."

[21] "Uncreativity as a Creative Practice." *Electronic Poetry Center*. University of Buffalo. 10 November 2000. Web. 16 October 2015.

> I reasonably expect to be offered a tenured position within ten years… Still, I would maintain that it is possible to maintain a rigorous position of disinterest— that is to say, a stupid lack of bias. If only, as noted, because the material is so dumb. Thus the work retains some potential for political efficacy. Or, more properly put, retains nothing at all, but invites something.[22]

It would seem, then, that we are speaking of poets who are content to lose their heads so long as they retain their crowns— poets who would ask that you excuse their lack of apparent political efficacy with respect to the advocacy of those who risk more than their authorial necks as part of some critical central abdication of traditional conventions of authorship on their part. The disparity piques: where Michael Brown gave his mortal life, "All we poets stand to lose is a rarified sense of ourselves," says Place. Indeed— that is all. To be blunt: these are enemies of mastery, but not power. Theirs is an art that perhaps, its creators muse, might "invite something—" a politically efficacious action, even— but more probably tenure. Call it *bourgeoise oblige* or grave robbing or an infinite offense playbook based off a single hermeneutic pump fake. We'll have time for all that here. But don't mistake the poets for "fools." Though their "lack of bias" be "stupid," they know how to throw the rock, hide their hand, and pass the buck without the writing of a single word.

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[22] Place, Vanessa. "'Notes on Conceptualisms': A dialogue between Vanessa Place and Tania Ørum."*Jacket 2* 22 February 2012 — 22 June 2012. Web. 13 August 2015.

Towards a Purer Conceptualism

These days of disinheritance, we feast
On human heads. True, birds rebuild
Old nests and there is blue in the woods.
The church bells clap one night in the week.
But that's all done. It is what used to be…
… This bitter meat
Sustains us… Who, then, are they, seated here?
Is the table a mirror in which they sit and look?
Are they men eating reflections of themselves?
— Wallace Stevens[23]

What is the robbing of a bank compared to the founding of a bank?
— Bertolt Brecht[24]

* * *

I'd like to start by tucking into *Notes on Conceptualisms*, a 2009 book by Vanessa Place and Rob Fitterman that offers itself in its foreword as "a collection of notes, aphorisms, quotes and inquiries on conceptual writing."[25] From the outset, then, this little hornbook and its aggregate quality do not insist upon a sense of totality; its "collect[ed]" parts may very well be worth as much as their sum. For our purposes, all the better: my interests here are in a few aspects of Place/ Fitterman's project that don't constitute an exhaustive review of Conceptual poetry so much as they offer an introduction to the poetic and political attitudes of its creators. But for a critical entry to thinking about Conceptualism, we could do worse in terms of authoritative clout:

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[23] Stevens, Wallace. "Cuisine Bourgeoisie." *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. 227. Print.

[24] Brecht, Bertolt. *The Threepenny Opera*. Trans. Desmond Vesey. New York: Grove Press, 1960. 92. Print.

[25] Fitterman, Robert, and Vanessa Place. *Notes on Conceptualisms*. Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2009. 1. Web.

besides Place and Fitterman, *Notes* references Goldsmith's writing a few places, and includes an appendix of Conceptualist poetry that includes the works of all three, as well as well-known collaborators Christian Bök, Tan Lin— the two other men in that bar in Buffalo— Caroline Bergvall, Jen Bervin, and a host of others.[26] We'll get to the poetry itself in good time, but asking what the poets make of their work— in its "concept" and "practice," as the two are designated— seems as fair a place to start our inquiry as I can figure. Still, my interest in Conceptualist poetry began in doubt about its ends— are these poets bank robbers or bank founders? Or could they be both?— and suffice it to say I found what I suspected. As I'll work to show here, *Notes*' inclusive, democratic approach and its putative concern for an "affirmatively anti-institutional" "concept" becoming, "in practice," "a new institutionalism" is betrayed by its consideration of the "pure" and the "impure" Conceptualism.[27] Place/ Fitterman's clear preoccupation with this pure/ impure distinction and its centrality to Conceptual poetry results in their boldest and most prescriptive claims— the wolf hiding in the shearling coat of their anti-institutional power-sharing vocabulary and their disassociated "I." On the apparent self-acquittal of the latter is the former snuck in, with motives that only make an explicit appearance later. No need to be credulous: as we have seen, there is good reason to question the "potential for political efficacy" of this art and the "rigorous position of disinterest" on the part of its creators where power is concerned.

Kudos nevertheless to Place and Fitterman: their charming democratic tone is rather smartly wrought, starting with the foreword in which *Notes on Conceptualism* is

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[26] Place/ Fitterman, p 75-78.

[27] The designation of concept and practice, as well as some discussion of the pure and impure Conceptualisms can be found on page 53 among many, many places.

framed as “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.”[28] This credo offers a sense of participatory “incomplete[ness]” and multiplicity, those plural “Conceptualisms” of the title allowing for the proposal and cropping up of diverse and coincident interpretations. The architecture of the book’s main text is structured accordingly: *Notes*’ arguments come shaped as numbered points divvied up into lettered subsections, the order of which is marked by silent subtractions. So while 4a. neatly follows 4., what comes next is 5a.— there is no 5. Later, 6. is followed by 6b1.— there is no 6a.[29] The irregular deleting rhythm continues throughout, and would seem to constitute the “constraint” method from Conceptual poetry’s kitty of moves; as laid out in the foreword, these are “allegory, appropriation, piracy, flarf, identity theft, sampling, [and] constraint.”[30] These absences (or redactions), along with the long blanks between the numbered points, leave literal and imagined space for the reader to accept the invitation to “participate—” a critical looseness at the joints. This is *Notes*’ persuasive democratic bent at its best: insofar as it calls its reader to “add, subtract, multiply,” and otherwise intervene upon the Conceptualist practice, the reader is first invited to understand the authors’ take on it. So by the time Place/ Fitterman broach the more prescriptive terms of their *Notes,* they seem at first only to be indulging you with an offer, which you could return in the space provided for you.

But for all of *Notes*’ generosity of tone and form at the fore, the participatory

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[28] Place/ Fitterman, p 1.

[29] *ibid*, p 25-36.

[30] *ibid*, p 12.

humor is hard to keep up— some *Notes* remain plainly more difficult to freely interpret, much less subtract from, than others. We can look deep into 3b. where, set off by double space on each side, Place/ Fitterman offer that "Failure is the goal of conceptual writing."[31] Place/ Fitterman seem here to build on the earlier note 1a. in which they write that Conceptualism, as a form of allegory, "builds to an Idea. Images coagulate around the idea—" a point offered to distinguish Conceptualism from symbolism, which "derives from an idea." The concept of failure is introduced at that point as the better part of valor: "Note the premise of failure, of unutterability, of exhaustion before one's begun."[32] Fair enough— if the Conceptualist poem seeks to "assume all context" whereby it will create "a narrative mediation between figure and meaning," the observation of the incredible work of the work— the impossible rain barrel required— seems earned and responsible.[33] In 3b., we proceed well beyond that observation. It goes without saying that stating a modal goal is the very opposite of clearing "a purposefully incomplete starting place." By introducing this abstract negative, while not yet constituting a wholesale methodology unto itself, Place/ Fitterman clearly set their sights upon *Notes*' more prescriptive Conceptualist paradigm as the reader learns that failure is not simply the "premise" of the Conceptual poem— that incomplete starting place— but the goal too. Place/ Fitterman's Conceptualism would thus seem to draw an equal sign between their procedures' beginnings and ends, hinting at the idea of the "readymade" poem to come, which looks the same before and after its poetic interpretation with the exception, perhaps, of something "unutterabl[e]." For now, though, let's content ourselves with a

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[31] Place/ Fitterman, p 24.

[32] *ibid*, p 16.

[33] *ibid*, p 25.

smaller point: that whatever one might build in or subtract from *Notes*— whatever "narrative mediation" the poem locates "between figure and meaning" in the Conceptualist poem— there is a failure to which the poem must add up.[34] The poem must mediate, the mediation must fail, and the room for subtraction from (or more aptly here, addition to) *Notes'* Conceptualisms shrinks.

Perhaps the abstract negative is a wide enough space that the reader doesn't yet feel some encroachment— after all, perhaps mediation fails, but something else can come of those coagulated images. But the order to fail returns in force at the tail-end of 5a.:

> Note: these are strategies of failure.
>
> Note: failure in this sense acts as an assassination of mastery.
>
> Note: failure in this sense serves to irrupt the work, violating it from within.
>
> Note: this invites the reader to redress failure, hallucinate repair.[35]

And so it is here that Place/ Fitterman plot their poetic and political paradigm in rather more unsparingly prescriptive terms. The gentle suggestiveness of all these "note[s]" is here broken. Rather than charitably reminding the reader of the authors' ideas, the repeating note— note— note— is a rhythmic dictation, a euphemized instruction: commit this to memory. The reader will note that the Conceptualist failure is manifold, yes— but highly specific. The Conceptualist poem should fail the expectations of the "readership or *thinkership.*"[36] This failure should constitute a refusal— indeed, a cold blood assassination— of the reader/ thinker's expectations of mastery, as well as their

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[34] Place/ Fitterman, p 16.

[35] *ibid*, p 27. I've retained the spacing.

[36] *ibid*, p 27, emphasis theirs.

expectations of the appropriated work— expectations of the original work both poetic (as in that "narrative mediation between figure and meaning," disturbed or disturbingly reframed) and political (as in its identity, now thieved). These two failures orient the Conceptualist poem towards a final intervention upon the reader/ thinker's expectations themselves. Thus emerges a formal failure with stakes so particular as to launch a program of readership or thinkership from which Place/ Fitterman provide little room for deviation— a procedure not only for writing the Conceptual, but reading and thinking it too. Place/ Fitterman hand down this Conceptualist premise, goal, and hermeneutic: the reader/thinker is called to an awareness of their expectations, studies the procedures of those expectations' failure by "irrupt[ion]" and "violati[on]," and, through received imaginings as irrepressible and accidental as "hallucinat[ions]," finds herself back at, well, another "purposefully incomplete starting place—" a repaired or regenerated state after the master, the masterpiece, and mastery itself. "Note the desire to begin again," Place/ Fitterman ask of the reader.[37] But how does one note this projected desire without simply adopting it? When Place/ Fitterman wrote that *Notes* is a place "where readers, we hope, can enter," how did they hope we could enter their own desires without sublimating our own? And lest we begin to wonder whether all this procedure is perhaps more innocently descriptive than it is puzzlingly prescriptive, ask yourself if you, the reader/ thinker, followed this program in considering *The Body of Michael Brown.* Did you note a desire to begin again? Did you hallucinate a poetic or political repair?

Obviously enough, I did not— the only assassination I "hallucinated" was Michael Brown's, which hardly seems to "irrupt" the work of an autopsy. And so excluded from

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[37] Place/ Fitterman, p 22.

Place/ Fitterman's procedures of readership/ thinkership, I too found their introduction of another distinction, that of the "open" and "closed" Conceptualism, to similarly fail the anti-institutional, anti-foundational habit they want claim to. *Notes*' hermeneutic paradigm, insofar as it seeks a very specific irruption and shift in the expectations of the reader/ thinker, seems to me decidedly closed, and the fact that Place/ Fitterman feel a need to clarify that some Conceptualist poetry allows for "multiple meanings" already implies that some does not. But if the work "retains nothing," as Place has put it, and seeks to invite the reader/ thinker's "hallucination—" a description that brings to mind the involuntary, the received, the subconscious— I am at pains to square that with any sort of closed system of meaning. Nonetheless the reader finds in 7a2. that:

> Open conceptual writing is typically open horizontally: there are multiple readings, but not multiple meanings or levels of reading. In this sense, it may be somewhat closed.
>
> Closed conceptual writing typically attempts to limit its possible readings through some overt articulation or inscription. Closed conceptual writing is open vertically: fewer possible readings, but multiple meanings or levels of reading. In this sense, it is somewhat open.[38]

The idea here is that the Conceptualist poem either "renders the object" of the original work open or closed, so long as we accept that what is open is somewhat closed and what is closed is somewhat open. Got that? This, despite the fact that if we accept Place/ Fitterman's prescriptive readership/ thinkership, we have already imposed "limits" of interpretation; those "multiple meanings or levels of reading" are to be gathered or hallucinated through the authors' own "overt articulation or inscription" of a critical reading/ thinking procedure. If we are seeking Place/ Fitterman's specific failures in the

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[38] Place/ Fitterman, p 38.

work and in ourselves, then, there goes the “open,” and along with it the disinheritance of mastery.

I admit that I am also baffled by the difference between “horizontal” and “vertical” readings— without further elaboration or explanation, Place/ Fitterman’s “meanings or levels of reading” are difficult to locate. They must constitute some hermeneutic possibility beyond that which is offered in “multiple readings—” this much is clear from the syntax— but given the specificity of the procedures of readership/ thinkership proposed so far, the suddenly vague phrasing of these metaphorical “levels” (if they are metaphorical) thwart my ideas about reading more than they liberate. I find myself at the whim of Place/ Fitterman: are they referring to the various expectations a Conceptualist poem can interrupt? The various social worlds in which the poem can be read? Neither the irony nor the headache of this struggle is lost on me. Here, Place/ Fitterman seek to distinguish between two Conceptualisms that allow two modes of meaning— and yet the authors’ phrasing is so oblique that I find myself straining towards *any* mode of meaning that they might, well, mean. No help elsewhere in *Notes*, where “horizontal” and “vertical” appear only in literal reference to visual art— horizontal as in a horizon— except for one instance in which Place/ Fitterman call the reader to:

> Too, consider the materiality, horizontal and vertical, of the words themselves. The double-aught or emptied eyesockets stuck in the middle of “gloom” and “doom,” the heave in Heaven and god’s huff in Hell. The clutch of objects you work with— those cones and squares and cylinders which may be letters that compose words or pictures that refer to words—are evidence of your creation and its reception. [39]

It’s all very sexy, this huffing and heaving and old time religion, but horizontal and

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[39] Place/ Fitterman, p 68.

vertical are nonetheless terms of decidedly visual stakes here; it is hard to reconcile the sensual peaks and valleys they describe with the rather more discursive import offered by the idea of horizontally or vertically open readings. As an aside, this passage did little to persuade me of Place/ Fitterman's governing interest in the materiality of words, either— that other, anti-institutional devaluation in which words are objects, about which the reader should "Note that Conceptualism maintains only the concept of 'is' (e.g. materiality or other invocation) is permanent."[40] Schools of thought die, but the sensuous heave and huff of their letters seem to live on here: *vive matérialité*. I am decidedly unconvinced of this proposed permanence of materiality— the one concept that permanently "is—" given that we are discussing the construction of a Conceptualist linguistic machine that can gather, delete, and replace words of an original text to create a new text. Strategies such as flarf and constraint do not destroy materiality— they still need ink— but they do alter its textures and structures. Do these alterations not present a threat to a text's material permanence? I'm reminded of the old philosophic conundrum: if Argo is repaired during the course of Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece, and if it is repaired board by board so that all the boards are replaced by the end of the voyage, then what is Argo? The "clutch of objects you work with" is rearranged— materiality violated, evidence of creation or reception tainted— while only your perception of materiality remains permanent.

To return to the "open" and "closed" Conceptualisms, Place/ Fitterman come closest to explaining their difference by simply laying the two against another distinction worth our attention— that of the "pure" and "impure" Conceptualism:

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[40] Place/ Fitterman, p 38.

> Note: when the word is the wound (the site of failure), there are two extreme forms of mimetic redress: isolate and seal the word/wound (pure conceptualism), or open and widen the word/wound (impure conceptualism and the baroque).[41]

While this would seem to refer back to the open and closed Conceptualisms as describing two different modes of meaning, Place/ Fitterman's introduction of the image of the wound "rendered" further open or closed sets the motif alight. It fits easily with the vocabulary already established: the "site of failure" here would seem to refer to the found or seized text— "the word—" which Place/ Fitterman seek to violate from within, exposing that broken mediation between figure and meaning, all the while interrupting the master. To seal that broken mediation by appropriation is to close the wound— the application of some sort of transparent bandage through which the wound is still visible but undeniably dressed. To open the wound by baroque play is to exploit its broken figure/ meaning mediation even further— to twist the scalpel to make one's point. I still can't tell you what a horizontal or a vertical reading is— it seems to me that the open and closed distinction refers more to the Conceptual poet's procedures than to the number or modes of reading available to the reader/ thinker, the latter of which Place/ Fitterman seem all too eager to curtail and predetermine— but drawing from the pure/ impure distinction, Place/ Fitterman find a clear, if modified use for the open/ closed one.

Place/ Fitterman's clearest politic finds shape from this pure/ impure distinction as well. To that end, let's dwell for a moment on those "site" texts, already wounded when found. The Conceptualist failure will play their remedy, yes, and that "site of failure," then, is the site of operation, metaphorically and literally. Thus the wound exists

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[41] Place/ Fitterman, p 57.

before it is becomes the site of the poetic procedure, recalling that “premise of failure.” And yet it is in the consideration of the pure and the impure Conceptualism that Place/ Fitterman articulate the nature of this woundedness in a political sense, doubling up on the poetic aspect of its broken figure/ meaning mediation. Here we find Place/ Fitterman at their sharpest:

> In a culture where objects are already devalued by their commodification, an allegorical relationship to the art object (or text) further highlights the process of devaluation.
>
> One might argue that devaluation is now a traditional/canonical aim of contemporary art. Thus there is now great value in devaluation.
>
> Culture is a paradoxical commodity. So completely is it subject to the law of exchange that it is no longer exchanged; it is so blindly consumed in use that it can no longer be used.
>
> Conceptual writing proposes two end-point responses to this paradox by way of radical mimesis: pure conceptualism and the baroque. 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. Impure conceptualism, manifest in the extreme by the baroque, exaggerates reading in the traditional textual sense. In this sense, its excessive textual properties refuse, and are defeated by, the easy consumption/generation of text.[42]

It’s a fat quotation, I know, but I relish Place/ Fitterman’s clarity, and this passage makes clear these two modes of Conceptualist redress as separate “end-points,” wherein “the baroque is one end of the Conceptual spectrum, and pure appropriation the other.”[43] Before we discuss why Place/ Fitterman place these two procedures on their respective ends of an axis, I must draw attention to force of the vocabulary. It turns out that, if

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[42] Place/ Fitterman, p 26-27.

[43] *ibid*, p 18.

Place and Fitterman are poets for whom riddles like “What is the principle of the unprincipled?” and its follow-up, “Are we left then with only principals?” reside in a decidedly rhetorical and unanswerable register, they are still poets for whom no less a measure than “pur[ity]” will do for the description of their poetic method.[44] They don’t malign the impure Conceptualism (in short, any Conceptualist poetry that involves exercise on the part of its creator beyond excision and repetition of a seized text— so for example, writing), no— but to call those strategies impure makes clear which practices come closest to the authors’ governing preoccupations and their pure interpretation, and which practices only rhyme with those preoccupations on their way towards different ends. This identification of two “end[s] of the Conceptual spectrum” employs the pure/ impure distinction at the service of Place/ Fitterman’s previous note that there are “end-points to any spectrum and infinite points between them.[45] How one defines the end-points and the points in between instructs how one defines Conceptual writing.”[46] This defining Conceptualist distinction, then, is an imbalanced spectrum; it proceeds in points that move outwards on an axis— from a center towards its dissipation— from the essential to, eventually, the unrecognizable and the disowned. Place/ Fitterman might muddy your understanding of the horizontal and the vertical on their way here, but when they find time to define their two Conceptualisms in terms of each one’s allegiance to the putatively central political and poetic concerns at stake, *Notes*’ rhetoric finds its divining rod and ground to push into.

So what is divined? The “pure” Conceptualist poem is that which “seals the

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[44] Place/ Fitterman, p 53.

[45] *ibid*, p 18.

[46] *ibid*, p 23.

wound" of commodification and devaluation by devaluing the seized or "readymade" text a second time— a fate sealed as much as a wound. This is the mode in which *The Body of Michael Brown* was created, a poem that draws unreadability— that "negate[d] need for reading in the traditional textual sense—" from the materiality of its opaque bureaucratic language, and seeks instead to focus upon the social context— those mechanics of culture— in which language occurs: a "mirror" to "the easy consumption/ generation of text." The reversals at play are many: where one finds the mark of the master in the "traditional text," one instead finds facelessness in the pure Conceptualist poem. Where one finds success in the "traditional text" is indeed the same place where the pure Conceptualist poem finds its site of failure— a wound requiring attention.

But here's the rub: these reversals reveal the wound that most concerns Place/ Fitterman is not the disjunction between, say, the state and the citizen— the anesthetized coroner's jargon inscribed upon a hot body gone cold in the street— but that between master and masterpiece. This is the figure/ meaning relation Place/ Fitterman seek to rawly expose, and we can be sure of this because the pure Conceptualism is that which seeks first and foremost "to capitulate to and mirror the easy consumption/ generation of text and the devaluation of reading in the larger culture —" to "decapitalize literature," and to "decapitate the poet" as Place has put it elsewhere.[47] At its purest, then, the Conceptualist poem does away with writing altogether— in the name of disinheriting the master, the imposition of any "overt articulation or inscription" on the part of the poet is done away with, and so too is the necessity of reading negated. Thus Place/ Fitterman's insistence on a *thinkership*— one

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[47] Vanessa Place. "'Notes on Conceptualisms': A dialogue between Vanessa Place and Tania Ørum."

need only understand that Place/ Fitterman seek to dismember any "rarified sense of [them]selves" as poets to embark on their hermeneutic procedure. If the original text survives the procedure at all, it is only because of its materiality— the fact that it takes up space that can then be appropriated for Place/ Fitterman's execution of any prized notion of the creator and the creation— the former naive if not delusional, the latter doomed to cultural commodification and devaluation anyway. Rather than seeking to defend poetry against this commodification and devaluation, then, the pure Conceptualism accepts defeat, and responds to that which it objects by repurposing the traditionally unpoetic as a "readymade" mirror, held up as if to say: I know what I am, but what are you?

This is why *Notes* employs a vocabulary and syntax that leaves room for the reader: it would be unbecoming of poets who claim that there is nothing "rarified" about poets— indeed, that they should be "decapitated—" to admit they have programmed a hermeneutic procedure at least as prescriptive as what you might hear from those sworn protectors of "the snowflake self of the lyric" that Place scorns.[48] Place/ Fitterman claim they want only to hold up the mirror, leaving the responsibility of what you might see there to you— and yet they, like Goldsmith, seem to have forgotten their reflections and the mechanics of culture that govern not just readers and thinkers but poets, too.

This mild hypocrisy could be overlooked if Place/ Fitterman's assassination of mastery and their response to cultural commodification and devaluation came by way of an assassination of masters— those writers who capitalize and capitalize on literature in the most conventional, commodified, and canonical of senses. What of the work of the

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[48] Vanessa Place. "'Notes on Conceptualisms': A dialogue between Vanessa Place and Tania Ørum."

very guardians of master and masterpiece? That these figures do not feature in any Conceptual poetry I can find is certainly not for want of options. Hothead one-trick misogynist Bukowski and the ugly fetishizing mythology of his alcoholic glory still sell; at the time of this writing, a quick glance at Amazon turns up six unique titles of his in the hundred top-selling books of American poetry— more than any other poet.[49] Or what of those self-appointed appointers? Take Harold Bloom, a sexual predator whose Shakespearean exceptionalism and Freudian revisionism— his being a "literary history and cultural tradition as a titanic struggle between forbidding patriarchs and their virile, if tormented, masculine progeny," as Asha Varadharajan puts it— won him a job for life as one of Yale's no-more-than-forty Sterling Professors, a position that takes its name from a corporate lawyer who made his representing the likes of Jay Gould, Henry Ford, and Standard Oil.[50] What about their authority, their self-aggrandizing, their commercialism and colonialism, their racist, sexist, and classist campaigns in which letters and poetry are made to serve such ugly gods and masters? Why do these writers and their work evade the glare of the Conceptualist mirror? Does the work not exhibit the symptoms of the wound— the figure/ meaning relationship not just broken but gone corrupt— the devaluation of letters for the sake of valorizing the myth of their masters?

That these questions go unanswered would seem to arise from the view that Place attributes to Andrea Fraser: "there is no longer an institutional critique, simply

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[49] "Best Sellers in American Poetry." *Amazon*. 12 November 2015. Web. 12 November 2015.

[50] I can't imagine I need to offer evidence of Harold Bloom's many laurels and infamies, but I quite like the article by Asha Varadharajan, whose citation I'll give here:

Varadharajan, Asha. "The Unsettling Legacy Of Harold Bloom's 'Anxiety Of Influence.'" *Modern Language Quarterly* 69.4 (2008): 461-480. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 1 Dec. 2015.

institutional relations."[51] This neutrality (if not indifference) towards those institutions and officiants entrusted with guarding the canon and its ideologies of the powerful is indeed part of the pure Conceptualism, whose strategy is purely "to capitulate and mirror." Perhaps this is how we should interpret the provenance of the name, borrowed from those visual artists whose "militant intention was to defy the galleries and collectors, the capitalists of art," as Calvin Bedient puts it.[52] *Notes on Conceptualisms* offers us a manual of going through their motions, sure— there's a rhyme between Goldsmith reading traffic reports at the White House and Duchamp attempting to install a urinal at The Grand Central Palace in New York wherein the devalued, readymade art is a shared medium. But for the Conceptual poets, who have no choice but to acknowledge that "devaluation is now a traditional /canonical aim of contemporary art," only the concept of a radical devaluation— and not its anti-institutional politic— remains. These poets are instead Wallace Stevens' men eating reflections of themselves, chasing only their own tails with a mirror, for whom power and the church bell's clap one night in the week are but institutional relations to which we should acclimate. Pay no attention to that man behind the mirror, for he is not the master.

So uninterested in the distracting politics of oppression and unwilling too to give up on decapitalization via devaluation as their signature move, these Conceptualist poets could have always stuck to traffic reports and transcribing ordinary time editions of the *New York Times* as Goldsmith once did.And yet not even this sort of uncreative practice has proved enough for Conceptualism's *adultes terribles*: as Goldsmith has put

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[51] Vanessa Place. "'Notes on Conceptualisms': A dialogue between Vanessa Place and Tania Ørum."

[52] Calvin Bedient. "Against Conceptualism."

it, “I actually stopped being a boring writer almost a decade ago when I got bored of being boring… I stopped being boring and wanted to find hotter and more emotional texts.”[53] Thus Vanessa Place’s *Miss Scarlet*, in which she transcribes the minstrel’s patois of *Gone with the Wind*’s most pitiful creation, a dizzy and ignorant slave called Prissy. And thus too *The Body of Michael Brown:* these texts are “hot” and “emotional” insofar as they constitute representations of black narratives and black bodies in which each is destroyed to serve a white supremacist state — its revisionist pastoral fantasies and its regime of violence, respectively. But the Conceptualist intervention holds these texts hostage, emotional and political implications and all, only to prove that its own poetic master is dead. Put another way, the Conceptualist poem renounces its own master, but steps around the toes of yours.

That those other masters are more cruel is simply that which ensures the Conceptualist poem’s vitality, borrowed from crises of racialized violence or whatever else might be “hotter and more emotional” than crises of poetry. “Identity is up for grabs,” the poet might offer in defense. But that decentered Conceptualist self would then seem to emerge as some sublime elite white self, for whom the ethnic self plays the unmediated body. “I have stolen Margaret Mitchell’s ‘niggers’ and claim them as my own,” writes Place, to “set them in a block of text, a slave block—to remind white folks of their goings-on and ongoings.”[54] The ambiguity as to the role of the quotation marks around the slur weighs heavy here— is Place claiming the material word, the emotional and political narratives to which they belong, or black bodies themselves? The power to

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[53] Moss, Jeremiah. “Goldsmith’s Capital.” Jeremiah’s Vanishing New York. *Blogspot*. Blogspot 10 November 2015. Web. 10 November 2015.

[54] Place, Vanessa. “Artist’s Statement.” Drunken Boat. *Drunken Boat*. Web. 10 November 2015.

collapse the three— to reinscribe the uninterrupted history of oppression to which they belong by mirroring— is the pure Conceptualism at its ugliest and, well, purest. To that end, the poem establishes the Conceptualist poet as hero of individualism and technology— she who constructs the linguistic mirror machine that assassinates mastery, that assumes all context— a cogito levitating freely above the racial mob, whose hot and emotional toil either amuses or bores her— and who calls death a living.

There is another disheartening possibility— that the amorality of these poets who "have nothing to lose but a rarified sense of [them]selves" is some sort of deliberate challenge— a race to the bottom. Place has said she seeks to create "radically evil" poetry; perhaps, then, the decapitation of the master is to be achieved by a self-destruction of reputation.[55] On a body of work that pops racial terror memorabilia in the postmodern microwave, Vanessa Place seeks tenure, while Kenneth Goldsmith is publishing an unreadable 1000-page gilded coffee table book called *Capital* that retails for $49.95 and *The New Yorker* tells us it "gives you the feel of what it is like to be living in New York now."[56] (I bet.) To call the Conceptualist poet out on this would be passé, or else miss the interruption of your expectation of critique— a hypocrisy rephrased in *Notes*' paradigm as simply part of its procedure of reading and thinking. The Conceptualist practice is that which finds its wound of commodification and devaluation before sealing, preserving, and sending it off to reside within those institutions of capital and power the artists of its namesake despised. It is in the name of renouncing anything "rarified" or admirable about themselves or their work that the Conceptualist poets join

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[55] Calvin Bedient. "Against Conceptualism."

[56] Alec Wilkinson. "Something Borrowed."

the industrial complex, and defy you to be so dull as to argue that they're wielding their power hideously— their disassociated identity as disinherited responsibility.

As we have seen, the hermeneutic procedures set out in *Notes* sit all too easily with these ends— ends which extend narratives of racial crisis more than they tarnish them, which have the airs of a post- or anti-institutional politic and vocabulary while disavowing the political and poetic tool required and available for political efficacy. That the poetic strategies and stakes Place/ Fitterman plot for themselves and other Conceptual poets did not have to lead to such a disturbing ideology seems a point worth making. But that they did puts Place's supposed "rigorous position of disinterest" to the test— her "stupid lack of bias," that is. As the cliché goes, power blinds, and perhaps the privileges of living in a white body or even the quiet fame belonging to experimental poets like Goldsmith and Place— "respectively the court jester and law-giver, the brand manager and ideologue, of Conceptual Poetry," as Ken Chen has put it— have convinced them that their own Conceptualisms check out, and that the material upon which it seeks to act really does await them dumb and failed.[57] This critical reversal of Adorno— by which the tortured man's scream is imagined as silent, unmediated, a premise of failure that must be interrupted and acted upon— betrays a decided bias, and a rigorous position of disinterest only with respect to the power of others, or lack thereof. We are indeed "left then with only principals," whose procedures and preoccupations present perhaps the most serious flaw in *Notes on Conceptualisms*' argument: insofar as these poems relate to the narratives of crisis belonging to people

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[57] Chen, Ken. "Authenticity Obsession, or Conceptualism as Minstrel Show." *Asian American Writer's Workshop.* 11 June 2015. Web. 1 November 2015.

of color, they do not fail my expectations at all.

Note: Perhaps Josef Kaplan had it right. Some names belong on a list.

Towards a Better Conceptualism

…
Was, da ein solcher, Ewiger, war, mißtraun wir
immer dem Irdischen noch? Statt am vorläufigen ernst
die Gefühle zu lernen für welche
Neigung, künftig im Raum?

*

…
Why, after such a life, Eternal, do we go on
mistrusting the earthly? Instead of from provisional things
ardently learning the feeling for who knows
what inclination, awaiting us in space?

— Rainer Maria Rilke[58]

* * *

All right— take a breath. I will, at least; it doesn't give me great joy to provoke such righteous vigor in myself. But this project began in righteous doubt of Goldsmith and Place's poetry, and a desire to work out that doubt through a consideration of their own words and theories. To that end, I feel satisfied— but I have never forgotten that their Conceptualism is not the only one, and that many poets employing similar linguistic strategies and perhaps even similar poetics do not wink so menacingly at others' narratives of crisis. *Notes on Conceptualisms* may propose a more institutional and prescriptive paradigm of writing, reading, and thinking than Place/ Fitterman want to admit, but it also allows for more than the ugly ideologies that made it famous— for one, we have barely considered the practice of impure Conceptualism yet. So that is what this chapter is for— a reconciliation after the scourge. Here we will consider those other

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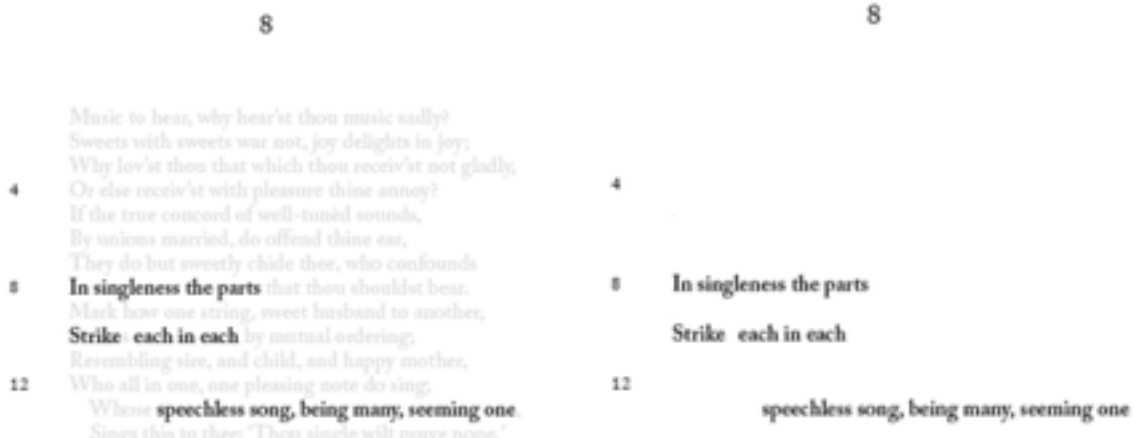
[58] Rilke, Rainer Maria. "To Höldernin." *Uncollected Poems*. Trans. Edward Snow. Ed. Edward Snow. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997. 107. Print.

Conceptualisms, as well as some work by poets who do not consider themselves Conceptual poets, but whose work can guide our reading of Conceptual poetry insofar as their moves and motives coincide with and diverge from those set out by Place/ Fitterman and the other Conceptualist poets referenced in *Notes on Conceptualisms*. I am still unconvinced of certain aspects of *Notes*' hermeneutic, and I'll be sure to note those instances in which my own reading and thinking diverges from Place/ Fitterman's paradigm, but I am not setting out to (further) disavow *Notes*. Instead, I here seek only to accept Place/ Fitterman's invitation to add, subtract, and multiply the possibilities of Conceptual poetry— to play in the blank space offered to me, the reader/ thinker.

I'd like to start with Jen Bervin's *Nets*, a cycle of poems in which Shakespeare's sonnets are "stripped… to make the space of the poems open, porous, possible — a divergent elsewhere. When we write poems, the history of poetry is with us, pre-inscribed in the white of the page."[59] This is achieved by the reprinting the selection of "stripped" words marked in dark type. They look like this:[60]



[59] http://jacketmagazine.com/25/metr-berv.html

[60] Conjunctions

In the printed book, the poems appear only in the format of the image on the left, the original text still visible, if faintly. But I quite like how these poems are published on *Conjunctions*' web presence, where toggling your cursor over the original sonnet "strips" it, leaving you with the image on the right. That there is no explanation offered for the words dropping away from you is even better— insofar as the poetic procedure interrupts the reader/ thinker's expectation of the sonnet, it surprises her with the agency to ravel and unravel the poem, the first time by accident.

Obviously enough, some of the procedural vocabulary from *Notes* is helpful in discussing *Nets,* and the work is specifically addressed in the book. Place/ Fitterman write:

> Bervin subtracts the master from his masterpiece, author from authority…
>
> Note: Bervin's gesture is more like Rauschenberg's erasure of de Kooning's painting in leaving the presence of the absence, than it is like Duchamp's proposed Rembrandt-as-ironing board.
>
> Note to what degree the authorial framing of text as art removes aesthetic control from the reader.[61]

There are a couple of points here with which I'll take issue. The first is the note that Bervin's procedure subtracts the master from the masterpiece, her selective strokes the sort of emendations that constitute that impure Conceptualism. I disagree— if anything, the procedure seems to me to provide another reading of the canonical sonnet that only refreshes the work and its creator. Or as Paul Auster puts it: "Jen Bervin has reimagined Shakespeare as our true contemporary." Following Auster, I'm of the mind that insofar as Bervin locates a new poem within Shakespeare's original, her work reframes the text

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[61] Place/ Fitterman, p 31.

as a contemporary one in the direction of recovering and reinscribing its author's legacy and relevance. Thus does the poem retain Shakespeare's structure, the words stripped away providing invisible (or simply faded) scaffolding to those that remain, "the presence of [some] absence" of text or master offering not so much a hermeneutic subtraction as it does an alternate reading, in light of which the original text is elaborated upon. The sonnet becomes a net, truncated but allowing, as a net does, for the reader/ thinker to catch and collect beyond their grasp.

This is all the more apparent if one compares Bervin's text with the entire original from which Bervin's newly divided "parts" indeed strike a new and "speechless" song, "each in each by mutual ordering." The original text's image of "sire and child and happy mother" joining in unison makes literal the poetic heritage both local (as in this one poem) and historical (as in the Shakespearean sonnet tradition); insofar as "her little poems sing," as Auster puts it, they sing along: a "true concord of well-tuned sounds." In fact, the text of the original can even be read as a direct rebuke to Place/ Fitterman's reading:

> If the true concord of well-tuned sounds,
> By unions married, do offend thine ear,
> They do but sweetly chide thee, who confounds
> In singleness the parts that thou shouldst bear.
> Mark how one string, sweet husband to another,
> Strikes each in each by mutual ordering…

Indeed, Place/ Fitterman seem "chide[d]" and chafed by the master/ masterpiece relation. The sonnet would direct them instead to appreciate the "mutual ordering—" that of the original and the subtracted, appreciable together and apart, each giving new shape to the other. Bervin's own comment gets at this too: in writing that "When we write poems, the history of poetry is with us, pre-inscribed in the white of the page;

when we read or write poems, we do it with or against this palimpsest." *Nets* is thus no rejoinder to but rather an acknowledgement of our inescapable complicity with a history of masters. And if its poems sing, they sing a song that while "seeming one" is actually "being many." The layers of that palimpsest are both literal and metaphorical: to strip away the sonnet is to reveal the netting beneath, the preinscription that is the premise of reading and writing poetry. Rather than proposing to tear open or seal the opening her found texts have made in the world as Place/ Fitterman do, Bervin seeks to "to make the space of the poems open, porous, possible, a divergent elsewhere—" to inspect the infinite tiny openings a text makes in our reading and thinking lives, and to invite the reader to make something of those.[62]

Which brings us to that other point of Place/ Fitterman's: that "the authorial framing of text as art removes aesthetic control from the reader." The note is at least somewhat undone by the *Conjunctions* edition of *Nets*, in which the reader's cursor controls the aesthetic of the poem, toggling back and forth between the original text and the stripped text with the swipe of her cursor— peeling back and laying down the layers as she pleases. But even in the printed edition, I'm not sure I see how the point applies to *Nets* (if it's meant to). Bervin's procedure of interrupting expectation seems to work by empowering the reader to imagine infinite songs unraveled out of Bervin's Shakespeare; thus each poem contains porous layers, and besides the ones revealed by Bervin, the rest that potentially await the reader are fully within the "aesthetic control" of the reader. Where Bervin succeeds in interrupting the reader/ thinker's expectation of

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[62] Metres, Philip. "Philip Metres reviews *Nets*, by Jen Bervin'" *Jacket 2* February 2004. Web. 9 September 30 2015.

mastery is where she interpolates the reader *himself* in the place of the master, or alongside the master— a reversal of Goldsmith standing in for the state or Place for the slaveowner, wherein the Conceptualist poet steps behind the mask of the poetic and political master, and for whom the reader simply serves as a gawking audience. To that end, I do see how *Nets* intersects with *Notes*' Conceptualist paradigm, shifting the perceived roles by which poet and reader imagine one another. The difference, then, would seem to lie in the irony that without the explicit anti-authorial ambition Place/ Fitterman espouse, Bervin seems to come closer to the realization of that ambition. Thus the parallel between *Nets* and Rauschenberg's erasure of de Kooning is the wrong parallel to draw: Bervin has not so much left "the presence of the absence" as recovered the presence of other presences— other layers, histories, and preinscriptions with which to go forward— a recovery in which the reader will serve as her own docent and master.

I am reminded of Paul Legault's "translations" of Emily Dickinson in his *The Emily Dickinson Reader*— author and work decidedly outside of the Conceptualist scheme— where poems like this one:

> I have a Bird in spring
> Which for myself doth sing—
> The spring decoys.
> And as the summer nears—
> And as the Rose appears,
> Robin is gone.
>
> Yet do I not repine
> Knowing that Bird of mine
> Though flown—
> Learneth beyond the sea
> Melody new for me
> And will return.

> Fast in safer hand
> Held in a truer Land
> Are mine—
> And though they now depart,
> Tell I my doubting heart
> They're thine.
>
> In a serener Bright,
> In a more golden light
> I see
> Each little doubt and fear,
> Each little discord here
> Removed.
>
> Then will I not repine,
> Knowing that Bird of mine
> Though flown
> Shall in distant tree
> Bright melody for me
> Return.[63]

are translated as such:

> I am in love with my brother's girlfriend. I am as fond of her as I am of my younger sister, though I do not want to have sex with my younger sister. My brother's girlfriend's name is Sue, and I want to have sex with her.[64]

Sue returns frequently in Legault's translations, as in Dickinson's 1039:

> My heart upon a little plate
> Her Palate to delight
> A Berry or a Bun, would be
> Might it an Apricot![65]

which Legault translates as: "I love you so much I want you to eat my organs. Forks and knives are in the top drawer, Sue."[66] None of which is not to misrepresent the book as

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[63] The quotations of Emily Dickinson I'll use will follow the versions and paginations of the following edition: Dickinson, Emily. "5." *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1960. 7. Print.

[64] Similary: Legault's translations follow: Legault, Paul. *The Emily Dickinson Reader: An English-to-English Translation of Emily Dickinson's Complete Poems*. San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2012. 4. Print.

[65] Dickinson, p 472.

[66] Legault, p 136.

solely concerned with making jokes about Emily Dickinson and her sister-in-law. But it is indeed the humor in these “translations” that concerns us insofar as it offers more than a parody of Dickinson by way of a simple high/ low contrast, ribald where Dickinson is chaste. Not to be humorless, but that these translations make me laugh is really just the beginning of my reaction and interpretation: why do they invite laughter? Or more precisely: what expectations of mine do they undermine by absurdity? As noted already: expectations of the poet and her poetry and that particular tonal pairing of the unveiled — as in her heart offered on that plate— and the veiled— as in her habit of consigning herself to a central blank space in the poems to which others, often birds, may return— are hilariously tipped to towards the former. Thus do Legault’s translations provide the premise of intimacy with the poet, whose motives for making poetry are collapsed into her pension for pithily peeking around the birds and flowers to make clear her strong affiliation with her “I.” And thus too is Dickinson’s own

> …The Maple wears a gayer scarf—
> The field a scarlet gown
> Lest I should be old fashioned
> I’ll put a trinket on.[67]

not really so far in content or tone from Legault’s translation: “If today is opposite day, I’m happy.”[68] But there’s more at stake here than merely playing dress up in the the Belle of Amherst’s veil— though this in and of itself goes a ways towards picking apart the hermetic sanctity of her mastery— as our expectations of translation and poetic interpretation are pressed upon (or tickled) too.

Perhaps it is Legault himself who explains the effect best. In this interview, he

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[67] Dickinson, p 11.

[68] Legault, p 43.

describes the undergraduate literature class where the project began:

> … everyone in the class was digging through her biography and trying to figure out what each poem meant in terms of like, Oh, well her cousin had just died, and she wrote this poem immediately afterward, and this poem is obviously, you know, about the death of her cousin. So they would translate the poem as: I'm sad that my dead cousin is dead.
>
> Which I found frustrating initially. I was really kind of annoyed because I was part of this cult of Emily Dickinson who prized her works as these steel-tight boxes that were meant to be beheld and not changed… which is insane. I still love that version of Emily Dickinson, but I also started to fall in love with my classmates' versions, because I thought it was funny. One poem would be like, "I really wanna have sex with Susan Gilbert Dickinson, my sister-in-law," because she had just written this love letter the day before she wrote the poem. So people were doing this, and I would take down what they said in the margins, and then I started to think it was funny. At first I was making fun of them but then I just kept doing it. The joke became serious.[69]

The experience of unwillingly sitting in on recitations of this particular brand of reading, in which every poem is treated as a crossword puzzle whose answers lie in its creator's biography, is too familiar to anyone who attended high school. But that Legault manages to interpolate the room noise of these overdetermined readings— indeed, a sort of preinscription that is always with us when we read and write poetry— into his translations is what complicates *The Emily Dickinson Reader*'s joke. The poems are less irreverent graffiti than they are, well, something like Goldsmith's or Place/Fitterman's mirror. To that end, Legault's work at violating the original text to disrupt the reader's assumptions surrounding and pertaining to that text and its master is what *The Emily Dickinson Reader* has in common with *Nets* and the paradigm set out in *Notes on Conceptualisms;* while we read these translations, we are confronted with our expectations of the mythology of Dickinson, her unmistakable tone, and the fact that her

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[69] Aprea, Jonathan. "Death is What's Happening." *BOMB* 11 November 2012. Web. 10 September 2015

work— those 1,789 poems in all— is often published in one volume one could forgivably mistake for the poet herself. But what really springs poet and poem from that "steel-tight box" here is the reclaiming of these bad readings— Legault's strategy of holding a mirror up to the reader not only to ask what is behind the reader (the mechanics of culture, the history of poetry) but to ask too about the work of interpretation itself. Thus do these translations deliberately break the promise of their name: rather than providing faithful reflections of their origins, Legault's provide a hilariously overcrowded mirror. Or perhaps the work is more like the rebuilt Argo: *The Emily Dickinson Reader* dismantles our assumptions about the poet, the work of her poems, and the reader's own scholarly work of interpretation (and self-conscious awareness of that) so that we might become aware of each part. That it manages to put them back together is its genius. That it deliberately gets builds it back wrong— opting against elegance, subtlety, or critical analysis, of which there is already plenty in the world of Dickinson commentary— is its joke. As Legault puts it in his translator's note: "Emily Dickinson used to exist. Now she's doing it again." Some repairs and inclusions have become necessary.

What *The Emily Dickinson Reader* works towards explicitly that *Nets* does implicitly is the acknowledgement of the unavoidable space the reader and our ideas about ourselves (at the very least as readers) take up when we read poetry. In *The Emily Dickinson Reader*, this is served out by the invocation of the bad reading; in *Nets*, the attention to the history of poetry that is always with us in which the reader is an archaeologist, sifting through layers. Perhaps this is what presents the starkest contrast to the work of Place and Goldsmith, wherein the reader is either rebuked— coldly "remind[ed]" of the fact of oppression, as if we forgot, and as if it was not currently being

borne out on some of our backs— or even tortured, our hot emotions (and the texts colored by them) played upon to saturate the hues of the Conceptualist mirror. In either of the latter two examples, the reader/ thinker's role seems rather less clearly imagined. This helps to explain why *Notes on Conceptualisms'* symbolic space left to the reader is an empty offer, its democratic rhetoric belying a programmatic instruction as to how to read Conceptual poetry. Standing afront Duchamp's urinal, Place and Goldsmith would rather you watch them piss in it than get out of the way so you might consider what work you are up to. Or less rudely: where *Nets* and *The Emily Dickinson Reader* involve the reader in their violated texts so that she might step back and observe herself, Place/ Fitterman's paradigm imagines her so vaguely that whether she is reading or thinking— interchangeably constituting a readership or thinkership— is a distinction not so much explained as dismissed. What matters most to *Notes*' procedure is simply that the reader/ thinker has a front row view of Place claiming the black body as her own, dominating the reader/ thinker while decrying the dominance of the masters that came before— the hermeneutic possibilities of the poetry curtailed by the aggressive showmanship and combative politicking of its creator.

That *Nets* is employed in *Notes*' arguments— if in a manner I think poorly suits both— makes clear that there is room in even Place/ Fitterman's Conceptualisms for poetry whose preoccupations are primarily with literature itself, as opposed to those hotter texts and the politics of oppression from which they draw heat. The work of *The Emily Dickinson Reader* too takes place decidedly within poetry's more hallowed halls. Insofar as both come closer to the assassination of poetic mastery— or at least radically democratized reframing of mastery— Place/ Fitterman seek, I've made my case. But I'd

like to explore here a work outside the Conceptualist scheme whose textual disruptions lead to failures of political expectations beyond an explicitly literary scope. It is with admitted pleasure that I'll start in on Joan Retallack's *A I D /I/ S A P P E A R A N C E*:

A I D /I/ S A P P E A R A N C E
for Stefan Fitterman

for Stefan Fitterman
1. in contrast with the demand of continuity in the customary description
2. of nature the indivisibility of the quantum of action requires an essential
3. element of discontinuity especially apparent through the discussion of the
4. nature of light she said it's so odd to be dying and laughed still it's early
5. late the beauty of nature as the moon waxes turns to terror when it wanes
6. or during eclipse or when changing seasons change making certain things
7. disappear and there is no place to stand on and strangely we're glad

A I D S
for tefn Fttermn
1. n contrt wth the emn of contnuty n the cutomry ecrpton
2. of nture the nvblty of the quntum of cton requre n eentl
3. element of contnuty epeclly pprent through the cuon of the
4. nture of lght he t o o t be yng n lughe tll t erly
5. lte the beuty of nture the moon wxe turn to terror when t wne
6. or urng eclpe or when chngng eon chnge mkng certn thng
7. pper n there no plce to tn on n trngely we're gl

B H J C E R T
fo fn Fmn
1. n on w mn of onnuy n uomy pon
2. of nu nvly of qunum of on qu n nl
3. lmn of onnuy plly ppn oug uon of
4. nu of lg o o yng n lug ll ly
5. l uy of nu moon wx un o o wn wn
6. o ung lp o wn ngng on ng mkng n ng
7. pp n no pl o n on n ngly w gl

F G K Q U
o n mn
1. no n w m no on ny no my pon
2. o n nvly o nm o on n nl
3. lm no onny plly pp no on o
4. no l o o yn nl ll ly
5. l y o n moon wx no own wn
6. o n l pow n n no n n mn n n

7. pp n no pl o no n n nly w l

L P V
o n mn
1. no n w m no on ny no my on
2. o n ny o nm o on n n
3. m no onny y no on o
4. no o o y n n y
5. y o n moon wx no own wn
6. o now n n no n n mn n n
7. n no o no n n n y w

M O W
n
1. n n n n n y n y n
2. n n y n n n n
3. n n n y y n n
4. n y n n y
5. y n n x n n n
6. n n n n n n n n n
7. n n n n n n y

N X

1. y y
2. y
3. y y
4. y y
5. y
6.
7. y

Y

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.

Procedural note: The disappearance moves through the letters of the alphabet (and the source text) in this way: Beginning with letters A I D S, it spreads to adjoining letters B H J C E R T, to F G K Q U, to L P V, to M O W, to N X, to Y. Part of the source text is from “The Atomic Theory and the Fundamental

> Principles Underlying the Description of Nature" in *The Philosophical Writings of Niels Bohr, Volume 1, Atomic Theory and the Description of Nature*. (Ox Bow Press, Woodbridge, CT, 1987).[70]

In terms of constructing a linguistic machine, I can imagine few more affecting examples. Retallack's deletions answer to so automatized a procedure that even the poem's dedication, by which the poet intercedes personally to offer the work, is not spared destruction. The formatted citation of the disappearing quotation is similarly arresting, offering a sense that the text has been officiated by means of a protocol that answers to a professional standard of reference. In terms of the linguistic machine Goldsmith speaks of by comparison, I find myself less convinced: for all the prescriptions of *Notes*, I am less sure of the motif's accommodation of Place/ Fitterman's or Goldsmith's paradigm, whose procedures are decidedly more flexible and unpredictable— which is to say, what a machine's aren't.

That may be a moot point— if Place/ Fitterman seek to build a machine that fails your expectations, it may fail too to resemble a machine at all, and that is, after all, precisely the sort of Lacanian riddle *Notes* is built on. But even putting aside claims to the form of the machine, that which Retallack's serves is a politic far more dynamic than, say, Place using hers to remind you of chattel slavery. To this end, we should start by acknowledging that Retallack's poem constructs its viral procedure by rendering the ravaging of disease as a textual one— perfectly, if I may say so. But before it self-destructs— or more precisely, uses its procedure to destroy its found text— the poem acts on more than its most obvious analogy of loss. By erasing the text of itself— indeed

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[70] Retallack, Joan. "A I D /I/ S A P P E A R A N C E." PROCEDURAL ELEGIES/ WESTERN CIV CONT'D. New York: Roof Books, 2010. 24-25. Print.

“in contrast with the demand of continuity in the customary description—” the poem ventures itself as vulnerable to such a disappearance that, as the title suggests, AIDS is only one. The poem wields itself against itself, and thus does the poem no sooner claim its found text than does it eclipse that text by the governing procedure, instantly rendering the found text as unreadable fragments bearing only their inky materiality in common with their origins. “There is no place to stand on,” even if the reader fights to pronounce “nvblty” (from “indivisibility”) and, indeed, “strangely, we’re glad:” even as the poem evokes the tragic, the impersonal, and the unrelenting, its program of deletions is engrossing. There are some disappearances, the poem implies, from which not even those things without bodies— like poems— are immune. Behind her ceaseless machine, the poet, too, disappears.

So the explicitly political thread I find bound up in *A I D /I/ S A P P E A R A N C E*, is simply another of these disappearances— that by which those victims of AIDS were erased by their state— the political death suffered by AIDS victims before the bodily one. To ascribe this to the history of only, say, the the failure of the American president to publicly acknowledge the existence of the disease before it had taken thousands of lives, or even more generally to those attitudes of homophobia to which that failure is often attributed, would be irresponsible. AIDS still ravages the developing world in as unencumbered a manner as it did in the United States then despite the development of treatments. And on these shores, AIDS has accordingly accommodated the local politic: for those whose financial and political precarity does not forbid their seeking treatment, the disease is a manageable condition not at odds with considerable health. For those whose does, the narrative remains decidedly one of crisis. Insofar as AIDS is a

disappearance in the poem, this political one is too encompassed— and the deleting space offered up by the poem not only one of mourning as part of the ancient observance of loss— by which "the beauty of nature as the moon waxes turns to terror when it wanes—" but one of the citizen's reclaiming, by which the loss can be understood as a complaint, if a doomed one, in defiance of the political death.

It is in this political aspect that *A I D /I/ S A P P E A R A N C E*'s positioning of the reader seems clearest to me. In the face of its various disappearances— textual, bodily, political, and authorial— the reader serves not as Bervin's archaeologist, or Legault's student, or Goldsmith's audience. Instead, the reader serves here as a witness— the last role of refuge available to those who face their destruction or oppression. That the reader registers her "terror" and pieces through its various implications, is the program of her reading. Where Place and Goldsmith hold up the Conceptual mirror, expecting the reader/ thinker to draw their own conclusions (so long as those conclusions adhere to certain premises) or simply remind the reader/ thinker of the fact of political oppression— in either case relying heavily on the reader/ thinker to figure out for herself what politically efficacious action should follow— Retallack makes room for a political role for her reader literal and not symbolic in its scope. The poem's destruction makes us a witness, watching as its line thin themselves out towards total disappearance. And yet the sense that the work might reinscribe the law of the tragedy it describes is not nearly so present as in, say, *The Body of Michael Brown*: no less emotional (or, if you insist, "hot") than Brown's autopsy, the text ventures itself and its own destruction— its own identity up for grabs— by its deleting procedure. If we are to be disappeared, the poem is going down with us. If we survive, it will be with a clear notion of our political

responsibility as witnesses and perhaps even the role poetry can serve as to fulfilling that responsibility.

Conclusions

This project is as imperfect as it is simply incomplete. I'm not sure more time would have helped, though it is a bad habit of mine to say yes, always yes to that question. A more thorough project would have involved some discussion of the connections between the Conceptual poets and the visual arts movement from which they draw their name. As implied here, the matter disinterests me insofar as the connection seems like a stretch on the part of the former; I do not think basic artistic strategies or procedural moves define a meaningful alliance, which would seem to emphasize similarities of means to the detriment of considering their ends. Likewise, a consideration of the Language poets whose path from the avant-garde into the academy preceded the Conceptual poets' acceptance of this route might have been interesting— though again, but for a shared enmity of the lyric and its dominance of the canon, I'm not sure I see as many compelling parallels as I do a shared means (and venue) towards different ends. Perhaps my favorite Language text, Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*, intervenes upon the medium of the autobiography to create an account of oneself far more suggestive and encompassing than the elided narratives I associate with that medium. And yet I have seen little in Conceptual poetry that equips itself with the linguistic tools to perform either so nuanced or so specific an intervention. Finally, and probably most maddeningly, I am sore over the second chapter, which I enjoyed writing, and which should have gone on for longer if only because I enjoyed it— reason enough, I say! That there is enough in its readings to bear out what I struggled to find in *Notes on Conceptualisms* is possible given a generous reader. That I should have gone further is undeniable.

Nonetheless, this project represents as clear and reasoned an argument as to my trouble with Conceptual poetry as I've ever been pushed to make. Having spent long hours reading interviews with Vanessa Place and Kenneth Goldsmith, and even longer ones on *Notes on Conceptualisms*, I feel sure that the holes in their poetics are indeed as wide as I imagined, and their ideas about who reads or thinks about their poetry as unencouraging. If I duck up from the texts here at the end, it's to say that I doubt very much their poetry is for anyone outside their particular corner of the academy (which, okay— another similarity to the Language poets). It is not for me, who is unlikely to return to any corner of the academy after this. But I at least as encouraged by what I found in Jen Bervin, as well as other Conceptual poets whose consideration would have been included had this paper been what it could have been— included in this are Stacy Doris, Juliana Spahr, and poor Rob Fitterman, who is unfairly yoked to Vanessa Place for the entirety of this project. But even in just Bervin's *Nets* and the parallels I saw between her work and that of Paul Legault and Joan Retallack, I was made me hopeful that other Conceptualisms (and Conceptualists) were not only possible, but already realized— simply less publicized than those more troubling manifestations. I'll take that last refuge of the unfinished, then: that this project, if nothing else, is a place from which I'll move on to other, better Conceptualisms— ones whose strategies are not employed to shuck its authors of their responsibilities, but to invite something from and make space for their reader/ thinker— in good faith.

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