

TOWARDS A 21ST CENTURY

EXPRESSIONIST ART CRITICISM

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the following questions: What might a 21st century expressionist art criticism consist of? How does such a mode of “art writing” relate to oppositional strategies often employed by certain artists challenging the boundaries traditionally separating art from writing? What role does the body play in such a model of writing? What role might fiction play in an expressionist art criticism? The intended outcome is to render a new model of writing “in the expanded field,” to borrow Rosalind Krauss’s phrase.

The essays and pieces of writing comprising this dissertation have been organized into four sections. The first part, “Bad Writing,” lays the groundwork for the three stylistic modes of expressionist art criticism that follow: the Expressionist Essay, Ficto-criticism, and Object-Oriented Writing. Prefaces before each section elaborate the conceptual thinking involved in arriving at each particular designation, as well as the positioning of each mode in the overall conception of a 21st century expressionist art criticism.

This thesis begins with the argument that art criticism must first and foremost be understood as a *literary* art form. This is an issue of intentionality that must be asserted at the outset, one that resonates with John Dewey’s notion of criticism’s re-creative and imaginative aim. It is one of the essential qualities that distinguishes art criticism from the art historical endeavor. I contend that the practice of art criticism is an art form in and of itself, one that, following the poet-critic model (or, more aptly, anti-model) advanced by Baudelaire and Apollinaire, is essentially *complementary* to the art object. This complementarity is what the task of an expressionist art criticism hopes to achieve. Thus, this thesis should be considered as an example of an art writing practice in the context of a thesis-based dissertation.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis can be considered simultaneously as a work of art criticism and as a work that engages with, reflects, and combats the situation of art criticism today. In doing so, it posits and explores the potentialities of a new stylistic mode of art writing that I have come to consider as an expressionist art criticism. In its dual functionality and its reflexivity, I have thus come to think of it as a work of art criticism “in the expanded field.”¹

To begin with, it is necessary to ground today’s art criticism within a historical continuum. Only by viewing criticism through its historical development can we begin to understand the role and shape criticism has taken today, and my polemic within that field, as a practicing art critic, who wishes to put forth a new model, of a 21st century expressionist art criticism.

Art criticism is both distinct from art history and entangled with it. Art history is a scholarly field of study, whereas art criticism is a literary activity. Whereas art history dates back to Pliny the Elder, art criticism only took on the vocational form that we recognize it as today in the 18th century.

Art criticism’s conflation with art history has a troubled and controversial relationship, as James Elkins has noted (1). This can be traced back to the notions of judgment and persuasion,

¹ Here, I am hijacking Rosalind Krauss’s famous term for describing the works produced and exhibited under the name “sculpture” in the 1960s and 1970s, and that is now more commonly referred to using such terms as “Land art” or “installation.” Krauss’s argument is relevant for much of what follows: namely, her contention that “sculpture” is a historically bounded category, rather than a universal one (Krauss 33). In what follows, I attempt to show the ways in which “art criticism” has been historically constituted.

the rhetorical devices upon which art criticism has traditionally been built (Elkins 2). Put another way: history is meant to be objective, while criticism is subjective. But of course such a notion is troubled: judgment and description (indirect, if not direct persuasive devices) are inevitably woven in to art historical tracts. Also, while art criticism might have its origins as a self-conscious discipline in the 18th century (with the publication in 1719 of *An Essay on the Whole Art of Criticism* by Jonathan Richardson, marking the first known instance of the word combination “art criticism” appearing in print) instances of art critical passages in Western discourse can be found as far back as the ancient Greeks; Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History*, brought to light the now-lost art critical tracts by Xenocrates, which were most likely authored in 280 B.C. (see Author Unknown, “Xenocrates”). For the purposes of focus and clarity, I will orient my conception of “art criticism” in this thesis to the Modern conception of the term, beginning with Richardson, and continuing with the French in writing about the Parisian Salons beginning in the middle of the same century. I will not attempt an exhaustive overview of the history of art criticism from the origins of Modernity to the present day – such a task has already been completed by Kerr Houston (23-81). Instead, I will focus on key moments in the inner dialectic of art criticism, with the intention of establishing what an expressionist art criticism might contribute to that cyclical polemic. Such an endeavor necessarily involves focusing on the more extreme positions taken throughout the history of art criticism.

Since Richardson, there has existed a binaristic tension in art criticism that has variously been posited as Platonic vs. Aristotelian, expressive/poetic vs. scientific, or Romantic vs. Rationalistic (Newman 279; Houston 73; Elkins 4). Put another way, this could be summed up as the eternal conflict within art criticism between notions of subjectivity and objectivity. Richardson would belong to the latter extremes of these respective categories. In his *Essay on the*

Art of Criticism, he held that art's aesthetic value could be judged according to a set of (pseudo-)scientific criteria, in which a painting was analyzed through the prism of seven categories and assigned a score between 0 and 18 in each, its total then added up to quantify its worth (105-156).

It did not occur to Richardson to evaluate contemporary paintings using these criteria; instead, his focus was on older works of art. Art criticism, in the way it is conventionally regarded today (responding to art exhibitions), really began in earnest with the rise of the annual Salons in Paris that served as showcases for contemporary art and catered to a general public, rather than the "old guard" of aristocrat-collectors, as Houston has shown (26-28). Prior to that period, there was little sense for journalists to write about contemporary art, as there were no regular exhibitions held; thus, the general public had almost no opportunity to see the works of art being made in their time. The annual Salons changed all that; for the first time, contemporary art found it had a large and enthusiastic audience, at least in major urban centers such as Paris, where the Salons originated. Enterprising literary men would attend the Salons early on, penning their reactions to the work on view in pamphlets that they would then sell outside the venues. They were both responding to, and partly responsible for generating, the hype that the newly accessible world of art provoked. Art criticism in its earliest manifestation thus formed a bridge between the formerly elite realm of the artist and collectors, and the general public: it was democracy in action, a product of the Enlightenment era (Houston 28-30). While the earliest art criticism is highly individualistic in terms of its responses to works of art, there is an underlying sense to this writing that it was being executed against the reigning artistic status quo, in being representative of the opinions of the general public; as La Font de Saint-Etienne wrote in 1747, "It is only in the mouths of those firm and equitable men who comprise the Public, who have no links whatever with the artists . . . that we can find the language of truth" (quoted in Houston 28).

It was with the French practitioners of the new medium that art criticism shifted away from Richardson's quasi-scientific systematicity and entered more subjective, literary grounds. In what we might term this first historical phase, art criticism arguably reached its stylistic height with the work of Denis Diderot. Diderot, like many of the earliest practitioners of art criticism, wrote in an era of pervasive censorship. As the regal authorities felt threatened by the democratic overtones of Salon criticism – particularly its critics' insistence that their voices represented that of the masses – art criticism was banned in France throughout the 1750s and 1760s (Houston 30). Certain enterprising critics found a way around the censorship – namely, writing for publications that were distributed privately, by subscription, to an international rather than domestic audience – and Diderot was chief among them (Houston 30). With Diderot, art criticism attained the hybrid form, stylistically speaking, that endures to the present day in the main stream of art criticism: an often digressive admixture of description, contextualization, witty anecdotes, analysis, and judgment.

The years leading up to the Revolution in France – namely, the 1780s – saw the emerging discipline crescendo in terms of the sheer variety of art critical formats. The writing of this period reflected the anti-monarchical sentiment of the masses (Houston 32). Literary responses to art might take the form of monologues, often in written in the voices of imaginary or historical personages (pre-figuring ficto-criticism and object-oriented writing), satirical songs, elaborate dramas, or Voltairean critique (Houston 32). The critics of Paris were searching for new forms to reflect the multiplicity of views towards art that flourished during this period. It could readily be argued that, in the sheer diversity of forms, art criticism in the 1780s was a much more dynamic field than it is today.

The field was further enriched in the 1820s, with the dissolution of Napoleon's empire and its vast bureaucracy, resulting in mass unemployment of former civil servants. Many of them turned to literary activity, and writing about the Salons was an opportunity to not only persuade, but to invent new forms; innovation in art criticism flourished. "Accounts of Salons from the period sometimes included, for instance, recounted dreams or complex conceits involving narrators who had fallen asleep for years, only to wake to a purportedly new style" (Houston 34).

During this pivotal moment in art history, critics like Stendhal played a pivotal role in transforming the stylistic impulse of the period from Neoclassicism to Romanticism. Unlike the conservative Neoclassicists, who sought to preserve contemporary art's ties to the greatness of the past, Stendhal favored artists like Delacroix whose work displayed individualism and psychological intensity, qualities that he felt were more appropriate and relevant to the period in which he wrote.

By the middle of the 19th century, the annual Salons were so popular in Paris with the public that more than one thousand journals and publications covered them (Houston 40). At the time, no other place in the world yielded such intense interest in contemporary art. It is thus unsurprising that so many of France's finest novelists and poets of the 19th century also wrote about art; their interest in the topic was hardly unique – instead, it reflected a near-universal fascination of the *Zeitgeist*. Within art criticism, however, the argument between the Neoclassicists and Romanticists, so important in the 1820s, was by the 1840s starting to seem rather stale. Whereas the Neoclassical position, represented most prominently in the Parisian press by Etienne-Jean Delécluze, was by now regarded as so old-fashioned that only the most conservative could take it seriously. The prose of Théophile Gautier, the critic who early on had defended the paintings of Delacroix and his fellow Romantics, began to feel repetitive as a result

of his high productivity. Many began to feel that a new movement in art – and its criticism – was needed (Houston 40). It was at this moment that a new critic arrived upon the scene: Charles Baudelaire.

Baudelaire's art criticism was clearly influenced by earlier writers like Diderot and Stendhal. At the same time, while endorsing the work of Romantic painters like Delacroix, he felt that Romanticism was reaching its zenith, and that a new form of art needed to come into being, one that responded directly (as he did in his poetry) to the realities of contemporary urban life. Stylistically, Baudelaire's chief contribution to the medium was to focus on evoking the *effects* of a work of art, rather than merely describing the properties of the work. Baudelaire, thus, would have no interest in the sort of systematicity promoted by early critics like Richardson; his views were highly subjective, at times idiosyncratically so.

When a new approach to painting actually was ushered in by Édouard Manet, whose paintings *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* and *Olympia*, both 1863, spurned the Modernist movement in painting and helped pave the way for Impressionism, he was widely attacked by both the public and an overwhelming majority of the critical establishment.² A few solitary art critics came to his defense, among them Emile Zola (Hamilton 85, 99). (Less publicly, Baudelaire wrote Manet a personal letter of support at the time he was being most viciously attacked, in 1865, when, according to one account, his *Olympia* was nearly destroyed by an angry mob when it went on display at the Salon des Refusés [Houston 42].) While Baudelaire is today more widely known as a poet and Stendhal and Zola as novelists, their artistic legacy is buttressed by their critical defense of innovators working contemporaneously in other media. Similarly, in London a few

² "What seems, even a century later, so exasperating about this criticism is not so much the brutality—even the cruelty—of much of it . . . as the general disinclination on the part of the critics themselves to make any attempt to understand the intention of Manet's work" (George Heard Hamilton, quoted in Houston 42).

years earlier, John Ruskin made his reputation as an art critic as one of the solitary defenders of Turner's increasingly "abstract" landscapes, helping to change public opinion to the extent that when Turner died, he was eulogized as Britain's finest painter (Houston 36, 38).

As painting evolved away from mimesis and representation into abstraction, it became the critic's task to explain this movement, and attack or defend it. It was the English formalists, namely Roger Fry and Clive Bell, in the early 20th century who were the most renowned defenders of abstraction in Anglo-Saxon criticism. In 1920, Fry argued, "It's all the same to me if I represent Christ or a saucepan since it's the form, and not the object itself, that interests me" (8). Such an approach represented a critical break from the impressionistic tone of the poet-critic model represented by Baudelaire in its attempts to elucidate a coherent system of pure aesthetics, similar to what the New Criticism was simultaneously attempting in the field of literature.³ In Formalism, as in the New Criticism, biographical matters and the intentionality of the artist/author were ignored in favor of organizing principles such as order and unity.

In Paris in the early 1900s, quite a different model of art criticism was practiced by the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, who would be one of the first critics to endorse the work of Picasso, Matisse, and Chagall, among others, in his prolific writings. Rather than the quasi-scientificity practiced by the English Formalists, Apollinaire wrote a poetic prose full of simile and metaphor in evoking the expressive effects of the avant-garde painting he felt most passionate about. As Genova observes, "A true 'poet-critic' in the tradition begun by Diderot, Apollinaire, like Baudelaire, was a self-taught art critic and he began his art theory naive to technical terminology and to the conventional precepts of the field" (54). Like Baudelaire, Apollinaire was more

³ Although the writers and scholars associated with the New Criticism had been active since the 1910s, they did not earn the "New Criticism" name until the publication, in 1941, of John Crowe Ransom's *The New Criticism*.

concerned with re-creating or evoking the *effect* of a work of art rather than describing or analyzing the work; as such, one could say that he presaged the work of Gertrude Stein, with whom he would eventually become familiar, in rendering an art criticism that was in many ways *complementary* to the art objects of its focus. As an artist in his own right, working in the medium of language, Apollinaire also coined many conceptual neologisms in his art criticism that have come to be an intrinsic part of the art critico-historical vocabulary, with “Surrealism” being perhaps the most widely known example; he was also one of the first critics to use the word “Cubism” (Sams 282; Houston 48).

Prior to the advent of the Abstract Expressionists and the emergence of an American Formalism, the United States’ greatest and most lasting contribution to the medium of art criticism was Marxist criticism. This came about in the 1930s, when a slew of European intellectuals – mainly German writers from the Frankfurt School like Adorno and Kracauer – were exiled in the United States due to Nazi persecution (Houston 54-55). In turn, art criticism, like that of Meyer Schapiro, veered towards a system of contextualization, seeking connections between the art object and the social conditions that gave rise to it. This style of criticism generated by America’s newest arrivals complemented a home-grown movement known as Experientialism, inspired by the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey’s cultural theories, which was rooted in the belief that artworks were immediately related to their cultural context – certainly a reaction to formalism’s “purist” aesthetics.⁴

In addition to its newly arrived European art critics, New York also played host to many newly arrived European artists. While traditional and conservative critics were suspicious, the

⁴ It is interesting to note that, though technically a “foreign import,” Marxist criticism was also able to gain foothold during the years of the Great Depression when a regionalist movement that favored Social Realism was in critical favor. The painters associated with this movement, such as Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton, were fiercely opposed to the abstraction then popular in Paris. (See Houston 54.)

radical painting styles of artists like Willem de Kooning, Hans Hofmann, Piet Mondrian, and Marc Chagall in turn fueled the emerging critical establishment in New York. The first major voice belonged to Harold Rosenberg, who would name the artists of the new movement (namely Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, and Jackson Pollock) “action painters.” His essay “The American Action Painters” was widely discussed and debated in the years following its publication in *ARTnews* in 1952. Its titular claim was that for the new painters, the canvas had come to serve as a metaphorical stage for action; thus, he rejected Formalism’s claims that the work should be considered separate from the artist’s biography or the context of its making, in that “art” and “life” had become indissolubly linked in the new style of painting (Rosenberg 45-56).

Rosenberg’s essay fits in well with the other writing featured in *ARTnews*, much of which was penned by the poet-critics of the New York School, such as Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, and James Schuyler. Like the poet-critics of France’s earlier generations – with whom they were well acquainted – the New York School poet-critics similarly pursued a *re-creative* criticism, resonating with John Dewey’s notion that the art critic’s duty was to review and evoke, via ekphrasis, the motions that the artist went through in creating the work of art (325). In fact, this tendency was taken to a literal level with a column called “_____ Paints a Picture,” in which the poet-critic would station himself in the studio of the artist and document the creation of a work; James Schuyler authored one called “Alex Katz Paints a Picture,” for instance. Another column, “Poets and Painters,” established more explicit corollaries between the two media. In fact, the two “groups” were inseparable; the downtown New York painters and poets were friends and colleagues that lived and worked together; the painters also avidly read and critiqued the poets’ work. When Frank O’Hara began working as a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, one could

say that poetry and painting were both of the same art world in New York. O'Hara's death in 1966 at the age of 40 was felt by many poets and artists with whom he was close – among them, Jane Freilicher, John Ashbery, and Larry Rivers – to be the end of an era (Gooch 460-461). O'Hara's demise bore an uncanny similarity to the effect of the death of Apollinaire at the end of the First World War in Paris: the result in both instances was a dispersal of many of the period's artistic protagonists.⁵

Another group of critics opposed the sort of art criticism put forth by the poet-critics. In fact, New York emerged as a truly diverse place for art critical practices in the 1940s and 1950s, much as France had a century earlier. But the most dramatic moment in American art criticism of the period was the rise of Clement Greenberg in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Greenberg advanced a variant of Formalism that differed from Fry's in its emphasis on the inherent flatness of abstract painting, rather than on spatial relationships within the painting. For Greenberg, the "flatness" of the paintings being produced by the Abstract Expressionists, including many of the same artists identified in Rosenberg's slightly earlier "American Action Painters," and their successors, the Color Field painters was indicative of the advanced state of the medium, its inherent self-criticality. Painting was no longer meant to be "about" anything other than its own conditionality, and the best artists of the day, Greenberg argued, understood this implicitly; truly great painting had no external referents, and this was more than just a fad, but representative of the progressive direction of the art canon.

With his insistence that taste could be objectively qualified by studying the history of art and seeing what had consensually landed in the canon of allegedly universal greatness,

⁵ As Gertrude Stein wrote, "Guillaume would have been a bond of union [after the war]; he always had a quality of keeping people together, and now that he was gone everybody ceased to be friends" (Stein 2012, 56).

Greenberg's quasi-scientific art criticism won out over Rosenberg, whose position of the canvas as the scene for man to play out his existential dilemma, came to be seen as "excessively romantic" by the youngest generation of artists, according to Irving Sandler (Houston 61).

Earlier, we set out to differentiate between art history and art criticism as two distinct disciplinary endeavors. Here, we might offer a further, vocational observation based on our analysis of the history of art criticism as a self-conscious literary art form: whereas art history is a scholarly pursuit, art criticism has traditionally been non-scholarly – that is, the work of the "enlightened amateur," the literary craftsman rather than the academic. This distinction became blurred with Greenberg's formalist followers, such as Rosalind Krauss, Michael Fried, and Hal Foster.

The post-Greenbergian critics altered the landscape of American criticism with their theoretically dense prose. Like Greenberg, they were consciously writing against the subjective and individualist criticism that the poet-critics of *ARTnews* proffered, a type of criticism that was not, according to them, of serious merit. Art criticism became a hermetic and scholarly pursuit, one that was no longer separate from the discipline of art history. Most of Greenberg's followers held or were pursuing PhDs in art history, and their central vehicle, *Artforum*, published essays heavily amended with footnotes, which were nearly unheard of in any of the art criticism published before 1960. Theirs was a brand of art criticism that was no longer meant to be digested by the general public, but was rather addressed to fellow art world insiders.

Formalist criticism began to wane as art progressed into hitherto unseen realms. As Greenbergian Formalism essentially applied to nonrepresentational painting and little else, Greenberg and some of his followers – notably Michael Fried – simply dropped out of the game

and stopped publishing art criticism in response to the new work (after positing the theory of “theatricality” in a sustained attack on Minimalism, Fried focused almost exclusively on art history, writing very few pieces of art criticism since then), while others attempted to revise Greenberg’s views to accommodate new forms of expression such as performance art and video installation. As political turmoil swept the United States in the late 1960s, Formalism was largely abandoned in favor of the sort of model proposed by Marxist criticism in the 1930s, focusing on the social and political conditions surrounding art, and art’s engagement with these issues.

A plethora of quasi-scientific positions now flourished: feminist art criticism, neo-Marxism, and post-structural theory all came to comprise the new postmodern sensibility. Theory, much of it adapted and derived from European sources, came to dominate the American critical landscape in the 1970s with the emergence of a new journal, *October*. Theory-based criticism lacked the interest in attracting a mass audience that concerned earlier forms of art criticism. More often penned by career academics than freelance literary writers, the prose became increasingly dense, scientific, and frozen in its essayistic formality. As even the notion of subjectivity in its relations with broader power structures came under scrutiny and early predecessors like Greenberg, with his brash opinions cloaked under the guise of scientific objectivity, were derided as authoritarian, casting strong judgment on the works of particular artists – formally a central task of criticism – became increasingly taboo – a fact that ironically came to benefit the financial power structures of the art world.

With the push towards globalization that began with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the art world no longer had a firm unitary center, as it ostensibly did in centuries past when much of the dominant art historical narrative shifted between Paris, London, and New York. With the proliferation of biennials, art fairs, and related events around the globe, today’s enterprising art

critic is more likely to be a jet-setter than one engaged exclusively with developments in her own city. Criticism became a peripheral activity, with the curator displacing the critic's former role as the arbiter of taste who could influence the reception of an artist's work and career. Many critics became curators, and many curators also write criticism; in some sense, the role of critic lost its disciplinary integrity. In the age of dubious "multi-tasking," writing criticism became one of the many duties expected of the enterprising art world professional.

Today, there are exceptions to this new breed of art critic, those who continue to practice and advance art criticism as the literary art form it was pursued as in France in the 19th century. Poet Eileen Myles and novelist Chris Kraus are two examples of art critics working in this *belle-lettriste* tradition (Kraus 2004; Myles 2009).

This thesis explores the following questions: What might a 21st century expressionist art criticism consist of? How does such a mode of "art writing" relate to oppositional strategies often employed by certain artists challenging the boundaries traditionally separating art from writing? What role does the body play in such a model of writing? What role might fiction play in an expressionist art criticism? The intended outcome is to render a new model of art writing "in the expanded field," to borrow Rosalind Krauss's phrase (30-44).

This thesis departs from the contention that art criticism must first and foremost be understood as a *literary* art form. This is an issue of intentionality that must be asserted at the outset, one that resonates with Dewey's notion of criticism's re-creative and imaginative aim (325). It is one of the essential qualities that distinguishes art criticism from the art historical

endeavor. I contend that the practice of art criticism is an art form in and of itself, one that, following the poet-critic model (or, more aptly, anti-model) advanced by Baudelaire and Apollinaire, is essentially *complementary* to the art object. This complementarity is what the task of an expressionist art criticism hopes to achieve. This thesis explores the *instrumentality* of writing (e.g. “writing as an operative force,” “writing in the ‘expanded field’,” “bad writing”): writing as a practice. Its tone, then, is meant to be demonstrative, in that its argumentative force is rooted in issues of style. Unlike a traditional academic thesis, then, which sets out to prove a single argument, this thesis, in its intention to explore and showcase an expressionist art critical practice, is devised as a series of essays and short-form writings with recurring and resonant themes.

The essays and pieces of short-form writing comprising this thesis have been organized into four parts. The first part, “Bad Writing,” lays the groundwork for the three stylistic modes of expressionist art criticism that follow: the Expressionist Essay, Ficto-criticism, and Object-Oriented Writing. Prefaces before each of these sections elaborate the conceptual thinking involved in arriving at each particular designation, as well as the positioning of each mode in the overall conception of a 21st century expressionist art criticism.

For my own art critical practice, the historical role of the poet-critic in shaping the medium has been essential. While I admire Formalism’s ambitions to focus solely on the internal qualities of particular art works and have pursued similar feats in my own art criticism, I reject as naïve the notion that such pretensions to purity can exist in the medium in 2016. Rather, the 21st century expressionist art criticism proposed in this thesis is more reflective of Harold Rosenberg’s Romantic conception of art’s inseparability from life. As my ficto-critical piece on the 2015 Venice Biennale included here makes clear, art and life are one and the same. The

accusation of Romanticism does not bother me, because unlike many contemporary critics, I do not think that Romanticism is an outdated mode; rather, it is a tendency that recurs constantly throughout history, up to the present day. I conflate Romanticism with the superior positioning of aesthetic pursuit within life, as indicative of what Deleuze has deemed the “life force” (see Deleuze 1990 and Pearson, 21.)

My use of the term “expressionism” is meant to signify more than a mere homage to the early 20th century art movement, which itself was in many ways an iteration of the Romantic spirit. It implies a privileging of the body and the emotions over the cold cerebrality of the mind, as will be elaborated throughout in my conception of vehicularity and the body-mind machine. Furthermore, the deployment of the term “expressionist” is re-invigorative, but also coyly combative, in its oppositionality to Kenneth Goldsmith’s hijacking of Conceptual Art for his Conceptual Writing project (this subject is addressed in detail in one of the essays in Part One.) Some might argue that Goldsmith’s pursuit is limited to the world of poetry and thus has nothing to do with issues in contemporary art criticism. Insofar as I have taken the position that art criticism is as much a literary art form as poetry, I would have to strongly disagree. Conceptual Writing attempts to severely limit the field of expression; as reflected in the manifesto-style writings authored by Goldsmith and Vanessa Place, its main proponents would be happy to do away with expression altogether (see Place 2009 and Goldsmith 2011). This recalls a situation – censorship – that the earliest forms of art criticism had to fight against. Conceptual Writing represents an abusive intrusion of theory into the realm of creation, one that restricts expression.

While my approach owes much to the French *belle lettriste* tradition, the emphasis (à la Baudelaire) on effect over content, and the Romantic notion of striving towards a “pure” subjectivity, I am not completely averse to theory in my work. Among theoreticians and

philosophers, this work owes much to the collaborative work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1986; 1987; 1994), as well as Graham Harman (2010), many of whose ideas have been woven in to the essays that follow. The work of Deleuze and Guattari, and certain of Deleuze's solo works (1990; 2001), represent the highest achievement in expressionist philosophy to date. Harman is a philosopher I arrived at rather late, after already having formulated my own notion of object-oriented writing, though my subsequent readings of his object-oriented ontology have enriched my thinking. In particular, his position that the subject – the self – should be treated as object has had an influence on my thinking through notions of intentionality in artistic creation, a recurring theme in the writings comprising this thesis. Like Apollinaire, I have also arrived at a number of my own concepts, which are developed throughout the course of this thesis; they include bad art/writing, vehicularity, object-oriented writing, automaticism, extension, über-authorship, frameless or “wild” writing, subjectivity, and definitionality. Woven in to what might otherwise appear as a collection of disparate essays, the recurrence and development of these conceptual themes are what unites this thesis into a coherent whole. Some of these writings were previously published in slightly different form over the past five years of this thesis's composition, a process that has enabled me to test out many of these ideas, and I am grateful to my editors and the readers with whom I have corresponded for contributing to the revised versions that appear herein. They form the core of what I have come to think of as a new expressionist art criticism.

I. “Bad Writing”

The essays comprising Part One of this thesis intend to open up *art criticism*, as it has been historically constituted, to issues in a larger field of *art writing* that begins with Gertrude Stein and extends up to the present day with the work of Ryan Trecartin, an artist for whom writing plays a pivotal role. Here, I will lay the foundation for a poetics of expressionist art criticism.

The title of this section, “Bad Writing,” refers to an oppositional stance taken on by certain writers and artists against perceived consensual notions of “good taste” (a theme that will be further explored in Part Two.) In the “bad writing” of Gertrude Stein, which was widely mocked and rejected by critics in the time she was writing, a claim could be made that we find the first strong instance of what has recently come to be referred to as “art writing” – that is, so-called experimental writing that addresses art while containing hybrid elements borrowed from poetry and fiction. In fact, despite numerous commentaries, there has been no serious theorization to date of what “art writing” actually consists of. What’s more, as I pointed out in the introduction, since its inception, art criticism has always been a medium of hybrid elements; fictional and poetic approaches and methodologies flourished in art criticism for many decades. (It is only since the 20th century that art criticism began to be regarded as strictly an essayistic form.) In my essay, I come to reject the term “art writing” in favor of the more concrete “object-oriented writing,” a tendency that will later be developed in my own work (ficto-criticism and object-oriented writing, subjects of Parts Three and Four) that blends elements of “creative” and “critical” writing.

Similar to Stein's alleged "abuses" of language (i.e. her inventive uses of grammar and syntax) in her writing, the poets associated with the Flarf movement used mis-spellings and incorrect grammar in creating intentionally bad poetry in rendering a "transcendent stupidity" meant to attack the perceived idiocies of the Zeitgeist in which they were writing: during the years of President George W. Bush in the United States. Stein and the Flarf poets alike approach writing as a means of embodiment. Through an analysis of the technique of "double agency" employed by the Flarf poets, I formulate the notion of a body-mind machine behind this type of writing – one similar to the automaticist postulated in my essay on Stein, and that will come to be seen as the main agency behind the most developed form of expressionist art criticism: object-oriented writing.

A movement related to, and often conflated with Flarf, is Conceptual Writing, the subject of the next essay. Kenneth Goldsmith, the movement's main proponent, borrows the conceits of Conceptual Art and applies them to poetry, forming what he calls "uncreative writing." In doing so, I argue, he is making a very small gesture, which is to direct his readers' attention away from the content and towards the container, the theoretical framing device that forms each piece of conceptual writing. Such frame fetishization stands in oppressive opposition to the models of expressionism in both art and criticism.

The work of Ryan Trecartin, subject of my next essay, shows us what a *frameless* writing, in defiance of the conceptualist model, might look like. This is developed even further in Part One's final essay, "Becoming Subject," in which I argue for a "wild writing" that values *gestural*ity, laying the groundwork for an expressionist form of art criticism, which is the subject underlying Part Two's monographic essays.

Gertrude Stein: Automaticism, Definitionality, Lines, and Object-Oriented Writing

In writing her near-thousand page novel *The Making of Americans* over eight years, Gertrude Stein came to realize that *incorrectness* was actually the *correct* form for her novel. That is, she had what we might term realistic expectations of the novel's potential readership, anticipating the work's status as one of the 20th century's great unread books. Considering those who might actually make it to the end of the seemingly endless text,

Lots of people will think many strange things in it as to tenses and persons and adjectives and adverbs and divisions are due to the french composers' errors but they are not it is quite as I worked at it and even when I tried to change it well I didn't really try but I went over it to see if it could go different and I always found myself forced back into its incorrectnesses so there they stand (Stein 1995, viii).

As one of Stein's earliest literary projects, it could be seen as an announcement of her later style, after the completion of her first published book, *Three Lives*, which, with its retainment of plot and conventional syntax, was comparatively *correct*, though its employment of repetition and the sing-songy rhythms already enunciate the Steinian voice.



Madame Cézanne à l'éventail, Paul Cézanne, oil on canvas, 92.5 x 73 cm, 1878

What's more, *Three Lives* already shows the influence of the painters that she had befriended and whose work she collected, as one of her biographers would later note:

The stylistic method of [*Three Lives*] had been influenced by the Cézanne portrait under which she sat writing. The portrait of Madame Cézanne is one of the monumental examples of the artist's method, each exacting, carefully negotiated plane — from the suave reds of the armchair and the gray blues of the sitter's jacket to the vaguely figured wallpaper of the background — having been structured into existence, seeming to fix the subject for all eternity. So it was with Gertrude's repetitive sentences, each one building up, phrase by phrase, the substance of her characters. (Mellow 94)

This painting, which Stein and her brother acquired in 1904, was included in that year's scandalous Salon d'Automne, which saw Cézanne and his fellow Modernists ridiculed by an uncomprehending press; such summations of Cézanne were typical:

Sacred, crude, violent, sincere, ugly, and altogether bizarre canvases. [...] Here the results of a hard laboring painter, without taste, without the faculty of selection, without vision, culture – one is tempted to add intellect – who with dogged persistence has painted in the face of mockery, painted portraits, still life, landscapes, flowers, houses, figures, painted everything, painted himself... Cézanne has dropped out of his scheme harmony, melody, beauty – classic, romantic, symbolic, what you will! – and doggedly represented the ugliness of things. (Hejinian 274)

As a collector of such works, Stein was clearly cognizant of her position as part of an artistic vanguard that found value in the denial of consensual aesthetic norms – in dubious representations of “the ugliness of things.” Even before she turned her attention to writing directly about art and artists, one finds in Stein’s earliest work the origins of object-oriented writing, as opposed to art criticism. Even Stein’s critics concede that her seemingly “irrational” writings were rooted in her engagement with visual art practice. “It is important for our theory,” writes one of them,

that between 1896 and 1912 Miss Stein had come to know Picasso and Matisse and was already long in the practice of defending their work against the question, ‘What does it mean?’ With such an experience behind one, it is not difficult to accept as art what one has hitherto dismissed as the interesting and rather surprising result of an experiment. It was, I believe, only because Gertrude Stein had already prepared the defense as it applied to Picasso that she could put forth her own unintelligible product as a serious artistic experiment. For a person of the sound intelligence of Miss Stein there is a great natural resistance against the production of nonsense. (Skinner 55)

Even writers friendlier to Stein’s work, such as Edmund Wilson, concluded that the key to understanding it lay in its author’s preoccupations with modernist painting (Wilson 877). Though it is doubtful that Stein thought of her writing in such straightforward, rationalistic terms. There is a danger inherent in the methodological comparison. Her approach to writing was not *imitative* of contemporary painting in the way contemporary critics – both those friendly and unfriendly to her work – took it to be; neither art form justified the ways and existence of the other; the autonomy of each was asserted through its individual practitioners’ approaches. Rather, there

was a processual corollary between the painters associated with Modernism who took painting itself to be their main subject, and writers like Stein (though fewer in number) whose subject came to be language itself; whereas the classical painter might attempt to *represent* nature in his canvases, the modernist painter, working in the language of abstraction, might attempt to *embody* nature. Thus, the tools are stripped down, reduced to their essence: raw paint, and for Stein the writer, naked language, as her friend Bravig Imbs characterized it, and which scholar Ulla E. Dydo defined as “the result of a process of reduction accomplished by punning with elements of sound and sight, which shakes up stable syntax and meaning” (Dydo with Rice 17).

Indeed, works like Stein’s, “writerly” texts, as Roland Barthes once termed them, require a new method of reading – one that entails a more active engagement on the part of the reader in producing meaning. Here, we might look at one of the most drastic examples of the transformation of visual motifs into literary ones in Stein’s writings, *Tender Buttons*. This series of poems,⁶ written in prose and divided into three sections (Objects, Food, and Rooms), allowed Stein to render her own abstract pictures, to embody her subjects via words. Most of the texts are very brief:

RED ROSES.

A cool red rose and a pink cut pink, a collapse and a sold hole, a little less hot.

(Stein 1997, 14)

⁶ Bearing in mind Ulla E. Dydo’s assertion that “Stein did not think in categories” when it came to her work (Dydo 11), that Stein did come to think of the texts in *Tender Buttons* as poems is evidenced from a letter in which she refers to them as such (Mellow 218).

As radical as such an approach towards language seems today, one can only ponder how it must have felt to read such a text in 1914, when the book was first published. The title refers to the object – red roses – in the plural, and yet the lone mention of roses in the body of the text leaves it in the singular: “a cool red rose.” Certainly a single red rose has a different meaning than a bunch of roses; a dozen red roses, for instance, is a traditional symbol of love, romance, marriage. A single red rose can have a plurality of meanings, from the inference of a flirtation to a funereal symbol of desolation, loneliness, and despair: already a disparity, a lot going on, in this simple, bizarre snippet of language. But the first phrase of the poem – “a cool red rose” – actually makes the most conventional sense if we are to consider what comes next – “a pink cut pink” – united by the connector “and.” We can assume that the “pink” Stein is referring to here is also a rose – though it could also be another type of flower, a carnation (carnations are also known as “clove pinks”); in making the unconventional decision to repeat the (new) adjective, rather than the noun, the image produced by the text is effectively blurred (much like the visual effect in paintings that wish to evoke a sense of memory or nostalgia in the viewer.) Next, we have “a collapse” – we’re not sure of what; perhaps the person being given the red and pink roses? Or: a collapse of meaning? – and a “sold hole.” Perhaps she first wrote whole, then decided to reject her initial impulse in order to shake things up a bit, to introduce a bit of semantic texture into the proceeding, to imbue the line with a singularity that allows it to stand on its own – as a poem, as a sentence. (From Dydo’s study of Stein’s notebooks, we know that this sort of wordplay was rampant in her writing process.) It ends “a little less hot,” of course, to set up a contrast with the coolness introduced at the beginning of the line; in other words, edging back towards cool. This shows that it really *is* a line: for a line begins one place, and ends up in quite another. This is literalized by two opposing poles on the end – cool and (less) hot – but in a subtler way by what

those two poles “contain,” namely the roses, the collapse, and the hole: roses collapsing into a hole, so that the directional flow of the line is simultaneously a *going forward* and an *inward collapse*:

-----→

(the compositional flow, i.e. “progress”)

cool -----→ collapse/hole ←----- (less) hot

the inward collapse

As the painter Agnes Martin wrote, “In reality there are no leaders or followers. Everyone is on his own private line” (99). Here, the line – the stroke, that vivid entity that enables the “progress” with which Stein was so obsessed – is illustrative of the extension principle that we will see developed in further essays on George Kuchar and Dieter Roth, where mind is but an extension of the body; united, the body-mind forms a vehicle that flows across the page/canvas/landscape (one of Stein’s obsessions: geography.)

But first, let’s turn our attention to something else going on in *Tender Buttons* that begs consideration. Note that Mellows associates Cézanne’s planes with Stein’s sentences. One could define the chief characteristic of Stein’s most radical writings as a preference for a spatialized, rather than temporalized, writing: that is, the utilization of a flat, planar, present-tense language, repeated seemingly endlessly at times (especially in *The Making of Americans*) as a means of rendering what she perceived as the flat horizontal plane of the American landscape in language.

This spatialization of language and its connection with the authorial body, the body-mind vehicle, was also observed by William Gass in one of his essays on Stein:

Books contained tenses like closets full of clothes, but the present was the only place we were alive, and the present was like a painting, without before or after, spread to be sure, but not in time; and although, as William James had proved, the present was not absolutely flat, it was nevertheless not much thicker than pigment. Geography would be the study appropriate to it: *mapping body space*. The earth might be round but experience, in effect, was flat. Life might be long but living was as brief as each breath in breathing. Without a past, in the prolonged narrowness of any “now,” wasn’t everything in a constant condition of commencement? Then, too, breathing is repeating – it is beginning and re-beginning, over and over, again and again and again. (Gass 69) (Emphasis added)

This is arguably best illustrated in Stein’s plays, which she regarded as landscapes. With the plays, one really sees the conflict between spatiality and temporality playing itself out. This grew out of a discomfort Stein felt as a young theater-goer.

Your sensation as one in the audience in relation to the play played before you your sensation I say your emotion concerning that play is always either behind or ahead of the play at which you are looking and to which you are listening. So your emotion as a member of the audience is never going on at the same time as the action of the play.

This thing the fact that your emotional time as an audience is not the same as the emotional time of the play is what makes one endlessly troubled about a play,

because not only is there a thing to know as to why this is so but also there is a thing to know why perhaps it does not need to be so. (Stein 1985, 59)

The discordancy between the lived time and the *playing out of the thing*, of the framed “lived experience,” gives rise to a psychological distress in Stein. The violence of this conflict, Stein goes on to argue, was recognized by jazz musicians, and thus forms the root of jazz. Ahead or behind, but never in simultaneity. (This experience is the same not only for the audience members, but for the actors taking part in the spectacle, as well.) One might argue the same, even, for the reading of a novel, though it is a markedly dissimilar experience with different possibilities. Theater and music, live art forms, exist mostly in the temporal sphere, while painting and the novel can both have temporal and spatial tendencies. Painting, in fact, is mostly spatial: the conflict between flatness and depth, as played out among Clement Greenberg and his cohorts. The novel, in conventional, linear narrative mode, is temporal. What Stein was aiming for, however, in much of her writing, was a spatialization of the novel as form. As such, she was the first American novelist to bring abstraction into the field. “American abstraction is not, however, the product of American family history,” argues Steven Meyer in his introduction to *The Making of Americans*; “rather the form that American family histories generally take, the peculiar ‘progress’ recorded in *The Making of Americans*, is itself the product of American abstraction, an abstraction rooted in what Stein characterized as ‘the geographical history of America’” (Stein 1995, xvi).

At the same time, there is a temporal element that features prominently in the writing; it is the effect of repetition; the breath of the body-mind vehicle, as identified by Gass in the quote above. Oftentimes, Stein’s writing comes across as sing-songy in its frequently monosyllabic repetitions. Yet through this repetitiveness, a new way of reading, of absorbing language,

emerges in the experience – similar to a trance-like state. This is particularly true once one reaches the latter pages of *The Making of Americans* where the excessive repetition/breath... hyperventilates, essentially; where paragraphs like the following form an extended landscape:

I am thinking about some who are living. Some of these are married ones in living. Some of these are not married ones in living. I am thinking about some who are living. Some of these certainly have not been ever married ones in living, some of these have certainly sometimes been married ones in their living, some of these certainly have been sometimes married ones in living. I am thinking about some who are living. I am thinking about a good many who are living. Some who are living are going on being living, some who are living are not going to be going on being living. I am thinking about a very great many who are living, some of these are liking very well being in living, some are not really liking it that they are being in living. I am then thinking very much about a great many who are living. Some of these as I have been saying have in a way sense in being in living, some of these as I have been saying have in a way not sense really for being in being living. Some of these as I have been saying are living just now and I am knowing them just now when they are doing this living, some of them are certainly living just now and I am not knowing them just now doing their living. I am then certainly just now thinking about very many men and very many women being living. (Stein 1995, 683)

The resulting perceptual alterance, similar in some ways to a hallucinogenic trip or a temporary state of insanity, allows for new forms of meaning-formation to occur. Anyone who has tried to make her way through *The Making of Americans* will tell you that what Stein was apparently

endeavoring to create was not merely a language in the “literary” sense, but also a language that was very much visual and sonorous. We might say that one of Stein’s chief concerns is with *definitionality* – that is, the creation of new meanings via a spatialization of language. “So sustained is a paragraph that a sentence shows no staring and some noise” (Stein 1932, 34). Evaluating the title of Stein’s third published book, *Geography and Plays*, and the contents to which it refers, this notion of definitionality becomes clearer. Ostensibly a collection of Stein’s shorter writings – surveying the table of contents, one finds a variation, in no discernible order, of indiscernible prose-poetic texts, portraits, “plays” (in which conventional markers such as characters, dialogue, and stage directions have been omitted); but also – and here is where the “geography” of the title presumably comes in – a smattering of texts bearing place-names and nationalities: “France,” “Americans,” “Italians,” “England.” What all of these texts have in common is that each seemingly neglects to explicitly mention the land or group of people named in the title; rather, “France,” for instance, is comprised of paragraphs meditating upon particular objects and actions, with no discernible subject connecting the paragraphs. At the same time, taken together, we must assume that the composite forms an image or an inference of *France*, for that is the title Stein has given the piece. In other words, what we have here is an instance of object-oriented writing: an invocation of the metaphysical (geographical) *essence* of France – a writing that positions itself within the *object* of France – produced by the body-mind vehicle known as Gertrude Stein.

Stein’s chief tool in the endeavor of definitionality was the line. An affinity could be expressed between Stein’s lines of prose and the painted lines of an artist like Agnes Martin. Like Stein, Martin was something of an automaticist – that is to say: a very ritualistic artist, one for whom the extension principle (the body-mind machine) governed the creative act. Out of the

order of creation comes the ordered chaos of the product; this type of artist is the disciplined nomad. “Stein herself came to believe that in the United States space and time were uniquely structured as regions through which Americans wandered without fixed itineraries or set endpoints” (Stein 1995, xvii). The point, of course, was the wandering itself, and Stein was a most disciplined wanderer, sticking to the same routine throughout most of her life of writing through the night, going to sleep as the sun rises, at which time Alice would rise and type up the previous night’s jottings. Stein’s method, her vehicularity, hardly left room for revision, a facet of writing that she avowedly was never fond of; the point was to keep going – even if it meant it was “detrimental” to the work. *The Making of Americans*, Ernest Hemingway would later write, “began magnificently, went on very well for a long way with great stretches of great brilliance and then went on endlessly in repetitions that a more conscientious and less lazy writer would have put in the waste basket” (Mellow 322). Of course for Stein, the method and purpose of writing the *Americans* book in this way was purposefully quantitative and thus spatial. If Stein spatialized the novel, Martin, the daily intensive painter who similarly shirked romantic notions of “waiting for inspiration,” temporalized the canvas by reducing the depth of field and repeatedly applying horizontal lines. Hence, the sonorous-temporal usage of repetition in both the artist and writer’s work, issuing forth from exquisitely programmed body-mind vehicles.

Both, we should note, managed to accomplish this despite the burden of occupying feminine vehicles. While Martin benefitted from a slightly later era, Stein came of age during a time when in order to be an artist, one first had to occupy a man’s body. Gender politics was not a game Stein would ever be interested in playing. Her vehicularity was too flexible to ever require the convenience of a label (“lesbian,” “feminist,” “suffragist,” “woman”...) When necessary, she could just as readily occupy the space of “man.” When famous male artists or

writers called on her, she would often go into a separate room with them, while the wives would be expected to entertain themselves in the company of Stein's own wife, Alice B. Toklas.

Becoming-man, and yet not: Although she could flexibly speak of herself in the masculine tense, jokingly and seriously at once, she never renounced her simultaneous femininity. This is where the act of becoming crosses over into something that nearly entails transcendence, though it takes place on the earthly plane. It is close to what religious zealots call a "leap of faith" or a shamanic possession, though it takes place without ceremony and with an eye towards sustenance rather than the disorder of leaving one's selves/self-structure behind.

The vehicle thus forms its own line across a landscape, and the shape of the line becomes the particularity of the life lived, the work-exhaust produced along the way. While few writers are consciously drawn towards the line, many painters are – Martin being but one example. The Austrian Otto Zitko, for instance, *only* paints lines. Long lines curving and curling, extending into nowhere, the void. A line never ends. It just goes and goes, infinite in its stark simplicity and semantic ambiguity. (Unless we are told, we never know what it is meant to be a symbol of.) Zitko uses his lines to create environments; as such, they are typically applied to the gallery walls, and are temporary in their nature. (Though occasionally he is commissioned to do a permanent line painting.) For his 2004 exhibition at the Austrian Cultural House in Prague, he limited himself to two colors: red and orange. Painted the entire room with them, totally changing the environment and violating the sacred white space of the gallery's walls, effectively turning it into a fiery red-orange swirl, another world. Zitko didn't always paint lines. He used to paint other things, but in the late 1980s, he decided to stop painting everything, everything except for lines. Which is very primal, as it is the root of what painters do. (What are planes composed of? Lines.) Where do Zitko's lines lead? They are all contained in the same space.

One can sit in a chair and study them. Try to locate where each line begins, follow its path throughout the walls and ceiling of the exhibition space, all the way to the end. And then begin again. It is endless; the making of Americans. A line implies the dimension of time. Zitko's lines could be said to illustrate time. One may sit in the gallery for hours, lost in Zitko's maze of lines, until forced to confront time by suddenly asking oneself what time it is... what has time become? The time is, in a sense, always now. It is never then or there. A present continuous, as Stein says. Zitko's decision to stop painting in a conventional way was not a nihilistic action, a gesture of aligning himself with the whole "painting is dead or not?" debate that has been going on for far too long. Rather, his intention to paint lines was and is based on the firm belief that this is the only way to develop painting any further, just as Stein was following a similar impulse by deploying the line in her novels. The deployment of the line thus represents a striving for a very specific and idiosyncratic form of purity that one can only hint at. A primitive gesture that becomes a reflexive metaphor – a line representing all lines, only gaining meaning in the context of the space it fills.

Martin's lines: contained by the canvas; Zitko's lines: contained by the exhibition space; Stein's lines: contained by the book's two covers? This containment, this *framing*, allows us to posit a referentiality, a relation between and among line-objects. Everywhere she looked and heard, she perceived frames; sometimes frames within frames:

I began to get enormously interested in hearing how everybody said the same thing over and over again with infinite variations but over and over again until finally if you listened with great intensity you could hear it rise and fall and tell all that that there was inside them, not so much by the actual words they said or the thoughts they had but the movement of their thoughts and words. (Mellow xxiv)

Inside them – here, the body is the frame, the container, not just of the organs, but of all the meaning and excess that define who the person is (their being) or is meant to be (the perception thereof.)

At the same time, a framelessness or a *de-framing* is encased in certain types of composition; as Deleuze and Guattari would have it,

The frame of the picture's edge is, in the first place, the external envelope of a series of frames or sections that join up by carrying out counterpoints of lines and colors, by determining compounds of sensations. But the picture is also traversed by a deframing power that opens it onto a plane of composition or an infinite field of forces. These processes may be very diverse, even at the level of the external frame: irregular forms, sides that do not meet, Seurat's painted or stippled frames, and Mondrian's squares standing on a corner, all of which give the picture the power to leave the canvas. The painter's action never stays within the frame; it leaves the frame and does not begin with it. (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 100-101)

Composition, painting, writing, conceived of as a series of forces meant to exceed the frame.⁷

Thus, Stein's landscapization of the novel, of the play.

I felt that if a play was exactly like a landscape then there would be no difficulty about the emotion of the person looking on at the play being behind or ahead of the play because the landscape does not have to make acquaintance. You may have to make acquaintance with it, but it does not with you, it is there and so the

⁷ We should say here that there are, of course, radical gestures in painting that respond directly to the frame and manage, in doing so, to remain encased within it. A prominent example here would be Mark Rothko who, in his "classical" period, produced work that was arguably centered on the issue of framing.

play being written the relation between you at any time is so exactly that that it is of no importance unless you look at it. (Stein 1985, 77)

The landscape has its formation and as after all a play has to have formation and be in relation one thing to the other thing and as the story is not the thing as any one is always telling something then the landscape not moving but being always in relation, the trees to the hills the hills to the fields to trees to each other any piece of it to any sky and then any detail to any other detail, the story is only of importance if you like to tell or like to hear a story but the relation is there anyway. And of that relation I wanted to make a play and I did, a great number of plays. (Stein 1985, 78)

There is a sonorous aspect to the line, as well. William Gass hones in on the rhythms, the inherent musicality of Stein's lines; in doing so, he makes us notice the fact that this prose is not merely visual, but also aural:

It is also typical of Gertrude Stein to employ quite colloquial expressions as technical terms. 'Does Merriweather have it in him to cross the country?' That is, does he have the gumption. Our selection continues (using a comma where a colon would normally be): 'A man in his living has many things inside him, he has in him his important feeling of himself to himself inside him.' The schoolteacher would be expected to delete the 'in him,' because it is redundant, however this 'in him' will be followed by ten more, as well as two that are submerged slightly in 'inside him,' with the total number of 'him's reaching

seventeen. One way or another the passage will beat away on **im im im** like a drum. (Stein 1995, viii)

Stein's prose was *bad*. The schoolteacher would be expected to step in here and correct it. But it is bad for a purpose – for many purposes, in fact – one of them being that of sound, musicality, which is inseparable from the visual spectacle of the work; one has a similar synesthetic encounter when staring for a while at one of Martin's canvases with their horizontal lines. The percussive strength of Stein's writing lies in its ability to recognize the limits of grammar and to extend beyond them, repeating those mistakes endlessly *for the sheer purpose of repetition*. Repetition being momentum, a key vehicular term: the generative flow of language is a most appropriate way for Stein to tackle her subject, which, in *The Making of Americans* in particular, is that of *generationing*: the quasi-Biblical bequeathing of lives in subsequence.

Another purpose of the repetition – particularly of a certain word that might be said to form the core subject of a specific paragraph, as often happens in Stein – is the meditative function. (Here, the title of Stein's great long poem, *Stanzas in Meditation*, give us the obvious clue.) Again, this links Stein's endeavor in literature with that of Agnes Martin's in painting: the purpose being to attain a *total clarity*. Martin's own writings stand as testament to this. Look at her meditation on time:

In my best moments I think 'Life has passed me by' and I am content.

Walking seems to cover time and space but in reality we are always just where we started. I walk but in reality I am hand in hand with contentment on my own doorstep.

The ocean is deathless

The islands rise and die

Quietly come, quietly go

A silent swaying breath.

I wish the idea of time would drain out of my cells and leave me quiet even on this shore. (Martin 17)

Each artist has her own particular vehicularity; even the stillness described by Martin qualifies as one, as it is infused with motion, even though Martin refuses to see her *going* as going in the conventional sense of the term. Inspired by Buddhism and other Eastern religions, Martin never explicitly enunciated the connection of repetition in her works to those ways of perceiving the world, though it stands clear. A comparison can be made to the use of the mantra in Eastern religions, whose repetition is intended to effect a spiritual transformation. The function of repetition, then, is less mechanistic – the way we tend to read it in the overly civilized West –

than evocative of the need to attain a transcendental understanding of objects and their being in the world.

“A history of every individual man and woman who ever was or is or will be living.” The same impossible encyclopedic impulse can be found in artists like Dieter Roth and George Kuchar, subjects of later essays in this thesis. Quantity over quality. Or: quantity *is* quality.

Literature is not life. Most writers know this well. Others get confused about it. And there is great joy for us, the reader, in getting caught up in that confusion, as the example of Stein attests. All those people and their multitudinous ways of being, it must have shocked and impressed her so much. Even before her awakening as a writer, during her university studies when she was preparing to become a psychologist, she offered herself up as both subject and object in a series of automatic writing experiments, which would arguably come to form an integral part of the core of her method of composition. As she would later reflect,

I was very much interested in the way [the subjects] had their nature in them and sitting there while their arm was in the planchette [a device for producing “automatic writing”] and hardly vaguely talking, it was interesting to me to see how I came to feel that I could come sometime to describe every kind there is of men and women and the bottom nature of them and the way it was mixed up with

the other natures in them, I kept notes of each one of them and watched the difference between being active and being tired, the way it made some go faster and some go slower and I finally felt and which in *The Making of Americans* I began to do that one could make diagrams and describe every individual man and woman who ever was or is or will be living. (Stein 1995, xxiv)

Automatic writing was as much a bodily phenomenon as a mental one – if not more so. As Stein would observe in one of her early experiments, wherein the subject was asked to write the letter ‘m’ over and over again with his writing hand strapped into the planchette while simultaneously reading a short story, “Sometimes the writing of the word was completely unconscious, but more often the subject knew what was going on. His knowledge, however, was obtained by sensations *from the arm*. He was conscious that he had just written a word, not that he was about to do so” (Skinner 51). One might suggest that the automatic writing exercises had a secret purpose for Stein, the budding scribe: that is, how to program herself as a writer. A new type of writer, for certain: a machine, a vehicle.

This is hardly an original hypothesis, having been posited in an article by the American psychologist B.F. Skinner, a contemporary of Stein’s, in 1934. Skinner went so far as to divide Stein’s work into two parts: the automatic work, which is typified by *Tender Buttons*, and the more “refined” literary effort, which, in Skinner’s view, is to be found in Stein’s most accessible works, such as *Three Lives*, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, and *Everybody’s Autobiography*. To each of these two modes, Skinner assigns a different personality or self: the sophisticate, which fits the “(wo)man of letters” image proper to the era, and the primitive,

marred by childishness and callousness. About the latter, Skinner concludes: “This part of her work is, as she has characterized her experimental result, little more than ‘what her arm wrote.’ And it is an arm that has very little to say” (Skinner 56).

Today, it is easy for us to view Skinner’s thinking as typical of the era, almost quaint in its reliance on binaristic oppositions for formulating an intellectual stance on an issue. Reading the essay from the position of a post-Derridean hermeneutics, one cannot help but further flesh out Skinner’s contemporaneous thinking by assigning “mind” to the sophisticate half of Stein and “body” to the primitive (or “experimental”) side. Skinner attempts to maintain Stein’s phallogocentric “dignity” by essentially negating the second, bodily part of Stein’s work: her automaticism. “I welcome the present theory because it gives one the freedom to dismiss one part of Gertrude Stein’s writing as a probably ill-advised experiment and to enjoy the other and very great part without puzzlement” (Skinner 57). Clearly Skinner is no proponent of the theory of extension we are promoting here. Literature, according to Skinner, is something that should not cause any puzzlement or pose any intellectual challenges; rather it is something that one should be able to enjoy, like light entertainment. What Skinner is unwittingly arguing in favor of, essentially, is kitsch. (And to those who believe that Skinner’s is an outdated idea, one need look no further than Anis Shivani’s claims that writing should be clear and easy to understand in order to be considered good.)

Skinner’s essay brings further evidence of Stein’s vehicularity to the table: the role of forgetting in her acts of creation. As soon as she completed her first novel, *Q.E.D.*, she put it aside and forgot about it for nearly twenty-five years. As for her experiences as a subject in the automatic writing experiments, she forgot about those as well when she sat down to write her automaticist works. This is part of the present continuous whirl that Stein not only wrote in, but

also lived in: just as one does not linger over the exhaust emitted by one's vehicle as it moves down the highway, so Stein felt no great compulsion to fret over her work once it was finished. (Except, of course, for steering its course in terms of publication and promotion.)

One hallmark of Stein's writing is her frequent usage of bad grammar, as Gass pointed out earlier. The constitutive quality here is the usage of the connector "and" without commas as a means of extending her sentences in perpetuity. The "and" is representative of vitality, of the life force: If the period signifies the end, the employment of a constant "and" serves as a means of extension, a means of permanently denying that end, that closure that allows meaning formation to become solidified.

Stein's preferred tense was the present continuous: the plethora of verbs, of what we might call verbage, in *The Making of Americans*, with the necessary -ing appendage that enables the vehicular flow and rhythms of the prose that Gass so eloquently elucidates in his Foreword to the book, produces a ceaseless movement of mind across the page's scape.

I am very much interested in men and women having sense for being ones being in being living, for men and women having sense for being ones succeeding in being living, succeeding feeling being living, succeeding in winning anything in being one being living, succeeding in living to themselves to any one, in men and women being married ones. (Stein 1995, 682)

The linear language in Stein, far from being “dead,” is in fact never static or concrete, but always fluid, in a perpetual state of motion. With its deployment of simple, often monosyllabic words that even a child could understand, what makes her prose so difficult to read is the challenges to meaning-formation that this particular usage of language deliberates. Much more than Skinner, poet Lyn Hejinian is able to grasp this facet of Stein’s writing, and in the accursed *Tender Buttons*, of all places:

As for movement, Stein wanted to understand things not in isolated rigidity, which falsified and monumentalized conditions which were fluid, but as present participants in ongoing living – outpouring, fountainous living. How does a carafe move? In an arrangement. By being larger than a cup and smaller than a pitcher; by containing less liquid than before; by reflecting light (and thereby color); by being or containing the same color as a piece of paper; by having a vase with flowers not of that color set to the left of it from here but to the right of it from there, and so forth. (Hejinian 101)

In fact, movement abounds in Stein’s work – not merely encoded in the style of the writing, but within the narrative, as well. Early on in *The Making of Americans*, Julia Dehning must go riding around the country in order to make a decision on whether to get married:

It was a well meant intention this in Julia of riding by herself around the country and thinking hard about what they had both said about it, but not the certain way to end in a passionate young woman her first intense emotion. The wide and glowing meadows of low oaks, the clean freedom and the rush of rapid motion on the open road, the joy of living in a vital world, the ecstasy of loving and of love, the intensity of feeling in the ardent young, it surely was not so that Julia Dehning could win the sober reason that should judge of men. (Stein 1995, 27)

As a coming-of-age motif, this sort of journeying is fairly traditional. In fact, all sorts of rides and journeys are represented in the Stein oeuvre, this being but one example.

While Skinner's critique of Stein's writing is harsh, it is quite generous in comparison to conclusions many other critics – both contemporaries of Stein and later writers – have reached about her work. Some are more subtle than others. There have always been, not murmurings, but perhaps critical implications (criticism has always been a male-dominated terrain) that this woman wrote this way because she in fact did not know how to write. “[M]ost publishers and editors refused her as illiterate or mad – a faker or simply a capricious lady. What little was published [in her lifetime] left many readers angry. They turned the tables on her, blaming her for writing incomprehensibly rather than themselves for failing to comprehend. They ridiculed her and her work” (Dydo 13). Yet one need look no further than her work – even some of the early pages of her alleged worst novel, *The Making of Americans* – to find very normative sentence and paragraph structures, oftentimes containing great philosophical insights, such as this paragraph-long meditation on aesthetics, which I will break down here, sentence by sentence:

“The dining room was without brilliancy, for there can be no brilliance in a real aesthetic aspiration.”

A key overlooked statement of Stein’s own poetics, and a blatant embrace of “bad” form: Real aesthetic aspiration, after all, lacks brilliance (in the conventional sense of the term, of course.) Stein continues in her description of this rather drab interior, an odd negative/critical moment in her work:

“The chairs were made after some old french fashion, not very certain what, and covered with dull tapestry, copied without life from old designs, the room was all a discreet green with simple oaken wood-work beneath.”

Here is Stein the Modernist speaking: Dullness – note its semantic opposition to the “brilliance” refuted in the previous sentence – is also refuted here – though, again, in the conventional sense of the term. For this is what is being attacked here: the *convention*, in art, of copying without life from old designs. The discretion and hence safety of the color green, the mannered simplicity of the wood work – all qualities that Stein attacks, not explicitly, but in the style of her writing. The paragraph continues:

“The living rooms were a prevailing red, that certain shade of red like that certain shade of green, dull, without hope, the shade that so completely bodies forth the ethically aesthetic aspiration of the spare American emotion.”

On the color scale, red is on the opposite spectrum of green, and thus thought to compliment it. Though opposites, Stein identifies their shadings as identical: both contain “that certain” dullness, “without hope.” In describing colors, she conjoins ethics and aesthetics with hopes and emotions, in particular that “spare American emotion”; here we can presume an embodied critique of a

certain middle class WASP-ishness and puritanism. In subsequent paragraphs, Stein will go on to defend the integrity of the middle class, a uniquely American creation, to which she believed she rightly belonged, though here, the tone of the paragraph is quite otherwise, hinting at a certain inner tension in the author between her origins and the life she was in the process of creating for herself as an alien in distant and culturally disparate Paris, France.

“Everywhere were carbon photographs upon the walls sadly framed in painted wooden frames.”

The enumeration of the scenery positions the sadness of the carbon photographs, their “sad” frames, pathetically painted. This, of course, one must position in one’s mind against the picture we have of Stein’s parlor with its prevalence of masterpieces from the likes of Cézanne, Matisse, and Picasso crowding each inch of the wall space: liveliness; the life force.

“Free couches, open book-cases, and fire places with really burning logs, finished out each room.”

There we have it: the rounding out of a picture of bourgeois comfort and perfection, representative of a lifestyle that Stein would battle against throughout her life while simultaneously embracing it. This paragraph can be seen, among other things, as one of the earliest and most explicit documentations of that struggle (Stein 1995, 31).

In a conventional sense – in terms of action, plot – very little *happens* in Stein’s writing. On the level of language, however, everything and anything happens and in anarchic simultaneity – it is too much to take in. This is not the way we are taught to read, and it does something to our

perception – a faint quivering can be felt that seems to infer the uncontrollable urges of the libido, of the secret desire to rend chaos from the order of our language and our lives. On a philosophical level, “ideas evolve over the course of her work. But they do not resolve. There is no end point, no summation, no synopsis, no closure. And given the nature of her ideas and the character of her method, there could not be” (Hejinian 289). To this extent, her work is immune to summing-up, to the critical enterprise. There is a way in to Gertrude Stein’s work; those seeking a way *out*, however, are often left frustrated.

The reason why Stein’s writing resists normative reading strategies is because, to put it simply, it is quite another thing. This otherness was not only present in her poetic texts like *Tender Buttons*, but also in her writings about the visual artists who inspired them. Stein’s art-related writing is less criticism than what we might deem *art writing* in the proper sense – that is, a form that tries to replicate or capture the essence of, through the medium of language, a work of visual art. Whether she was consciously responding to it or not, Stein’s response to the art critical enterprise were very much rooted in a French tradition that had it that the poet is the best translator of a work of art into language. Indeed, one of her friends and a frequent visitor to her salon was Guillaume Apollinaire, a poet who also wrote voluminously on the art of his time and frequently collaborated with sculptors and painters. Stein’s word portrait of Apollinaire is typical of her writings on other artists of her time:

Give known or pin ware.

Fancy teeth, gas strips.

Elbow elect, sour stout pore, pore caesar, pour state at.

Leave eye lessons I. Leave I. Lessons. I. Leave I lessons, I.

The position of the poet-art critic would endure in the West for quite some time, until becoming openly challenged in the 1970s in the New York art scene, with the advent of the first academically trained (as art historians) group of art critics, the (post-) Greenbergian formalists. An unarticulated battle was set up between the competing aesthetics represented by *Artforum* and *ARTnews* magazines. In the words of poet and art critic Carter Ratcliff,

ARTnews was really a writers' magazine, a poets' magazine. The New York poetry style is no less arrogant than any other, but this isn't obvious to everyone at first glance because it's a style of off-handedness and understatement and occasionally just being silly. So nobody made grand, Oscar Wildean comments about how criticism is a creative act, just as painting and sculpture are, and yet that was always implied. And that meant that the writing was supposed to have literary qualities running parallel to the pictorial qualities or sculptural qualities that were being celebrated. The idea was that the artists and writers were in the same world and a kind of a conversation was being carried out in the celebration of a certain shared sensibility. So there was no notion of objectivity, or even critical judgment – that was taken for granted. If you were Bill Berkson and wrote about Philip Guston, you didn't waste any time making an argument for the greatness of Philip Guston. I mean the very fact that you were writing about him and you were Bill Berkson meant that he was great. And the same with Tom Hess

and Willem de Kooning. I don't think he ever did state de Kooning's importance; he just wrote about him all the time in terms that were, on the one hand, intimate and on the other hand exalted, so the critical judgment may have been unstated but it was obvious. And unquestionable. (Newman 279)

The formalists at *Artforum*, on the other hand, practiced what Ratcliff termed a “workaday authoritarianism”; their job became to churn out what would become known in the field as *Artforum* prose (Newman 281). While Ratcliff assumes in retrospect a critical stance towards both positions, he decidedly aligned himself early on with the less doctrinaire *ARTnews* school. We can see how Stein might have, as well, had she still been around in the 1970s. But we can also see how her writing very much exceeds what the New York School poets gathered around *ARTnews* were trying to do in their art criticism. At the root of the argument, one might surmise, is a conflict between intuition, on the one hand, and learnedness, on the other. While the post-Greenbergian formalists around *Artforum* would compete with each other in what Ratcliff rightly defines as equally reductive approaches to the object, it is implied that the poetic approach would be to then celebrate the object – otherwise, what is the point of turning our attention to it at all.

The Steinian approach resonates with the object-oriented approach – that is, something that goes beyond reduction, celebration, or description, and instead tries to *inhabit* the object – thereby eliminating the “about” altogether from the equation. *Tender Buttons* has been aptly described by one critic as a collection of “object poems” (Hejinian 93-94). There is a theory of the name at stake here, one that sees proper names as reducing things to stasis – language fails in

that it separates us from the real thing. The name, separate from the thing, becomes an object also: writing = objects inhabiting objects.

Stein [...] does not trace things back to their origins, her investigation is not etymological. That would reduce things to nouns, and Stein's concern was to get away from the stasis (and the phallo[go]centric monumentality) of the name. She saw things in a present continuity, a present relativity, across the porous planes of the writing. (Hejinian 101)

Honing in on Stein's realism, Hejinian picks up on an unusual affinity between Gustave Flaubert's ambitions as a novelist and Stein's realizations as a writer. The former once wrote to a correspondent,

What seems beautiful to me[,] what I should like to write, is a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the internal strength of its style...a book which would have practically no subject, or at least one in which the subject would be almost invisible, if that is possible. (Flaubert 154)

Tender Buttons, that masterpiece of object-oriented writing, might very well be the book that Flaubert hoped to write, but never did. As Stein herself would later put it, "Now that was a thing

that I too felt in me the need of making it be a thing that could be named without using its name. After all one had known its name anything's name for so long, and so the name was not new but the thing being alive was always new" (Stein 1998, 330).

And so with Stein, what we have is the very first *art writing*; which is to say, the very first object-oriented writing. A writing that set out to not merely describe, but to go inside, beyond the mere name of an object, and experience its innate being.

The Language of the Toilet

Gary Sullivan, American poet, experiences the death of his grandfather, an amateur poet. Shortly before the grandfather passes away, lying on his death bed, he telephones his grandson to boast that he has won an important poetry contest. The “contest” turns out to be one initiated by poetry.com, one of countless cynical scam sites/vanity publishers that prey on would-be poets. Every poet who submits a poem wins – and each is celebrated via inclusion in a trophy anthology alongside other “winners,” all of whom are implicitly expected to buy several copies.

After his grandfather passes away, Sullivan exacts revenge against the scam machine by sitting down to pen the absolute worst poem he can manage and submitting it to the same organization. He entitles the resulting mess – the foundational Flarf moment – “Mm-Hmm”:

Yeah, mm-hmm, it's true
 big birds make
 big doo! I got fire inside
 my “huppa”-chimp(TM)
 gonna be agreessive, greasy aw yeah god
 wanna DOOT! DOOT!
 Pfffffffffffffffffffffffffffft! hey!
 ooh yeah baby gonna shake & bake then take

AWWWWL your monee, honee (tee hee)
 uggah duggah buggah biggah buggah muggah
 hey! hey! you stoopid Mick! get
 off the paddy field and git
 me some chocolate Quik
 put a Q-tip in it and stir it up sick
 pocka-mocka-chocka-locka-DING DONG
 fuck! shit! piss! oh it's so sad that
 syndrome what's it called tourette's
 make me HAI-EE! shout out loud
 Cuz I love thee. Thank you God, for listening!

(quoted in Magee)

It doesn't get much worse than this. Were we to pick up the poem randomly and not realize its author's intended badness, it would be received as little more than a piece of facile juvenile graffiti, perhaps mildly amusing to toilet humor enthusiasts. With its erratic line breaks and total disregard for the structure of rhythm that typically guides free verse endeavor, "Mm-Hmm" is nearly transcendent in its stupidity.

A simple rhythm seems to be developed in the first line, a series of clipped, banal colloquial utterances comprising a mere five syllables: "Yeah, mm-hmm, it's true." It seems logical that the rhythmic pattern would be repeated in the second line, which is also comprised of

monosyllables, only Sullivan suddenly and inexplicably neuters the line midway through, breaking off the rhyme into the first half of the third line, so that the second remains a three word clunker: “big birds make.” The thing they make, “big doo!,” relegated to the third line, completes the scatological non-joke that commences this masturbatory masterpiece. This leads in to a head-scratcher, the speaker boasting of the “fire” inside his “ ‘huppa'-chimp(TM).” A Google search for “huppa” yields two primary possibilities: a commercial line of children's clothing and the portable canopy beneath which a couple stands in a traditional Jewish wedding ceremony. Neither of these definitions gives us a clear idea or picture of what a “huppa-chimp” might be, though nonetheless, as the (TM) for “trademark” suggests, the reader should be warned away from trying to steal the idea from the author.

The following line is memorable for its creative misspelling of “agreesive,” which, given that it is followed by the similar-sounding “greasy,” gives ponderance to the idea that it could be intentional or, at the very least, a “fortunate” accident.

(Before stumbling onwards through this callous corridor, we should pause to come to grips with a noticeable problem that has evolved in our analysis: that of double agency. That is, in illustrating badness through his poem, Sullivan plays a double role as poet. While the role of the author in Conceptual Writing, subject of the next essay, is fairly straightforward – framer of the text – in Flarf, it is rather more complicated, as the author is implicated in a play of deliberate deception: one must be fairly good in order to be bad. The whole notion of authenticity becomes blurred when one sets out to write a poem like “Mm-Hmm,” in that Sullivan is employing his “skills” as a poet to simultaneously mask or even tarnish those skills. What, then, does Sullivan's “real” poetry look like? If Flarf is all a big put-on, for the poets who claim this territory, when

and where does the gag end and the real begin? For the purpose of our analysis, we will assume a system of tarnished equivalencies between the “authentic” voice and the “fake” amateur, and introduce our position on the frame's functionality: in the case of Flarf, “badness” forms the frame. Thus, the “double agency” of the Flarf poet.)

This is followed by the vocalization of a giant fart, an idiotic “hey!” Flarf, like so much of the other bad work we will look at in the course of our investigation, relies heavily on the scatological to achieve its ends. As Žižek has strained to point out, the scatological is always implicitly linked to the ideological:

In a traditional German toilet, the hole in which shit disappears after we flush water is way in front, so that shit is first laid out for us to sniff at and inspect for traces of illness. In the typical French toilet, on the contrary, the hole is in the back: shit is supposed to disappear as soon as possible. Finally, the American toilet presents a kind of synthesis, a mediation between these two opposed poles — the toilet basin is full of water, so that the shit floats in it, visible, but not to be inspected. It is clear that none of these versions can be accounted for in purely utilitarian terms: a certain ideological perception of how the subject should relate to the unpleasant excrement which comes from within our body is clearly discernible in it. (90)

Flarf clearly positions itself within the American toilet, floating its refuse before our eyes while encouraging us to look away, and the language of Sullivan's inaugural poem makes this clear – not merely with its vocalization of bodily processes, but its tonal and stylistic hijackings from the detritus of popular culture, its banal pseudo-jargonistic Reality TVisms and jerky, failed attempts at imitating the rhythm of hip hop, which clearly surfaces in the clumsy clichés of the following lines: “ooh yeah baby gonna shake & bake then take/AWWWWL your monee, honee (tee hee).” This is followed by a line of incomprehensible sounds, which remind one of the “boom-jigga-jigga-boom” vocalizations of rhythm in hip hop, but, were this a “real” poem, might have been substituted with a double line-break, bringing some sectionalized relief to the unpleasant amalgamation of arrhythmic lines.

Line eleven concurs with Sullivan's proposal that Flarf's agenda be inclusive of the “most offensive” – that is, politically incorrect – sentiments that the poet is able to conjure – a project that again poses interesting challenges to our conception of the double agency of the poet and the frame. Perhaps Sullivan feels somewhat safe in employing “mick” and “paddy,” derogatory terms for Irish people, as his name implies that he himself is of Irish descent.

The list of imbecilities continues: lines eleven and twelve end with pointless alternate spellings of “get” and “git,” leading to the failed pseudo rhyme at the end of thirteen (“Quik,” as in Nestle), ultimately arriving at the end of fourteen and the poem's premiere successful attempt at rhyme, with “sick.” Another line of vocalized rhythmic noise ensues, signaling the poem's descent into what should be its third and final stanza, which commences with a series of expletives, followed by a rather weak joke about Tourette's syndrome. The final two lines form the poem's nerve-grating anti-climax, which, we can only say, sputters: Not *sputter* as in the

delightful sounds that might emerge from the mouth of a baby upon tasting its first ice cream, but *sputter* as in the unpleasant cacophony emitted by a malfunctioning toilet.

Unsurprisingly, Sullivan's efforts were not ignored by the contest-holders at poetry.com. Within weeks, Sullivan received a letter of acceptance, arguably the aesthetic equal, in prose, to the poem itself:

Gary, over the past year, we have conducted an exhaustive examination of over 1.2 million poems that have been submitted to us. Only a small percentage of individuals whose poems we have reviewed were selected to be part of this distinguished project. “ ‘Mm-hmm’ was selected for publication because it sparks the imagination and provides the reader with a fresh, unique perspective on life. We believe it will add to the importance and appeal of this special edition. Of course, Gary, as always, you are under no obligation whatsoever to submit any entry fee or subsidy payment, or to make a purchase of any kind. Your poem will be presented in the most elegant way possible. This coffee-table quality book will feature an ‘Arristock leather’ cover stamped in gold and a satin bookmarker ...

(Quoted in Magee)

Sullivan shared his schoolboy's prank with his colleagues on the Poetics listserv. Based at the University of Buffalo in New York, the Poetics listserv has served as the virtual meeting place – arguably the Internet-era's capital – of North American avant-garde poetics since its foundation in 1994. Others quickly got the joke, and began to file behind Sullivan, penning their own poems. A new movement, Flarf, was born, complete with mini-manifestos (“a blend of the offensive, the sentimental, and the infantile,” according to K. Silem Mohammad, elaborated further by Sullivan as “a kind of corrosive, cute, or cloying, awfulness. Wrong. Un-P.C. Out of control. ‘Not okay.’” [Magee]). Much of Flarf had its organizational roots and energy in the new communicative possibilities spawned by the Internet – Flarf blogs and a breakaway e-mail list from the Poetics listserv enabled the Flarf poets to share their efforts with each other and organize festivals as well as publishing projects, while keeping aflame the morale of badness that ignited the movement. “To be honest,” said Sullivan, “we started this list to do a hundred-page anthology of just garbage” (quoted in Fischer).

As Flarf (d)evolved, along with it came a narrow array of tactics and approaches. While “Mm-Hmm” may have been composed “off the cuff,” using no other tools than the most callow regions of the poet's own imagination, others began to evolve methodologies to their madness. One of the more prominent of these was “Google-sculpting.” The process involves entering two random words or phrases into the Google search engine, then “mining” the results, selecting lines from the displayed textual results (without clicking on the websites themselves) to craft into a poem. So, for instance, out of the two random phrases (“yankee doodle” + “fuck machine”) from which the poem derives its title, Mohammad came up with the following:

Yankee Doodle Fuck Machine

I am a robot and I'm angry at people
I'm not wasting a vacation on a Boy Scout jamboree
the songs I can play are "Für Elise,"
"The Entertainer," "Fuck You Becky," and "I'm Not Gay"

Anne Murray is the ugliest boy
I have ever seen in my life
"he is optimistic that man will come out on top"
where the FUCK is my time machine

regardless of how "indisputable" it may seem
to the fags or Arabs or whatever
we all have to have banks and as such banks get
to fuck up politics in America and the world

"at night we ride through mansions of glory
in suicide machines ... and fuck them," Flaubert wrote
in his journal with a little riiipp! AUGH! whap whap
whap whap whap as he sat in his gold Rolls-Royce

poems from Kansas don't have to be that crazy
one of them is "Yankee Doodle," the other one isn't
then cowboy change your ways today or with us you will ride
keep your stick on the ice, go fuck yourself

there are over 100 words for "shit"
and only one for "fuck you"
and every one of the self-serve machines at Kinko's
is an Anne Of Green Gables pop-up dollhouse

Riddled with shits, fucks, bodily functions, indecipherable noises, and politically incorrect unniceties (derogatory statements about Arabs and homosexuals), "Yankee Doodle Fuck Machine" seems to follow the badness of the Flarf agenda established by "Mm-Hmm." It also successfully emulates the debased language of the Internet, which is in turn a reflection of the American "majority-speak" of the Bush Years – although "emulate" is perhaps a misused verb in this sense, since it is presumably wholly comprised of that actual language. In a sense, the Flarf poet here plays a similar role to that of the Conceptual Writer, whose task has been relegated to that of "curator," rather than creator, of language. For Flarf, however, the issue of mediation comes into play in a way that it does not for the Conceptualists.

Another word on shit before we continue. I mean, to be precise, the ways in which shit can be said to float in that ocean of language through which we currently row. In Flarf, after all, the poet often plays the role of monkey, those creatures so fond of using their excrement as a weapon in fending off unwanted and would-be invaders. This is not, of course, what we expect when we go to pay the monkeys a visit in their cages at the zoo. We expect to find the monkeys doing cute things, chasing each other around in care-free play, engaging in impressive feats of acrobatics enabled by their astounding limberness and flexibility, perhaps even smiling and waving at us like innocent children as we smile before their captivity.

Instead, we are pummeled in the face with shit.

This is something like the experience of coming to Flarf from poetry. Perhaps, we could say, this is that instant in which *flarf* actually becomes a verb. We come to verse with our cliché ideas of what “the poetic experience” is meant to provide – language in its highest, loftiest form, deploying a sentiment of universal appeal; the Hallmark greeting card poem. (Once we leave the Ivory Tower, is this not the mass conception of poetry, after all?) The Flarfist knows exactly what we expect to see when standing before the poet’s cage, and, like the feces-flinging monkey, is eager to defile our cheap yearnings for escapist pleasure via sentimentalism:

Grandmother's Explosive Diarrhea

Callused, knobby, aching,

This is my grandmother's anus.

Overworked, but always looking for more to do,

Wrenched open again & again

When it should stay closed.

My grandmother's explosive diarrhea

Resembles the sound of bowling balls

Dropped into a wooden tub

Filled with moist grapes and papayas.

My grandmother's anus has been working for 84 years,

This 110 pound woman, weak from

Dehydration, with strength pulsing from her anus like

The vein of an ox.

Could my anus ever be like this?

Could my anus ever experience the pain?

The glory?

The peace?

Already my anus looks withered from

The flatulence and loose stools of my 45 years,
45 years of pampered life.

But her every wrinkle tells a story,

Like waves of movement

That have expelled the feces.

The Holocaust caused watery stools,

The depression caused near-catastrophic constipation,

The birth of 4 children caused waste rich with joy.

Her rectum shows the grace of a swan and

The tenacity of a lioness.

Could my rectum ever reach this ironic state?

My grandmother's anus soaked with wisdom,

Apprehension, and comfort.

Buba's explosive diarrhea is my afflation,
My goal,
My aspiration. (Sullivan)

We could venture to suggest that the monkey named Gary Sullivan knows exactly what he is doing at the moment he picks up his turd with the intention of deploying it torpedo-like in our direction. Not merely the shit in its potential instrumentality (*qua* weapon), but something of its ontological nature as well; the monkey is likely aware that it is something that, at a certain point, came out of him, and that it came out of him for a good reason: it bears no beneficial use, and thus has been rejected by his body as a piece of gnomonic excess.

It is for similar reasons that the bad artist so often falls back on scatology as a sure way of cementing her position in opposition to the generative project of artistic spectacle. Precisely because it is so unwanted, because it generates such intense feelings of disgust and repugnance, shit is flushed away, never put on display... But what about those artists who excavate it and put it on a pedestal?

The bad artist, among other things, operates from a total consciousness of her own body – an awareness that creativity is not “merely” a mental act, but a physical, bodily one. In fact, it could be said that the bad artist reverses the importance that the two traditionally find themselves arranged in with regards to poetic creation, placing the body before the mind. The artist, then, becomes not a body machine, nor a mind machine, but a body-mind machine; in such a formulation, body naturally assumes prominence, yet the mind is always and inevitably attached;

in such a scenario, mind is but an extension of body (and vice versa, of course.) Hence, the totality of the body's processes must be included within the poetic output – including, for instance, the scatological (but also the nutritional, the sexual, the breakdowns – in a word, *all* functionality.)

Like Dada, Flarf represented an avant-garde reaction to the machinery of war. Flarf began in 2001, before September 11th, but reached its full momentum in the months and years of George W. Bush's wildly unpopular presidency and the war he launched in Iraq. The Flarf poets subsumed and reflected the era's crazed right-wing rhetoric in anarchic collage poems like Sharon Mesmer's "I Wanna Make Love to You on Mission Accomplished Day":

I wanna make love to you on Mission Accomplished Day

On the floor of the main headquarters of the Department of Faith

I wanna make love to you two years ago today

When Bush's carrier offed some old Arab broads who just 'got in the way'

When I was a kid we made love in a fun Catholic kind of way

On our bikes, under maypoles, in the Enterprise's cargo bay

I can't wait for Al Qaeda's Call for Papers Day

When I'll make love to you on four million barrels a day

I met FDR once in Vegas, he was a good lay

But as good as you 'cause you're so ofay

Like an OPEC quote, and bin Laden's protégé

We'll make hot monkey love on Whoopin' Osama's Sorry Ass Day

(Mesmer 21)

Even within avant-garde poetry circles, however, not everyone was willing to jump on the Flarf bandwagon and accept its proposed criticality at face value. In an essay for *Jacket*, Dan Hoy criticized Flarf's lack of critical engagement with its own methodologies. In doing so, he opened up a troublesome dialogue on Flarf's revolutionary potential. "The Internet may be rhizomatic," he writes, "but search engines are not. They're selectively hierarchical. That poets are employing these hierarchies as poetic tools without questioning the implications of doing so (whether in pre- or post-production) exposes a lack of rigor in their process, as well as a tacit

disregard for their own cultural complicity as something maybe worth exploring, or at least being aware of.”

It could be argued that Flarf’s employment of Internet search engines is little more than an update of Modernist poetics – in particular, the forfeiture of creativity to chance procedures. To make such an argument, reasons Hoy, is to problematically ignore the Internet’s hierarchical infrastructure.

In light of our knowledge of how they were composed, poems like “Yankee Doodle Fuck Machine” must be read as collage, insists Hoy. “I think the way these poems are written and received is very much a part of their content; the former because it informs them as they’re developed (inherent content), the latter because it determines their functionality (projected content.)” This unites Flarf with an avant-garde lineage, whose *built-in affects* ensure that the work contains its own criticism; Flarf is self-conscious; it may not appear so, but the effect of double agency at work here enables its inevitable dual function. “If there’s a difference,” continues Hoy, “with Flarf and its progenitors it’s that Cage and Oulipo researched or created their generators of deterministic randomness, whether it be the I Ching, the weather, or mathematical formulas. They were aware of how each generator distinguished itself as a context and control variable, and their selection of each context and control variable was part of the content... The Flarfists may be aware of the webpage from which they borrow material, but the only reason they’re aware of that webpage is because Google (or AskJeeves, or Yahoo!, or...) showed it to them – so the question is, are they aware of why they’re aware of that webpage? Do they wonder how it is that their poem is determined as it is – that is, of the process at work on their work by an outside force, one not divine or natural but corporate? This is a fundamental

aesthetic concern as well as a socioeconomic one. And a process that draws so much attention to itself as process (since the end result is often intentionally discordant with overt tonal & syntactical juxtapositions) undermines its credibility if it propagates a lackadaisical attitude toward its own mechanics.”

When one steps back and evaluates Flarf from a wider perspective – particularly that of the anarchic ethos of the Language school, which sought a destabilization of meaning and a complete separation of signifier from signified in its poetics – a more nuanced possibility of the politicization of language proposed by Flarf emerges, as Language poet Barrett Watten has observed:

A kind of political allegory adheres to this view: the noun phrases become the “citizens” of a radical democracy that cannot be totalized or subordinated through formal or political means; sentences, on the other hand, would be moments of Foucauldian discipline wrought on the phrases, hard task masters of coherence and sense. Paragraphs would be akin to forced labor camps, and a complete narrative something like the totalizing teleologies of progress and millennial utopias of all sorts. Discourse would be the final horizon of coercion and control: the top-down muscling together of all those discrepant noun phrases, a poetics of sheer force, fascism in the making. While this allegory partakes of the absurd, it is felt by many as a limit of acceptable expression in the avant-garde. It’s a contradictory prohibition where the “freedom” to be free of higher-level constraints is a constraint in its own right, leading to a widespread and

internalized prohibition. I am not talking only about my own generation of poets; the recent emergence of Flarf poetries – with their very different social perspectives, gender and identity politics, and performance strategies – still seems policed to a degree by the “noun phrase”: all one-liners must be atomized phrases, and discourse itself can only be discontinuous and accretive (if generally subordinated with a very loosely and arbitrarily controlling, often absurdist, “thread” such as “Chicks dig war”).

Watten points out that the supposedly anarchic, free-for-all idea of Flarf is actually rigidly controlled by an underlying formalism in the poems themselves; sometimes anti-formalism can be a form in itself. Thus, unlike Hoy’s Google-centric reading of Flarf, Watten’s deeper analysis makes clear that not merely any poem composed according to the Google-sculpting methodology outlined above will qualify as Flarf – it must also retain certain formal characteristics (i.e. the “noun phrase.”)

Watten goes on to argue:

It is precisely, however, to the degree that Flarf does something new performatively and with its use of the detritus of popular culture and the internet, treading the high/low distinction until it breaks under the weight, that it re-invents

the avant-garde. In a larger aesthetic economy, it seems, “the truth will win out.” Flarf’s recent productivity shows how the injunction against the sentence, paragraph, narrative, and even discourse from some sectors of the Language school intersects with actual conditions of language use. Any such thing as stylistic norms in the avant-garde must inevitably intersect with “life.”

Could it be said that Flarf comes closer to *life* than more “normative” schools of poetry? If by “life,” we mean everyday, spoken language, as well as the “written” language deployed in the new communicative realms enabled by advances in technology, then the answer would be yes. At the same time, embedded within Flarf’s absurd juxtapositions of everyday and “net” speak, we find a critique of the current state of language: it is truly a high/low hybrid, as Watten notes, in its utilization of the “high” art form of poetry to hurl, shit-like, language in its most debased state, the language that has become a norm in the 21st century, at its audience.

On Conceptual Writing

In his manifesto-style essay, “Conceptual Poetics,” Kenneth Goldsmith announces the death of originality, the advent of a bad literature, using bad language. “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 2008).

We could propose that this comes out of a love of the colloquial, of the debased state that language has reached in a world where people’s most intimate relationships are mediated through machines; a world seemingly hundreds of miles away from the literary, as it is traditionally conceived.⁸ Conceptualism proposes a diseased writing practice, whereby writerly impulses are ignored or, at best, subsumed into choice. It is a writing that is intended to be *merely* interesting,⁹ in its ideational delineation, which are the limits imposed by the author, whose sole agency has been reduced to the role of this *imposer of limitations*. In short, if the conceptualists were to have their way, the author's role would be reduced to that of framer.

⁸ Elsewhere, Goldsmith suggests that popular culture, where this language finds a home, is also somehow more advanced. “And I was I was arguing for popular culture's become really really interesting it's become incredibly sophisticated” (Goldsmith 2001, 36-37).

⁹ Here, I realize I have echoed Michael Fried’s famous put-down of Minimalism (or what he calls “literalist work”) as being “merely interesting” as opposed to boring (165). While I find Fried’s advocacy of abstract painting intriguing on many grounds, I should note here that I strongly disagree with the overall thrust of his argument in “Art and Objecthood” against “theatricality.”

Indeed, conceptualism, as a practice, serves to draw the viewer's attention away from the content, towards its container: the frame.

“In 1959 the poet and artist Brion Gysin claimed that writing was fifty years behind painting”: a reminder that the Language Poets, the major movement in North American avant-garde poetics that precedes Conceptualism, also often chanted (Goldsmith 2011, 13). Goldsmith and his fellow Conceptualists (among them Vanessa Place and Rob Fitterman) have responded by adapting Joseph Kosuth's idea that the central impetus behind art should be choosing and nominating (i.e. framing) pre-existent content, and applying it to the field of writing. The Internet is regarded as a potential co-conspirator, rather than the pariah it is viewed as in increasingly fervent debates surrounding economies of attention.

The author may not be dead as she was once regarded in the recent past, but her agency is no longer linked with creation, but with selection, with framing.

Make no mistake: conceptualism, according to Goldsmith, is *the* defining writing movement of the new century.

The twenty-first century, with its queries so different than that of the last, finds me responding from another angle. If it's a matter of simply cutting and pasting the entire Internet into a Microsoft Word document, then what becomes important is what you – the author – decides [sic] to choose. Success lies in knowing what to include and – more important – what to leave out. If all language can be transformed into poetry *by merely reframing* (my emphasis-TJ) – an exciting possibility – then she who reframes words in the most charged and convincing

way will be judged the best. I agree that the moment we throw judgment and quality out the window we're in trouble. Democracy is fine for YouTube, but it's generally a recipe for disaster when it comes to art. While all words may be created equal – and thus treated – the way in which they're assembled isn't; it's impossible to suspend judgment and folly to dismiss quality. Mimesis and replication doesn't eradicate authorship, rather they simply place new demands on authors who must take these new conditions into account as part and parcel of the landscape when conceiving of a work of art: if you don't want it copied, don't put it online. (Goldsmith 2011, 10)

In defending his literary tactics – and simultaneously endowing them with further metaphorical gait – Goldsmith appropriates the corporate language of marketing. Writing is no longer about *creating*, but about *managing*. The world, once a canvas, is now a stock portfolio. “How I make my way through this thicket of information – how I manage it, how I parse it, how I organize and distribute it – is what distinguishes my writing from yours” (Goldsmith 2011, 1).

Since “context is the new content,” we are meant to judge the quality of a work by the interestingness of the concept deployed, rather than the content therein (Goldsmith 2011, 3). We thus don't necessarily need to waste our time reading an entire work; just knowing what *framing device* the author has employed is enough. Thus, Goldsmith “managed” the “uncreative” endeavor of putting every word he spoke for a period of one week into a book, *Soliloquy*, that numbers at nearly five hundred pages and is, according to the author himself, unreadable (2001).

What, then, is the point of publishing such a work? Perhaps by doing what the author tells us not to do – taking a closer look at *Soliloquy* – knowing what it is and looking at it anyway, will help us determine what kind of author Goldsmith *really* is.¹⁰

Since Goldsmith is apparently aiming for a strict separation of form and content, and wants the reader's focus to be on the former rather than the latter, let us look at those features of *Soliloquy* that are most readily identifiable. We will find right away that these features are tied to what often goes unspoken about the social context in which Goldsmith situates his work. But this context is just as much a part of the frame as the formal and aesthetic constraints that Goldsmith imposes on the work.

Goldsmith operates almost exclusively in the North American avant-garde poetry world. This is the contextual audience to whom he addresses his many essays, manifestos, and uncreative work, as well as the realm from which most of his critics and supporters come. The title of the work, *Soliloquy*, is the first and most obvious framing point at our disposal, one that clearly identifies the work – however provocatively we may wish to take it – as a work of poetry – or, to be exact, a work of poetry embedded within the context of drama.

The badness is in the composition itself. There's a sort of laziness flagrantly put on display here – I can't be bothered to sit down and put in the hard work that is required in *creating* a work of literature, so I will merely record myself and create a book within a period of one week – a book really quite sizeable in length, comparable to a work like, say, *Ulysses*, which took James Joyce seven years to write. Imagination is held at bay, and the idiotic machinations of our everyday speech are put on display – and, in this case, are hardly flattering, as Goldsmith reveals

¹⁰ Marjorie Perloff, one of Goldsmith's biggest critical supporters, engages in a similar task with regards to his work *Traffic* (Perloff, 151).

himself to be a self-obsessed, cynical opportunist and careerist, more concerned with elevating his status than maintaining the integrity of his projects. As Ron Silliman has noted, “the cult of the artist [is] his own work of art. [...] Kenny Goldsmith’s actual art project is the projection of Kenny Goldsmith” (Perloff, 149).

The poetico-dramatic form of the soliloquy is further emphasized by the headings of each section. Goldsmith employs dramatic convention to delineate each of his seven days; this *Soliloquy* encompasses seven acts, rather than stanzas or chapters. It reverts to “soliloquy” in the classical sense in its implication that the drama resides in the language itself. Of course, Goldsmith’s usage of the term is ironic, even facetious, in his insistence that his is a “drama” that is not meant to be read, much less enacted. In this, he is the sole actor, the only one ever designated to recite this soliloquy – author and star wrapped into one – and performing for an audience of zero, a “thinkership” that is meant to merely be aware that an improvised performance of this type once, and only once, took place.

Goldsmith’s soliloquy, however, differs from traditional soliloquy, in that the former is traditionally spoken not only by the actor, but to the actor himself, as an aside: it is the internal monologue *externalized* for the benefit of the audience present. It represents a fracturing of the fourth wall, one of the few accepted violations of the theatrical scenario, allowing the audience in on what they are otherwise unable to access – that is, consciousness itself. Therefore, we could hardly compare *Soliloquy* to the so-called “stream of consciousness” that we find in *Ulysses*, as all of the words included in the book were, in fact, originally spoken aloud to the individuals that Goldsmith interacted with in that particular week. Rather, the work puts on display a *lack* of consciousness, a spillage of mindless banalities – the exact opposite of the literary language

established by Goldsmith's Modernist forebears, as in this fascinating excerpt: "Yeah. Yeah. Uh huh. Wow. Huh. Right. Right. Right. Of course. Yeah. Yeah. Right. Right. Oh wow. Yeah. Right. Right. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Oh, that's great. That's great. How you doin'? Going to John's? OK. We were here. Kenny and Cheryl. Hi" (Goldsmith 2001, 58).

Soliloquy, then, is a transgressive reversal of the soliloquy form; indeed, when reading the work, it is probably not disagreeable to suggest that there is an *absence* of the intimacy and depth of thought one finds in Shakespeare's soliloquies, which Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis would come to revel in as paradigmatic manifestations of the unconscious.¹¹

What about another kind of reader, a reader of the sort that Goldsmith doesn't anticipate? In fact, the way I read it would likely piss Goldsmith off. For I read it not as an act of conceptual writing, or an instance of poetry, nor as a record of fact, but as a novel. On this level – a first-person narrative – the work certainly fails, because of its inherent flatness. If we are, again, to turn to Shakespeare, whose prowess as a characterologist was unique and radical for his time – his use of the soliloquy would both allow the character to speak out loud and ventriloquize the character's thoughts, then dissect them in an unheralded display of the mechanisms of self-consciousness; watching or reading a Shakespeare play, the resulting effect is that one watches a character become someone else. None of these qualities are "managed" by Goldsmith qua character; he remains the same rather shallow and conceited figure throughout the 600+ pages.

Soliloquy could also be considered as, say, a monologue. A playscript, a film. An essay, a document. Even a work of visual art, as Goldsmith himself admits in Act One, when he is describing the project:

¹¹ Freud, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, arrived at his formulation of the Oedipal Complex through a reading of *Hamlet*. Lacan also turned to Shakespeare's hero several times throughout his work (Lacan 11-52).

Here's a here's a new project I'm working on. OK? I'm taking a leap of language. I'm recording everything I'm saying say for an entire week. I mean it no, I'm always talking about the volume of language that's around I mean what what would your language look like if it was if you collected every piece of shit word you that you said for an entire week. Yeah and what would it look like and you know what form would it you know it say you just printed it out and put it in a big stack and it's a visual representation of all the crap that you speak all week. That see there it's a visual representation of language. It may not be exciting but it's a great concept it's you know it could in other words that could be I could take the language that I record myself speaking all week no one else speaking, just the shit that I spew myself and think now, how could I represent this visually differently? That's raw material. How could that be represented you know if every word of language was a drop of water and I counted it out and dropped it into a glass would this represent my language for a week? You know how many jellybeans in the jar kind of thing. You know that could be a really you know and I could have different representations of that week's language in different forms as visual (Goldsmith 2001, 15).

If the work's status as poetry can be questioned, then let's shift this to a larger frame-focus: Why should this work even exist as writing? Obviously, beyond the immediacy of Goldsmith's spoken voice, the originary form that the work takes is as an audio recording. (As does Andy Warhol's

a: a novel – clearly *Soliloquy*'s precursor in this vein, though Warhol never intended the work to serve as anything other than a *novel*, nor attempted to dictate the ways in which it should be read/considered [1968].)¹²

This begs the question: What if the reader were to reclaim her autonomy and consider the work without the frame? The answer is quite simple: The entire Conceptual Writing enterprise would collapse. By ignoring the framer's disclaimer, I, the bad (disobedient) reader, cause the work to fail. This is because the framing devices that Conceptual Writing works with are, in fact, purely contextual. Whereas the Modernist enterprise was largely oblivious to the reader – an oblivion that cloaked a respect for the reader's autonomy, which reached its full articulated zenith in Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" – Conceptual Writing is, in fact, obsessed with assuming full control over the activity of the reader, in spite of its apparent claims to the contrary. Hence the need for the preface, for the explanatory text/essay preceding the main, conceptual work – a text that assumes primary importance over the work itself. One need look no further than the template employed by Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin in their anthology, *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, wherein each work included is preceded by a text explaining the compositional methodology employed by the author.

Considered from a different angle, it could be argued that Goldsmith has accomplished little more than boiling down his aesthetic position to a play of semantics. Take a look at his usage of the terms "creative" and "creativity" in the following statement:

¹² *a, a novel*, was a "soliloquy" that Warhol recorded by following his "superstar" Ondine (Robert Olivo) around continually with his tape recorder for 24 hours. However it was actually taped continuously during three different long taping sessions amounting to 24 hours; August 1965 then Summer 1966 and May 1967. All the incidental noises were also included and transcribed in the book which was described as "conceptually unique." This was the first book that Andy Warhol "wrote" with his tape recorder (but not the first one he published).

Having worked in advertising for many years as a “creative director,” I can tell you that, despite what cultural pundits might say, creativity – as its [sic] been defined by our culture with its endless parade of formulaic novels, memoirs, and films – is the thing to flee from, not only as a member of the “creative class” but also as a member of the “artistic class.” (Goldsmith 2011, 9)

Well, there we have it: An advertising professional admitting that what is now called “creativity” in our culture is but mere formula, and as such, must be run away from in order for genuine innovation to emerge. But wait... isn’t “innovate” just another word for “create”? And isn’t doing something intentionally “uncreative” just as uncreative, in actuality, as what is considered to be “creative” by our current debased standards? Maybe we are looking in the wrong place for answers. Perhaps our focus should be on the end of that sentence quoted above.

Goldsmith – whose other books of “poetry” include a re-typing of an entire issue of the *New York Times* and a transcription of broadcast traffic reports – is not the first writer to endorse the use of plagiarism. The novelist Kathy Acker spoke and wrote often of “pla(y)giarism” in her work, even enduring (like Baselitz) legal consequences, including a lawsuit from author Harold Robbins for her appropriation of his writing in one of her novels.

It is telling that the legal implications of plagiarism are completely evaded in Goldsmith’s work – and surprising, given the fact that one of the other leading Conceptual writers, Vanessa Place, is a lawyer by day. The willful defiance of copyright and intellectual property laws

certainly seems like a radical idea on the surface. Then again, Goldsmith – the advertising creative director turned Ivy League academic – has never been in a position where he has been forced to make a living off of his own art. It is this obliviousness to the plight of writers – and let’s be specific and say “novelists” here, since few poets are in this category – who depend on royalties that gives Conceptualism a rather disturbing side, and why it is essentially an affair of the White Collar elite; one may even speak of Conceptualism as the White Collar avant-garde. In her many public appearances, which have the aura of publicity stunts, Vanessa Place dons corporate attire and adopts the language of advertising, making her pronouncements in a cold, dry, emotionless voice. Recently, she has gone so far as to launch her own corporation, Vanessa Place Inc., through which, as CEO, she offers “poetry” “products,” such as a limited edition book of twenty \$1 bills, sold at a price of fifty dollars. Whether her stance is meant to be “ironic” or not, Place operates from a position that is fully compliant with corporate fascism. Goldsmith, for his part, operates in a meritocratic realm in which being an effective networker has replaced talent and integrity as the key virtue in “getting ahead.” Here’s one of Goldsmith’s many futurist pronouncements: “Careers and canons won’t be established in traditional ways,” meaning, presumably, based on talent and ability. “I’m not so sure that we’ll still have careers in the same way we used to” (Goldsmith 2011, 10). Having outed himself as a status-obsessed, aggressive networker in *Soliloquy*, the message becomes increasingly clear.

To an extent, we can excuse Goldsmith. Writers working with avant-garde ideas have long had to defend their work via essays, lectures, and interviews. Alain Robbe-Grillet is the most prominent example that comes to mind, an author who had to spend so much time defending his work, so despised and misunderstood was it by the French literary establishment of

his time, that the resulting essays collected in his *Pour un nouveau roman* are today as famous as his novels and films.

Goldsmith is on similar territory, only it doesn't bother him the way it clearly bothered Robbe-Grillet, because Goldsmith knows his work is unreadable and actively discourages people from reading it (whereas with Robbe-Grillet, it was the opposite.) This is all part of Goldsmith's grandest project of all, his *agent provocateur* schtick. Goldsmith constantly demonstrates, however, that this is nothing more than a schtick; all of his provocations are followed with apologies.¹³ With the uncontainable impatience of the *arriviste*, Goldsmith wants to have it both ways: to be both an *enfant terrible* and a respected member of the faculty. He makes jibes at the establishment that he so desperately wants to be a part of; all of his theoretical writings and performances – especially his recent reading at the White House, when he was the only “experimental” poet invited for a televised evening of live poetry readings before Michelle Obama – are aggressive attempts at canon insertion.

In the most cynical sense, Goldsmith is truly an artist of our era, if the motto of our era is taken to be: let him, who is the most adept at networking and self-promotion, win. But it doesn't take much analysis to see how short-sighted Goldsmith's supporters really are. For what they fail to realize is the troubling reactionary nature of the entire conceptual writing enterprise. It is

¹³ After aggressively making the case that Conceptual Writing should be considered *the only* significant literary movement of the 21st century, he suddenly steps back and realizes there are other sorts of writers standing in the room: “I'm not saying that such writing should be discarded: Who hasn't been moved by a great memoir? But I'm sensing that literature – infinite in its potential of ranges and expressions – is in a rut, tending to hit the same note again and again, confining itself to the narrowest of spectrums, resulting in a practice that has fallen out of step and unable to take part in arguably the most vital and exciting cultural discourses of our time. I find this to be a profoundly sad moment – and a great lost opportunity for literary creativity to revitalize itself in ways it hasn't imagined” (Goldsmith 2011, 7). Besides the obvious objection – that “literature” is such a general term here that the argument devolves into meaninglessness before it is even fully stated – we might ask: Isn't creativity, by definition, boundless? Why, then, has the time suddenly come to kiss it good night?

perhaps more than just a mere coincidence that this brand of writing reached its critical peak in the United States during the Bush Years. A “school” of writing that bound itself to, that argued for the supposed valor of prescriptive thinking, a banalization of language; procedural, rule-based work – all hegemonial markers of what the Flarfists would describe as the New Era. A fetishization of the Law, the frame that regulates the flow. Though whereas the Flarfists satirized the period’s dumbing-down of language and thought in their work by using the tools of mirroring and embodiment subversively, the conceptualists’ approach was dangerously accommodating in its earnestness. As one critic summed it up:

Captured specimens of a linguistic field, conceptual works not only exemplify the crass and bankrupt state of language, its inability to signify with credibility let alone authenticity – they are the discursive formation of an adaptive system bootstrapping itself to the next level of mind meld and social order. (Drucker)

No wonder conceptual writing was institutionalized so swiftly; it was *readymade* for institutionalization.

Conceptualism delivers raw information, intentionally resisting authorial mediation, and, even in formal terms, brings nothing new to the table. This is rather dangerous, since conceptualism is meant to be about ideas, rather than content – at least the *ideas* should be new, as they often were in classic conceptual art. Conceptual writing, on the other hand, is a practice favored by people with nothing to say, and very little in the way of ability to contribute. It

reveals a lot about the dearth of critical thinking in our culture that it has been accepted so widely, even in (especially in) academic circles. It represents a triumph of the New Era.

What its triumph implies is that poetry – as a disruptive force, and which conceptual writing positions itself against – is needed now more than ever. In labeling their anthology “against expression,” the conceptualists reveal a lot. For if expressionism implies a limitlessness to the bounds of authorial agency when it comes to engaging with the world via art, conceptualism stands for closedness, extreme reduction, and mechanicity. There is nothing revolutionary about what conceptualism stands for, and it is difficult to fathom Goldsmith’s underlying assertion that there is something particularly radical or novel to this approach. Conceptual art, after all, already “did” conceptual writing – that is, conceptual art very often *was* a writing practice – back in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁴ Anyone with the vaguest cognizance of recent art history, then, can only regard Goldsmith’s claim, that a practice that originated some forty years ago should be regarded as *the* new avant-garde practice of the 21st century, with suspicion.

But of course, Goldsmith only likes to be reminded of history when it’s convenient for him. In one interview, he asserts, “Any notion of history has been leveled by the internet. Now, it’s all fodder for the remix and recreation of works of art: free-floating toolboxes and strategies unmoored from context or historicity” – essentially a repetition of the tired, trite and naïve PoMo conviction that we’ve arrived at the end of history and are thus somehow divorced from it (Goldsmith and Smith). At the same time, Goldsmith appropriated one of Sol LeWitt’s foundational texts of conceptual art for one of his own conceptual writing manifestos, and

¹⁴ If there was anything radical about it at the time, it was in the way it disrupted the norms of how the art market functioned (see Alberro).

frequently makes statements that sound like near-replicas from the mouth of one of his heroes, Andy Warhol. What does Goldsmith really believe in, other than the need to assume positions of power in the culture industry and academia?

Once a larger public grew immune to the provocation of boring, repetitious, uninteresting language deployed in their work, Goldsmith and Place quickly realized that they would have to act fast in order to maintain the glare of the spotlight. In March 2015, a week after the US Department of Justice cleared a white police officer on all charges in the shooting death of an unarmed black man named Michael Brown, Goldsmith read his new “poem,” a slightly edited version of Brown’s autopsy report ending with a description of the victim’s genitals, called “The Body of Michael Brown,” at a poetry conference at Brown University, eliciting condemnation and disgust throughout the US poetry world. Just a few months earlier, Place elicited similarly negative reactions for her project of transcribing the most blatantly racist passages from Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* on Twitter. At a time of profound racial duress in the United States, neither of the two white poets found it necessary to apologize for their actions, instead presenting themselves as would-be victims of censorship and martyrs of freedom of expression. Goldsmith, for one, made a statement in which he felt that his artwork, and all artwork in general, should be considered as divorced from political concerns and evaluated solely on its aesthetic and formal merits. Such an argument – which is nothing new – is intended to excuse unthinkingness on the part of the artist, when in fact *all* writing is political implicitly or

explicitly, whether or not one chooses to acknowledge it. Of course, it's hard to do that when there is so little there in terms of artistic integrity; as one respondent put it, Goldsmith and Place's actions were little more than "cynical means for drawing attention to work that might otherwise not spawn much debate" (Lee). What's more, they effectively cemented their positions – and that of Conceptualism – on the same side as the Law that excused the white police officers for murdering Brown.

Indeed, there was no self-consciousness displayed in Goldsmith and Place's reactions to the charges of racism and insensitivity leveled at them recently; only the typical cold clinicality of Place, the career lawyer, and the *art pour l'art* evasions of Goldsmith, the would-be dandy with not half the wit of an Oscar Wilde. Can we believe, then, that it is just a coincidence that conceptualism seems to appeal mainly to people of a certain socioeconomic class and a certain skin color? Is a white collar avant-garde the true "way forward" for literature in the 21st century? Are expression and originality dead because wealthy white professional careerists calling themselves poets declare it to be so?

While both Goldsmith and Place comprehend the importance of provocation in garnering headlines, neither of the two have proven themselves remotely capable of expression and originality (let alone humor.) In order to put forth a convincing argument for moving past something, one should at least be able to prove first that they have mastered it. Goldsmith, along with many of his fellow conceptualists, comes to writing with the acquired knowledge of the intellectual, rather than the experiential wisdom and need for conveyance found in the artist/poet. This is why he is able to take the term "experimental writing," a term most writers are suspicious of – *especially* those writers classified as "experimental" by critics – at face value. This is not to say that writers don't experiment – every artist does – it is a part of craftsmanship; writing, in its

published form, however, is arguably meant to appear *after* the experiments have been done.

What the conceptualists are content to give us is the experiments themselves – a *gesture* that is meant to be provocative, even though the *results* are more often than not offensive or just plain boring.

With its strong anti-gestural bias, there is no place, no value for the body-mind machine, for vehicularity, in the conceptual writing enterprise. Conceptualism clearly favors mind, while negating the primacy given to body in the classical conceptualist enterprise. This positions conceptual writing quite far away from the Flarf poets, who integrate the body's functionalities throughout much of the content of their poems. In fact, one might even go so far as to read Goldsmith's "The Body of Michael Brown" as a clear statement of conceptualism's *violent* opposition to the body, to expression; to *vehicularity*.

This is ironic, since the failure of the conceptualist enterprise can be readily located within the limitations of Goldsmith's own frame. When we follow his line of thinking all the way to its logical conclusion – something Goldsmith himself appears unable to do – we find that the *discourse slash criticism period* surrounding a work assumes more importance than the work itself. Goldsmith would like so much to just cut it off at the artist's statement that explains the work; unfortunately, the conceptualist project is much bigger than Goldsmith himself projects, trespassing the boundaries of the individual authorial ego, which he still clings to so desperately. In other words: it's not just what Goldsmith says or writes about *Soliloquy* or "The Body of Michael Brown" that is more important than these works themselves, but what his critics write is then also more essential than the actual works. It is thus ironic how selective and evasive Goldsmith and Place have been in responding to recent criticism of the controversies they have provoked, more keen on re-tweeting rare praise for their actions than on responding to the many

lengthy and thoughtful pieces of criticism attacking them. For their supposedly ironic stances, there is something profoundly lacking in their sense of irony – which, again, calls into question their ability and their status as poets. (Who has ever heard of a poet with no aptitude for irony?) The uncomfortable truth we reach about Goldsmith is that he turns out to be just as lazy in his thinking as he is in his practice: he might give his thinkership lots to think about, but the conclusions they subsequently reach so often occlude his efforts. Reading Goldsmith, we arrive at no new conclusions, but a sad universal truth – the very one, we might suspect, that Goldsmith has fought so hard to conceal: Not everyone who calls themselves a poet actually deserves the title.

Ryan Trecartin's *I-Be Area* and Frameless Writing

Let's say there is always something outside the frame, lurking or knocking or waiting, unwelcome perhaps or unnoticed — the stranger or the strangeness that refuses to come inside, or that we ignore, or deliberately keep at bay. What happens if the frame breaks and this thing, this otherness, gets inside? Doesn't everything change, the frame as well as each thing it once held apart? And doesn't the fact of our acknowledging it shift our focus, alter the syntax from one of tidy resolution to one that verges on chaos, or cacophony, or meaninglessness, as we enter this suspended irresolute space of rejection and acceptance, until this strangeness is absorbed? It is the pressure of this strangeness that might in fact produce the work of art in the first place; the desire to accommodate it, to bring it into relation with what already is; we might say that what comes to be known of a particular age or spirit has to do with this adjustment, this inclusion, which alters old habits of thought.

– Ann Lauterbach, “The Night Sky II”

Perhaps traditional writing practices are, in fact, a dead end. It could be that writing has finally reached that plateau so long ago attained by the other arts, having left behind its traditional

perimeters in polluting the once-sacred spaces of other, formerly autonomous disciplines. Perhaps now is the time for us to take into consideration writing “in the expanded field,” to employ Rosalind Krauss's famous phrase for sculpture. And in order to do that, perhaps we would do best to look at one of those contemporary practitioners whose expanded field bewilders, if not desiccates, the frame.

Though a “video artist” by convention, Ryan Trecartin is also an artist for whom writing plays a formidable role in his overall practice. His work departs from a zone that will be immediately recognizable to most of us. The Reality TV script is, by now, formulaic, easy enough to decode by nearly anyone. It’s been around now for a generation, the youngest among us has known no other function of television other than constructing and presenting a mediated form of reality. Ryan Trecartin's work, and in particular his film *I-Be Area*, is both an amplification and distortion of that script. Reality TV changes our whole perception of reality; reality is now something that you watch on a screen. In *I-Be Area*, we get screen upon screen upon screen upon endless screen. The screen is both filter and transmitter of heavily performed and heavily edited reality. Although there are many different settings, the entire action of the film occurs within a single zone, which is both RealityTV amplified and Reality© amplified, a space where all interactions are heavily scripted in order to orchestrate the illusion of chaos and a natural collusion of conflicting wills, a locale controlled by a god whose iterability manifests itself in a total situationality that is occluded by the all-recording digitalized über-presence. Affectation and gesture become just as important as the text being deployed by the participants in these multiproliferatory screens; they become the emotive norms that encase the seemingly random collage of words and ideas that form the script – thoughts melting into one another linguistically because one thought can never be completed: a New Real Order of distraction.

There are many different ways of watching *I-Be Area*. It's like taking a different ride each time: There is the participatory way, wherein you join the party, projecting your own zone of being and becoming into the “total minimal situation” that the film proclaims; the narrative engulfment, in which you attempt to navigate the “multilinear” (Kevin McGarry) pathways that the plot entails; the linguistico-linear tributary, immersing yourself in the piece's pure language stream, finding the sense in the seeming nonsense; imagistic engulfment, giving yourself over to the sensory overload in the piece's manic cuts, the repeated strains of neon color, the detailed visual anarchy of the sets and costumes; the energo-intensive path, wherein affectation becomes your beaming guide; the elemental way, in which you attempt to sort out the millions of parts that form the spectral collage of the whole.

In all likelihood, however, your way of taking in *I-Be Area* will combine all or many of these methods, thus putting you in a schizoid delirium that may repel or enliven you, depending on your openness towards destabilization and the manic mediation that forms the fabric of RTV and R©. All of your impulses become amplified, the aim of your desires is no longer certain, stable identity becomes a joke.

It can be a discomfiting ride to take, which makes it all the more worthwhile.

It should be noted, however, that there can be no characterological way of watching *I-Be Area*, because in a topia where identity is so fluid, there can be nothing so solid as character – thus there is no such thing as a standard linear narrative. Rather, the triumph of simultaneity – both the multiplicity inherent in being and in situationality. (In one of Trecartin's subsequent films from the *Any Ever* series, a character suggests re-writing the US Constitution and replacing the word “God” with “Internet” and “people” with “situations.”)

If the film can be said to be “about” anything (this “about” is always the worst thing anyone could ask of an artist, as it necessitates *going outside* the work – though we often do), then it is the dissolution of identity into a sort of digital being – a hallmark of the New Real Order. Don't like your identity? Buy a new one online, pay with plastic. Don't react; redact! “Sometimes I feel like a prequel to a horrible person,” says one persona early on in the film. This embrace of becoming – a multiplicity of selves (everyone is different people, different genders) – is certainly a generational influence; an abundance of youth marks every Trecartin statement. Despite the current shadows looming over the civilized West, we must keep in mind that the RTV generation was reared into an attitude reflecting an overload of confidence, unafraid of the consequences of taking risks – unafraid of appearing stupid. It is this latter fact that allows for so much of the vileness of Reality TV, and which *I-Be Area* subtly mocks. “What will I be when I grow up?” asks I-Be after he has been transformed into a new avatarial persona, Oliver. “A production company!” s/he answers. Media and the means of mediation are newly morphed into one with technology's showboating and accessibility; not only is everything shot in HD, the cameras are often visible and frequently held by the speaking personae. Nearly every line of dialogue in the film is spoken directly to the camera, reflecting a consciousness of the process of mediation, a demolition of the fourth wall borrowed from the theater.

Departing from the recurring concept of adoption – of babies, but also, by extension, implying the incorporative becoming of new selves – individuals drift into new personae readily and without hesitation. Everything is temporary, and so the heavy burden of ontological meaning is absent. An avatar can become “a toxic bisexual wearing unstable flip flops” before finding hermsself a living, walking meme. Dialects and personalities can be picked up and discarded alongside wigs and make-up. Tangible is intangible and vice versa. Interactions are pure – no

psychology, just a super-psychology, overburdened with mediated emotions. “Major” and “minor” – events, personae, substance, objects – become equal and are thus no longer worthwhile distinguishing.

The loss of agency this process entails is not necessarily a bad thing. In the film's “Moms” scene, in which a group of mothers gathers in a middle-class suburban living room in order to vote one of the mothers off the show that the film has suddenly become, the excluded mother proclaims, “I can't believe New Jersey happened to me. It was like writing a book I had no control over.” Instead, in such an equalized universe, a realm where agency is absent or altered, in which subjectivity is therefore spectral and momentary, it all comes down to mattering. “That will be a good day,” shouts the excluded mom: “When it won't matter!”

Projectile bodies mattering all over the supra-mediated normvoid.

“Do you know what your dad is?”

“My dad is a building that we lit on fire.”

Just as you begin to think it's all like a high school drama improv class gone totally haywire, the setting shifts and enters into... well, what appears to be a high school drama improv class. While narrative shifts occur all the time throughout *I-Be Area*, in keeping with the multilinearity that is the underlying aura of the piece, a major shift nonetheless can be detected about an hour into the film. Or, perhaps: a shift of realms. This new realm is a classroom compound overruled by a pregnant authoritarian teacher, Jamie, and her muse, Ramada Omar. Jamie sits with her legs spread wide open and squats constantly while standing, always about to give birth. Ramada Omar rolls around on the floor, squealing “This is my favorite interactive!”

(“It's not phone, you person, go call yourself!” responds Jamie.)

How does all this mattering come to resolve itself in the light of the “total minimal situation”? Perception, after all, can also be a physical object in these heightened terms. Saying is an object; so is this gesture. “No symbols where none intended,” Beckett famously wrote at the end of his novel *Watt*, but how to read in the absence of symbols? Do reading and being become intertwined through projection and participation? How does the frame manage to function when its content's aim is to completely decimate the material structure of its container?

We have to see the RTV zone for the metaphysical failure that it is. Just as, say, human laws cannot physically prevent someone from committing a crime, our own physical containers can no longer contain us, if they ever did. *I-Be Area* is the drama of this failed containment, a literal and ritual purging of the frame. Don't tell me what something *is*; rather, inhabit it.

In the end, the personae trapped in the zone that *I-Be Area* inhabits are desperate to get out of it, to bust it up. They are constantly picking up hammers, breaking glass, destroying the set, fueling the increasingly frenzied chaos that is the artificial guise of their inhabited voidosphere.

Where to go once one finally manages to escape? Escaping is never about re-location – it is about the very act of escaping. The answer is never “there,” more like “there-ing.” Perhaps it's too unsettling, this sudden cognizance that there is no final destination, only constant movement in store. If there is any true reality, then it is in the machinic nature of shifty becomings, the drive to escape the inescapable. Perhaps the right attitude is best expressed by one of Trecartin's all-too-“real” personae: “Fuck you and sign out.”

With Trecartin's example, we are able to see how far we have gotten away from Barthes' "death of the author," arriving at a rather more Nietzschean conception of the über-Author; the apparent multiplicities of Trecartin we find in *I-BE AREA* illustrates the multiplicitous nature of authorship available within this model. I: subject, object, the multiple: the every/any-author, ready to be inhabited. Just like all the objects I surround myself by in my day-to-day.

Becoming Subject: Considerations of Vehicularity and “Wild Writing”

At the root of it, we have the struggle of imposition – that rappedance that language does which is a gesturing towards containment, a process that can never be completed. Nietzsche complained of it in *On the Genealogy of Morals*: that version of morality wherein the aristocracy coins a word for a thing, and in so doing, effectively gains possession of it. Of course, in doing so, the aristocratic class is also lying to itself, because in point of fact meaning-formation takes place on quite other terrain – it is more subterranean and hence geological than anything that might be inferred by a mere word. The sign winds up being, despite our best efforts, wrong; but the meaning is wrong as well – at best speculative; the only thing we may cling to is the fact that certainty is an illusion. Rather than considering this a depressive force, we should see it as the life force that it is; indeed, a total divorce from meaning – were such a thing possible – might be the closest we get to the experience of “freedom,” as it is often posited.

Visual artists working outside the domain of spoken and written language have known this for some time, and now that writing is beginning to enter into the domain of art, the “art world,” then it stands to take the trouble – for it is a troubling thought – to articulate the stance once again. There are four things: there is image, there is word, there is sound, there is gesture. We favor the last, gesture, because it is so fleeting. If there is a semiotic equivalent, then it is the scrawl – the mark of gesturality that posits itself somewhere between word and image, yet is markedly asignifying. It is that thing that can be inferred, but hardly captured.

We could conjure a “wild writing,” a writing to come, that positions itself within a cognizance of language’s ultimate failure, its impossibility to truly *mean*, and that frees language from its increasingly endangered position as a vehicle for conveying forms of meaning acceptable to the masses in the so-called information age, and rather utilizes language as a medium for creating new sounds, new meanings. Language *against* the law, against information. Wild writing would then be part of a tradition that includes the Russian Futurists, the American L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, asemic writing... The Stein of *Tender Buttons*, the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake*, the Guyotat of *Eden Eden Eden*.

Who would create this. That is a question. We might conceive of a new means of picturing the creating being. The being-as-object. The subject. The machine... A model that reverts to a physicalist standpoint, refuting the body–mind division of the Cartesian. For mind is but an *extension* of body, and vice versa. A wild writing would first of all be a writing of the body. One in which body takes precedence over mind, and thus: the body–mind vehicle. But what does it mean to become a body–mind vehicle? It means, first of all, that you *program yourself*. When we speak of programming the self, then we leave behind the norms of human psychology and begin speaking the language of the mechanic, the language of the machine. But a vehicle is a very particular sort of machine, a machine that is defined by *movement*, by constant motion. That is what it is designed for; not staticity, not the contained motion of, say, the blender. So: a vehicle is a machine, but a specific kind of machine. Program yourself before someone else does it for you. This should be the ultimate pedagogical aim.

As human beings, we have a quality that distinguishes us from other objects. It is our remarkable ability, not just to create things outside of ourselves, but to self-program. Self-programming, one becomes an object with agency, a subject. Subjectivity is rooted in the

awareness that creation is not merely a mental process, but a physical, bodily one, as well. No Cartesian splits are acknowledged by the subjectivist, the automaticist – by the wild writer. Instead, the principle of extension rules, wherein mind is but an extension of body, and vice versa. The subjectivist is constantly trying to evade the frame, to go outside the territorial entrapments of the socius. Subjectivity concerns itself with the mechanics of the body–mind machine, rather than the results; hence the machine’s *vehicularity*. That is to say, the purpose is the process, the movement, the action – not what it completes. Never the final product. Which is not to say that the final product has no value. But due to the way the rest of the socius has been programmed, and the fact that the automaticist’s gesture is a *contra*-programming, the socius’s natural reaction to the final product is one of revulsion and rejection; hence, *bad art*, a “wild writing,” is produced as a critical reaction to the conditions of meaning-formation outlined above.

For a “wild writing,” a boundary-less etching into the future unknown, a writing that is inherently frameless, it becomes all about extension – the self no longer a self but a vehicle, the writing a trajectory *extending* always outwards in countless directions – projective pathways melded to the earth. The earth is alive and all life ultimately sprang from the inanimate. If we are to accept this as a fact of evolution, then it follows that we can’t really tell what is alive anymore and what’s not. Wild writing would be a part of the hylozoic revivalism that is happening in other fields, such as philosophy (object-oriented ontology) and ecology. No longer any differentiating boundaries erected between the self and the art object, the ground and the sky, the creator and the created. Consider the object as a thing, no different than you, the subject. Your goal is to infest it with agency, even if it does not resemble verbatim the agency through which you perceive and mold perception. In going, the subject, self-object, I-object, gives off pollution,

which then becomes the art object. It is not the final destination, but a result of the ceaseless movement.

Identity politics was perhaps the last major mainstream attempt to cling to established categoricals as a means of affirming the significance of the subject. With a reconsideration of the universe from the standpoint of the being-object, we begin to see the fruitlessness of identity politics' quest of instance-finding, yet can still find and fight against the systematic forms of discrimination that human objects must combat in their daily peregrinations. Wild writing is programatically against this, all systems. This is what it means to operate *framelessly*. A robotics of the self need not exclude the political, social dimension, but the tactical considerations will be different for each subject. There is no army here. Nor can we declare that the subject has no thoughts, no emotions. But why anyway give thoughts and emotions primacy over the physical and spectral qualities of a subject?

Becoming subject is a way out: a method of leaving behind the old trappings of the self. Subjectivity goes beyond mere thingness in its necessitude to claim a spectral identity, as well as a concrete body-form. It considers that the object, beyond being mere thing, *is* vision, a perceptive device – a surface filled with ego eyes. The writing that shoots out of us thus forms a scape that runs parallel to the terrain we occupy. A being without the frame, without the law. A ground where wild gesture, constant movement is able to thrive – as this new ground is made out of gesture itself.

II. The Expressionist Essay

The essays in Part Two build upon many of the concepts introduced in Part One, while extending them into what I consider a new expressionist art criticism. In the first essay, for instance, George Kuchar is shown to be another proponent of the frameless cinematic writing found in Ryan Trecartin. The idea of vehicularity, elaborated in Part One, is further articulated in my essay on Dieter Roth, wherein the Barthesian notion of the dead author is overturned in favor of an ever-wandering, multiplicitous über-author. Furthermore, the notion of the “bad artist” is further explored in both Kuchar and Roth, while also manifesting in the third essay on Christian Schoeler.

In the early years of the 20th century, Expressionism came to be a readily identifiable force in painting, film, poetry, and prose fiction. Notions of a consensually agreed upon objective reality were increasingly rejected in favor of an art form that put the artist’s inner life at the forefront:

Twentieth-century art and esthetics are characterized by a growing disbelief in an objective reality. Emphasis has shifted from the outer world of empirical experience to the inner world that a man can test only against himself. As the subjective personality of the artist has assumed control, it has demanded, in place of the old passive contemplation, an active participation from the observer. This is perhaps the most important single factor in the development of the expressionist movement. (Selz 3)

There were also critics in all of these fields who were sympathetic to the new style, though with the exception of Wassily Kandinsky, none of them attempted to replicate that style in the content of their own critical writings; rather, they played the role of theoretical defenders (Kandinsky 1912; Kandinsky 1977). Chief among the early theoreticians was Wilhelm Worringer, who felt that the emphasis in painting should be on vision rather than knowledge, and revelation rather than observation (Selz 9). Furthermore, the psychological notion of *empathy*, which first gained currency during the German Romantic movement a century prior, re-gained force as the renewed basis of aesthetic enjoyment.¹⁵

These essays do both: elaborating the theoretical tenants behind the inner force of vehicularity, effectively rendering a new Expressionist poetics, while embracing the classic Expressionist claim of empathetic identification, putting forth a model of Expressionist writing. Such a writing entails a fearless deployment of the ‘I’, which becomes a wandering, infestive presence, in recognition that ‘I’ is always a multiplicity; this wandering ‘I’ comes to the forefront in particular in my essay on Christian Schoeler. Expressionist art writing simultaneously rejects quasi-scientific criticism’s strivings for “objectivity,” instead asserting a heightened state of *objectivity*, as argued in the final essay of the first section (“Becoming Subject”), wherein the self emerges as an object itself, indiscernible from the artwork: a project that will reach its apotheosis in object-oriented writing.

Kandinsky, the great art writer of Expressionism, wrote that “the problem of form is secondary in art. [...] [A]rt is above all a matter of content” (quoted in Selz 228). In rendering an

¹⁵ For a detailed exploration of empathy in Romanticism and Expressionism, see Morgan, especially 321-322.

expressionist art criticism, I have followed suit: while many of the concepts from Part One are further explored here, the content of the writing is never subservient to formal concepts or theory; rather, the concepts proceed from the processual flow of the writing: expression rules!

One can see clear instances of this quite clearly towards the end of the Kuchar essay, when the writing enters into an embodied state with regard to the *Weather Diaries*, and to an even greater extent near the end of the Roth essay with regard to the *Solo Scenes*. In the essays on Kuchar and Roth, we can see the clear development from a more traditional mode of essay-writing to an expressionist mode. The expressionist mode comes to predominate in my essay on Christian Schoeler, a painter with clear ties to Romanticism and Expressionism, in his avowal of the primacy of emotion in his work and his thorough rejection of conceptualism: content is privileged here over form. The essay diverges slightly from earlier concerns in the thesis with what we might deem my “new” expressionist poetics (vehicularity, extension), and takes up more classical expressionist concerns with issues like melancholia, sexuality, being, beauty, and the problem of sensuality; problems that are nonetheless relate to the “new” expressionist poetics in that they are all related to the body (i.e. the body-mind machine.) In employing a wavering ‘I’ in entering into the space of his paintings, I produce a proto-object-oriented writing. In this section’s final essay on Winston Chmielinski, the language becomes more abstract in invoking the substance and content of the painter’s “clusterfuck existentialism,” the abstract figuration found in his paintings. This could be seen as a further extension of the body-landscape phenomenon (“scapes”) found in so many of Schoeler’s works.

The formal departure from traditional modes of art criticism that reaches its apotheosis in my essays on Schoeler and Chmielinski will splinter off into a new form, ficto-criticism, found in Part Three. When empathy, the central force behind Expressionism, is successful, then one is

completely *within* the work one observes, as a contemporaneous critic of Expressionism noted; the idea of writing-as-embodiment as reflected in expressionist art criticism eventually reaches its fulfillment in object-oriented writing, subject of the fourth and final part (Selz 7).

George Kuchar: The Pervert's Recognition

“Extraterrestrial spaces are enclosed within the space of the Earth itself.”

- Pierre Guyotat (52)

The bad artist, in some sense, doesn't live in this world – “this world” being the sphere of existence governed by a real or imagined consensus – or else, dwells in this world in order to contaminate it, to draw attention to those things ungovernable by the socius. That which is excessive, that which we look away from in disgust. These things, this scum, being the primary focus of artists like Dieter Roth and George Kuchar throughout the duration of their long working lives. As one critic aptly put it, “Roth's five-decade career turned on the provocation of admitting decomposing matter and other dross into sanctioned art spaces, then delighting in the aggressive unsalability of the art that ensued.... [I]t's difficult to decide whether Roth's collapse of art into life yielded a radical, Dadaist dispersal or a heroization of the artist as a privileged figure whose every gesture qualifies as art. The answer, it seems, is that Roth achieved both – a position that makes his art by turns fascinating and fascinatingly vexed” (Fiske). One could say that George Kuchar, though working in a different medium – narrative film – and with a markedly different sensibility, attained something similar in his six-decade-long career.

“I've always believed in looking in the garbage for inspiration,” said George Kuchar in a 2005 interview. For Kuchar, the brutal banality of the everyday bucolic, the scatological, dances with its anti-corollary, the celestial, in a lifetime project of understanding through his own manic vehicularity. “If we need action,” says the voice of Kuchar at one point in *Weather Diary 5* as the

camera pans up towards an ominous gray sky, “we know where to look.” The joke is typical Kuchar fare, commingling his frustration with the lack of sexual stimulation in the cooped-up motel room he’s isolated himself in with the inherent dangers of the locality: the “Tornado Alley” region of Oklahoma that the filmmaker visited each spring for more than three decades. The artist’s body – its functions, failures, and peregrinations across the trashy landscape of a Middle American Nowheresville – is as much the subject, the object – the *subject* – as the severe weather that he fears and is simultaneously fascinated by. There is something quasi-spiritual, almost Rabelaisian about the quest: Want answers for the urges troubling us down here? – Look to the skies! The result is a seemingly endless, very personal theater of absurdity, the likes of which have no cinematic parallel.

George Kuchar’s career as a filmmaker can readily be divided up into three discernible phases: his earliest collaborations with twin brother Mike in the 1950s and 1960s, when the two emerged as pioneers of the early New York underground film scene (alongside such luminaries as Andy Warhol, Jonas Mekas, and Kenneth Anger); the chaotic and colorful films he made with his students each year, from the early 1970s up until his death in 2011, at the San Francisco Art Institute; and his later, more personal, diaristic video works.

The Kuchars were not yet teenagers when they began creating their own versions of the B-grade matinee cinema that they often skipped school to take in. These early works were inspired equally by the melodramas of Douglas Sirk – George later claimed to have seen *Written on the Wind* eleven times when it came out – as well as the double feature monster flicks that

filled cinema marquees throughout the 1950s – in short, the lowest of the low-brow (Stevenson 186). Working with friends and using materials acquired from thrift shops and parents' closets as props and costumes, they used 8mm cameras and shot on rooftops so as to have access to as much natural light as possible, since of course there was no budget for real sets, costumes, and lights.

By the time the 1960s rolled around, they were being fêted by the downtown avant garde for 8mm productions like *I Was a Teenage Rumpot*, *The Naked and the Nude*, and *Pussy On a Hot Tin Roof* – even though, with their geeky suits and thick, working-class Bronx accents, they did not exactly fit the hip downtown bohemian artist caricature. As Jesse Lerner notes, “For [Jonas] Mekas and company, the Kuchars were authentic cine-primitives, intuitive naïfs who achieved greatness in their profane innocence.”

Although they would continue living together in a shared apartment up until George's death in 2011, the twins would soon go their separate ways as filmmakers and artists, while also embarking upon remarkably distinct life paths. The turning point came in 1965, by which time they had upgraded to 16mm film. Midway through production of *Corruption of the Damned*, Mike suddenly lost interest and began working on his own sci-fi flick, *Sins of the Fleshapoids*. George would finish *Corruption* on his own, and the two films were respectively the brothers' first solo credits as filmmakers. The following year, George would make his most famous film to date, *Hold Me While I'm Naked*, which has been aptly summarized by Mark Finch:

George is a filmmaker frustrated by a leading lady who runs away with one of her co-stars. He is unable to find a suitable replacement because all his pals are

having sex in their showers. He himself takes a shower, interrupted by his mother's call to dinner. Faced with a plate of overcooked beets and other burnt offerings, George wonders whether there is indeed anything worth living for.

(Finch 77)

The film is notable for its establishing characteristics of what would become George's definitive style, which blends elements of the cinematic fantasy world the artist's imagination had been deeply entrenched in since early childhood with the bitter, harsh reality of a quotidian working-class existence. The blend is effortless – as in the film's opening sequence, with dramatic symphonic music underlining the turmoil of an upcoming chase scene, which is immediately followed by the sound of George's voice fervently directing the leading lady to run for her life as she escapes from an apartment building in a panic: For George, there is no real difference between the *constructedness* of the scene and the *constructing* of the scene; they are both equal players in the cinematic act.

Perhaps the only commonality the twins would come to share in the end was their heavy Bronx accent – one could never be quite sure which you were speaking with on the telephone – as well as their queerness, which often manifested itself through their work in tortuous relation to their Catholic upbringing. Mike, with his long guru-esque beard and somewhat withdrawn personality, would embark on a decidedly more spiritual quest – which included a journey to India, where he was spiked with strong psychedelic drugs, an experience that would mark him for life – George, clean-shaven and an outgoing chatterbox, always eager to communicate with anyone around him, was recruited to teach at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1971 (Kuchar and

Kuchar, 149-152). He would remain on the faculty until his death forty years later, always teaching the same class, essentially an apprenticeship: Whoever signed up for it got to work on a George Kuchar film, either as actor or crew member. By merging his teaching and filmmaking practices, Kuchar managed in this regard to produce an astonishing quantity of films and videos over the years; though no definitive number yet exists, his output is believed to number in the hundreds.¹⁶

It is the third phase of Kuchar's work, beginning in the 1980s with the wider availability of consumer grade camcorders on the market, that is worth examining in more detail. While many of the "pictures," in Kucharian lingo, retain the lurid, B-movie style titles of Kuchar's other work, much of Kuchar's output from the '80s until his death in 2011 consists of edited video diaries of the artist's milieu and travels. In particular, I will focus on what has arguably been the centerpiece of Kuchar's vast oeuvre in these later years, the *Weather Diary* series, documenting his annual visits to the El Reno Motel in El Reno, Oklahoma, a series that, in the words of one critic, flies "in the face of all we have been taught about good video-making, good taste, or good meteorology" (Lerner).

While "spring break," in American parlance, inevitably conjures up images of buff dudes and bikinied babes released from college dorms for a couple weeks of beer-drenched debauchery on sandy shores, George Kuchar would use his annual time-off from the San Francisco Art Institute to temporarily escape the muck of urban life, while simultaneously imbuing the artist's

¹⁶ As of 3 March 2013, his IMDB page lists 217 directorial credits; retrieved from http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0473647/?ref=tt_cl_t4.

childhood fascination with, and fear of, extreme weather. Having lived on either coast for his entire life, his presence in the heartland of middle America was very much that of a stranger in a strange land. For several decades, he opted to stay in a run-down motel in El Reno, Oklahoma. Initially, on these visits, while waiting for the bad weather to arrive, he would read and paint, though eventually, the idea arrived to bring his camera along and begin filming his escapades, as he later relayed in a filmed interview.

The *Weather Diaries* have their genesis in Kuchar's childhood, as he explained in an introduction posted online on the occasion of a retrospective screening at Harvard Film Archives. "Since I was a city boy, living in The Bronx, nature came to me via the colorful tapestry of sky that loomed above the tenements. The awe of summer thunderstorms, smothering blizzards and window rattling nor'easters left a lasting impression on me. I sought out, via library books, the superstars of this meteorological majesty and read up on hurricanes, tornadoes and other terrors that occasionally whirled into urban awareness."

Elsewhere, Kuchar identified the *disruptive force* of unruly nature as being the prime motivator behind his fascination. This disruption – both as an imaginative entity and a real-life phenomenon that one could readily follow in the news – provided a welcome escape from the trials of adolescence. "My childhood? It was...well I guess...torture, except I was a nature lover, since I was born in a city and lived in a city, New York, all my life, born in Manhattan and then moved to the Bronx at an early age, so I worshipped nature and storms... anything that came into the city and disrupted it, in a 'nature way' " (quoted in Stevenson, 186).

Wild Night in El Reno was the first entry in the *Weather Diaries* series, and is the only one to be shot on actual film, using Kuchar's old Bolex camera that he used throughout the

1970s. The silent film, dating from 1977, clocks in at under six minutes in length, and is in some ways the most abstract entry in the series, consisting as it does purely of images of raging winds and electric lightning in the skies and landscape surrounding his motel. Considering its purely visual nature and lack of any narrative structure, it would perhaps be more fitting to regard *Wild Night in El Reno* as the prologue to the *Weather Diaries*.

By the time *Weather Diary I* was made, some nine years later, the technological landscape of the audio-visual world had shifted to become more democratic, in some ways, with the wide availability of affordable VHS camcorders on the market. Kuchar moved with it: his shift to video was complete. Kuchar began working with a VHS camcorder in the 1980s because, in his words, it was a “despised medium,” ugly and amateur: the stuff of home movies, maybe, but hardly the correct vehicle for high art. Not everyone was fond of Kuchar’s transition. “Well I know when I started making video, I did in a way disappoint, or *anger* some people, or they thought I was making *crap*. Of course I was beginning making video so I was just trying to develop my style, get a feel for it, and learn how to edit in the camera, and do everything in the camera. And very few people encouraged me. But there were those people who did encourage me, after seeing some work, and told me to please go on. Which I would have *anyway*, but, ah, very few people did encourage me. Very few *filmmakers* encouraged me” (Stevenson 199-200).

Indeed, for those accustomed to more polished cinematic presentations, Kuchar’s crude VHS diaristic works are hard to digest. Upon initial viewing, it is easy to write off the *Weather Diaries* as the work of an artless amateur – were it not for the fact that Kuchar is, in fact, an avid stylist very much aware of the crudity of both the medium and his vision. “[T]he movie develops its own style, when you see what you have and you see the limitations, and you work with the limitations, the style begins to develop” (Stevenson 200). With his great gift of prescience,

Kuchar immediately sensed that the most interesting way of dealing with video's limitations would be to exploit them. The resulting oeuvre can be read as a single, continuous opus with individual films serving as chapters, ranging in length from under ten minutes to over an hour. Stylistically, it is neither home movie nor low-brow art, but perhaps a little of both. It forms a self-portrait of the artist – his journeys, his friends, and his daily motions – all transmitted through Kuchar's self-deprecating, Bronx-accented narration. Beyond that, the Kuchar oeuvre is also an archeology of the banal, the budget of each film being the price of the VHS cassette tape it was shot on (and, often, the fast food and snacks we watch the filmmaker consume on camera.)

Contrary to his critics' objections, Kuchar's move to video was very much a deliberate one, motivated by a range of aesthetic and life factors – which, for Kuchar, were always one and the same. In a prolonged meditation on the differences between film and video, Kuchar explained how both aesthetic and financial considerations informed his decision. “I got attracted to video because it *was* a despised a medium, and because film got to be too puffed up financially for me.” When he was working in film, the financial constraints often affected not only the production, but the final output. Kuchar was thus forced to evolve a cinematic language that he described as “short-hand.” “Film, I tried to squeeze the essence out of each scene because each scene was expensive. I don't really know if that was on my mind while I was making it, but I did know I had a certain language in film. And that was like, do away with extraneous scenes like coming and going out of doors and telling people where you were and who these people were. Just have them go around doing their business, and their business, while you're photographing, should be very high key, at that moment. Emotional peaks. So that became my movie style.” While his turn to VHS might have shocked critics and fellow filmmakers, Kuchar saw little essential difference between the two media. “I look at it as – you know, it's *stock*, and,

ah, you slip it into your cassette player and it gets thrown onto a screen, and the screen's a hell of a lot smaller, but, it's fine with me. I will always enjoy going to the movies... And I enjoy making movies... But... you see, I made a lot of movies and I don't really know how I made them. I don't know how I put all that effort into making them. And I've been sidetracked so often, I've been hit with such terrible vices... that I don't know how I managed to pull off the pictures. But, for some reason, maybe in order to overcome my vices, or, maybe that movie-making *was* a vice on my part, I was able to turn out these things and go through all the steps that you have to go through making a movie... And then you go into the lab, you bring it in, you get your movie and there's the premiere and people look at it and... of course it's like, how did this horror ever get made? So... making movies is a very peculiar thing. But if I have difficulty... am paying \$600 or \$700 for a 20-minute movie, you know, that gets shown on a screen and gets pooh-poohed because it's either not 'politically correct' or, for some other reason. And I could make something that's even more offensive for \$6 or \$8, and that's so offensive it would even offend the filmmakers – because I'm workin' in *video*. I would option for the more offensive medium” (Stevenson 198-199).

Thus, the reduced content of Kuchar's video works purposefully sets out to match the medium's inherent constraints. Despite the title, in the *Weather Diaries*, much of the footage is centered on Kuchar's motel room: a collage of banal narrative ultimately veering into the grotesque (as we are constantly informed of the artist's canned meat and fast food diet—and its gastro-intestinal consequences) interspersed with weather reports from television and radio, as well as “action” shots of the (impending) storms outside the window. Occasionally, he ventures out for strained interactions with the locals; in *Weather Diary 5*, we accompany Kuchar to the empty beauty salon, where the proprietress gives us an in-depth tour of all the hair products. In

Weather Diary 3, he befriends a student storm chaser staying in the room next door. His romantic infatuation with the young man is rooted more in Kuchar's own awe of the meteorology student's bravery than a straightforward sexual attraction.

What becomes immediately apparent, in *Weather Diaries 1*, the first and – at 75 minutes – longest tape in the series, is the inherent boringness of the endeavor. For a lifelong city resident like Kuchar, his three-to-four week stints in El Reno each year can be excruciating, forcing him, as they do, to confront the existential muck of life that one is otherwise able to ignore in more lively environments. The irony of weather, of course, is that it is really only interesting when it is severe. The raw facts of meteorology – as Kenneth Goldsmith's 2005 tome, *The Weather*, a transcription of a year's worth of hourly weather bulletins on a New York radio station, makes clear – are boring (Goldsmith 2005; see also Perloff n.d.). "Not much goes on in this town," Kuchar notes in *Weather Diary 1* over a montage of scenes from the El Reno town center, with its limited range of remaining Old West historical relics. "Whatever did happen, came and went."

Weather's other main quality is its unpredictability. One never knows when or where the storm will manifest. In yet another of his many nostalgic ruminations of his childhood storm obsession, George noted,

Yeah, I did like storms, and *twisters*, tornadoes. I don't know why. I think in the '50s a big one had gone through Worcester, Massachusetts. And I guess there was talk about it in New York, and it was in the news, and for some reason it excited me. The great storm smashing up towns, and blowing into people's lives, and changing it. Not so much that I was interested in the carnage, but the fact of...

whirling clouds and big winds and stuff like that. It was weather on the rampage, it was nature unleashed, nature loosed. It was dramatic. From all descriptions the sky is a weird color, the clouds are *boiling*, and etc., etc. It struck my fancy. And I think most people that are interested in meteorology are fascinated by that particular character in meteorology, the tornado. (Quoted in Stevenson, 194)

Inevitably – and perhaps fortunately, for Kuchar’s well-being – the tornado never hits El Reno, but nearby towns in Oklahoma. Thus, he spends a considerable amount of time filming footage from local TV news in his hotel room.

What else is there to do? He watches *Godzilla* on television. He spies on his neighbors from the window – denizens of the trailer park across the street and the few other guests of the motel; gossips and speculates about the motel owners’ personal lives. He becomes fixated on Gloria, the absent daughter of Ruth, the establishment’s elderly matron. At sporadic moments when boredom threatens to overcome him, he intones her name. Near the end of the video, which is crammed with a sudden burst of social activity – as though the light of immediate departure has filled our cinematic guide with the sudden desire to spend as much time as possible interacting with those around him, all the freaks and unknowable human detritus of white trash small town Americana, whom he previously dreaded encountering – we learn from Ruth that Gloria’s husband has recently left her after she caught him in bed with another woman down in Houston, where the couple had been living. His sole companion is a stray dog, Runt, who follows him around on his nature strolls around the motel, and who, according to Kuchar,

“smells terrible”; in one of many scenes of grotesquerie, Kuchar refuses to allow the dog into his room because he has been “rolling around in dead animals.”

Rather than interacting with others, Kuchar turns his focus constantly back to his own body and its lower functions – particularly the flatulence and state of his bowel movements resulting from a pure junk food diet and apparently total absence of fruits and vegetables. As Margaret Morse wryly notes, “The tape ultimately addresses all the big questions – death, origin and family, religion – as well as the small discomforts of the body, only to reverse their order of importance.”

At the same time, we begin to understand Kuchar’s horror of those around him when he manages to get himself invited to Ruth’s Bible study meeting near the end of the tape. “I like Ruth and Roy,” George narrates. “They’re decent people. Decent enough to try and convert me to the Cult of the Christianities! Of course, I went when I heard that refreshments were going to be served.” Surrounded by Midwestern church ladies of a certain age, Kuchar begins to feel the absurdity of his presence in El Reno. When queried on his religious predilections by Ruth, he responds, “I was a Catholic. I became a hedonistic sinner.”

“What’s that?” Ruth replies.

“Well, I was a Catholic. I would go to church all the time, but I would pray for the wrong things. And unfortunately, I got them.”

The clash of values signals it’s time to go back to the safe confines of the city. Until next year...

Just as Kuchar has a love-hate relationship with El Reno, his relationship with mainstream cinema has always been one of give-and-take. While there's nothing here resembling a conventional plot, the action is always fast moving, with most shots in the Hollywood three-and-a-half to five-second range, thus refuting the strategic slowness on which oppositional strategists of "art cinema" so often rely. Kuchar, then, can be thought of as *anti-anti*; his art is the deployment of a deliberate artlessness. With its wandering gaze, lo-fi effects, and obsessive need to document and find meaning in the unspectacular, Kuchar's vision remains, in spite of itself, one of the most endearing in American cinema.

Weather Diary 1 is the longest video in the series. By the time *Weather Diary 3*, 1988, rolls around, Kuchar has reduced the films to the episodic temporal structures of television. The video opens with a shot of water boiling in a pot on a hot plate in Kuchar's motel room. Cut to a close-up of George's face with a serious expression, an expression that can be read as somewhat psychotic, as it is accompanied by stabbing music *à la* Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

"I ruined my welcome," George laments, as he spills hot water from his tea cup on to the "Welcome" paper towel beneath it. For that, the gods seem to be punishing him: the video cuts to a weather shot of a pristine sunny day. There are thick white clouds on the horizon, true, but they hardly look threatening. Rather, they are fluffy – much like the paper towels obsessed over in the opening shots.

George wanders down the railroad tracks towards downtown to pick up the developed photos he took on a recent trip to Ohio. With a large hole in the knee of his pants, he looks

something like a hobo. He cannot buy pants in town, he informs us, because all the clothing for sale here is made out of itchy polyester. Shots of small town Americana, scenes that appear quaint and idyllic at the outset, until one considers the possibility of living there and is immediately reminded of the sinister horror of eternal boredom that such places inevitably deliver. Having been raised in New York City and lived for most of his adult life in San Francisco, George has never learned to drive, and thus is always quite stuck on these annual sojourns to Tornado Valley. This is why, as he tells someone later on in the video, he has never been able to become a storm chaser; rather, he identifies as a storm squatter.

In town, George picks up the photographs he had dropped off to get developed. They are mementoes of his recent trip to Ohio for a film festival in the town of Athens, which he shows us. Interspersed with them are photos of his cat back in San Francisco, as well as his brother.

Directly outside his room, two Chihuahuas in a wire cage bark ceaselessly, much to the artist's annoyance. For diversion, he wanders about with his camera, spying on shirtless young men playing football and swimming at a nearby pool. A medium close-up shows George licking his lips. "Hot," he says – referring more to the sight of the young men's bodies than the weather, of course.

The "heat" – in the double sense of the term – of the previous scenes is then relieved. We are subjected to an extreme close-up of what at first appears to be torrential rains, but then reveals itself to be the shower in George's motel room, where the artist is subsequently shot masturbating.

Meanwhile, the dogs outside continue barking. Standing outside amidst the barking animals and a group of neighborhood children, who smile and stare into the camera shyly,

George states in a graven voice, “Those things wake the devil in me. All fury and caged lust. I know exactly how they feel. The dogs...” Cut to a close-up of the uncooked hot dogs that appear to be George’s sole means of sustenance these days. The sequence is concluded with a montage of close-ups of the hot dogs in boiling water on the hot plate and George’s erect penis as he masturbates in the shower. To conclude the string of visual metaphors that much of the video has consisted of thus far, we see shots of a local baseball game. “It’s a paradise of balls and bats,” George’s voice deadpans over the scene.

Nearly ten minutes into the video, the entire tone of the work changes abruptly with the arrival of Mike, a 21-year-old storm chaser staying in a room next door. Although he is not identified as being a prior acquaintance in the video, Kuchar later explained in his Harvard Film Archive text, “[He] was someone I met in Wisconsin at a screening of my films/videos a few years before. This was his first visit to Oklahoma to chase tornadoes, but the storm season proved to be a dry one. His presence lubricated me on a more personal level, and our friendship helped to sweeten the sourness that happens when nature doesn’t ‘put out’.”

Indeed, Mike becomes the focus of the rest of the video – much as he becomes the (secret) focus of George’s lust. The two while away their time hanging out in El Reno, eating junk food, talking in their motel rooms, and walking through the town together. “Oh, wow!” exclaims George on one of these walks. “Look at all the good stuff in Wal Mart!” Quick cut to the toilet bowl in George’s room, where a bunch of the artist’s turds are floating...

George and Mike’s hatred of El Reno is mutual, but both are temporarily stuck in a sort of *No Exit* game – George in his self-imposed exile, Mike as he awaits the bad weather that will bring with it the National Storm Laboratory’s truck that he has been granted permission to ride in.

Finally, Mike arranges to have a friend with a truck come rescue him from the state of perpetual ennui that is El Reno, Oklahoma. “I’ll be sad to see you go,” says George as they await the friend’s arrival.

“Yeah, these past few days have been a lot of fun, but this place is killing my soul,” replies Mike.

The friend finally arrives. The truck is seen pulling out of the motel’s empty parking lot, leaving George alone as he was at the beginning. In the closing sequence, we see him wandering shirtless through an empty field – no friends in sight, no bad weather on the horizon – just the brutality of the early summer sun. He entertains himself with the reading material brought on this trip: male physique mags, *Fangoria*, UFO books and magazines, and a copy of *The Abominable Snowman*. The show must go on, after all, and the camera keeps rolling, until the video fizzles out into its anti-climax.

Each *Weather Diary* entry proceeds according to its own situational and formal logic. *Weather Diary 6*, shot in 1990, for instance, is more about portraying Oklahoma as a bizarre zone of danger amongst the bucolic banality of the Midwestern states; in the absence of bad weather, after all, one has to improvise. Unlike previous tapes in the series, the entirety of the tape was post-edited to include a soundtrack of music. Since they were children, the Kuchars obsessively collected vinyl recordings of film scores, which they plagiarize gratuitously in their own films – often to very comic effect. In fact – hardly a usual obsession for cine-buffs – George even became obsessed with certain cinematic composers such as Bernard Herrmann, Franz Waxman,

and Alex North. As a teenager, his choice of what film to go see would often be determined by which composer had scored it (Stevenson 186).

Weather Diary 6 is a good example of how music is utilized as one of the pivotal components of George's frameless, cinematic writing. The video opens with a shot of a vintage postcard reading "Hay from Oklahoma!" and featuring a photograph of a farmyard with bales of hay and a rainbow in the distance. The following intertitle, painted in Kuchar's own flashy cursive, reads "Scenes from a Vacation." Quaint symphonic music plays as a montage of images of ducks on Lake El Reno going about their business on a sunny day unfurls. George is seen in his motel room, seated on the bed and reading a book called *Confrontations: A Scientist's Search for Alien Contact*. (George's sporadic encounters with UFOs throughout the 1970s, a subject of numerous films and videos, give his obsession with the sky a further loaded significance.) This is followed by shots of the sky in various phases of temporal and climatic conditions.

There is considerably less of George in *Weather Diary 6* than in previous entries to the series (barring, of course, *Wild Night in El Reno*, in which he does not appear at all.) While his voice chirping animatedly from behind the camera is a fixture of nearly all his diaristic video work – and film work, stretching back to at least *Hold Me While I'm Naked* – no other sounds except for music can be heard in *Weather Diary 5* (save for a short segment near the end when a local weather report on a severe tornado is recorded from his motel room's television set.) As a visit, this one is clearly a bit of a disappointment for George; the sky constantly veers into near-disaster, with vintage horror music accompanying each dive, but then always returns back to idyllic sunniness. (In this sense, the visit is similar to that recorded in *Weather Diary 3*, which is largely a recording of George's encounter with a storm chaser.) Indeed, one of the most attractive features of the weather for Kuchar is its inherent unpredictability; nature is something

that simply, by definition, cannot be controlled. As his brother Mike pointed out, this indicates one of the key differences between the two brothers' aesthetic approaches to making films. "My brother's latest films are a sort of diary or interpretation of the world around him. Me, I'm sort of a control freak. My brother, he goes to visit and whatever happens, happens. His are sort of unpredictable. With mine, I kind of *direct* more" (quoted in Vogrin).

With regard to the question of directing, the *Weather Diaries* in particular takes on a more documentary approach – the few scenes that do seem staged have an improvisational feel, and are often the contrivances and depictions of George alone – and most of the "directing" thus takes place in the editing room, with the addition of sound effects, music, and extraneous narration. (It should be noted, however, that with other projects, namely the student films, George continued to "direct" in a conventional, narrative cinema fashion.)

Then again, directionlessness – or the seeming state of directionlessness – is very much George's direction – his "line of flight," to put it in Deleuzo-Guattarian terms. Like Ryan Trecartin's work, George Kuchar's videos can be seen as yet another example of writing outside the frame. And that which moves this particular method of writing is a wandering agency, as opposed to a static agency.

Writing, in fact, is everywhere in George Kuchar's work. One could say he is just as much a writer as he is a filmmaker – if not more so. In the book he co-authored with his brother, *Reflections From a Cinematic Cesspool*, George wrote the majority of the text, which serves as a showcase for his outrageously florid prose:

Realism only comes to the screen when the film jams in the projector and the image begins to bubble. An instinctual fear of the dark manifests when the projection light fails... heightened by the little furry things with long tails that scamper beneath the seats. The electrical nature of sex becomes apparent as the hair on your neck bristles when that pervert to your left makes knee contact. In these moments of truth, cinema reveals her face of realism. But she is a two-faced creature; the other countenance being a rainbow palette of dyed coiffures, pancake makeup and pancake-bloated guts crammed into costumes designed by cock-eyed midgets for superstars who beat their children with wire coat hangers and then peddle soft drinks potent enough to rot their dentures. (Kuchar and Kuchar, 45)

Writing, for George, is a sort of machine, one in a state of constant generation – which is why, in a sense, he can never shut up in most of his videos. For that would cause the entire machine to break down. George is an automaticist.

What is automaticism, anyway? It is a particular way of working that we find in a lot of the artists engaged in making bad art – or at least what we are calling bad art here. It is rooted in the awareness that creation is not merely a mental process, but a physical, bodily one, as well. No Cartesian splits acknowledged by the automaticist, by the bad artist. Instead, the principle of extension rules: wherein mind is but an extension of body – and vice versa. Do not let that “vice versa” confuse you, however: As, for the automaticist, the body always comes first in the equation. We can thus conceive of the automaticist being as a body-mind machine. As a machine, what automaticism basically means is you program yourself. For the automaticist does not

merely conceive of herself as a mere machine, but as a particular kind of machine – one that defies the staticity that harnesses most human beings to a particular mode or frame of existence. The automaticist is constantly trying to evade the frame, to go outside the territorial entrapments of the socius. For that reason, it is best that we call the machine what it is: a vehicle. For vehicles are defined by motion. Automaticism concerns itself with the mechanics of the body-mind machine, rather than the results; hence, the machine's *vehicularity*. That is to say, the purpose is the process, the movement, the action – not what it completes. Never the final product – which is not to say that the final product has no value. But due to the way the rest of the socius has been programmed, and the fact that the automaticist's gesture is a *contra*-programming, the socius's natural reaction to the final product is one of revulsion and rejection; hence, *bad art* is produced as a critical reaction.

The bad artist, then, is the self-contained machine whose sole purpose is *movement*, motion. The *work* produced is *bad*, because it is but the by-product, the *exhaust*, of the process. This is why, as is so often the case, what we find is a triumph of *quantity* over supposed *quality* – the latter is annihilated in the explosion of the former.

George Kuchar's vehicularity was most pronounced in his switch to video – anything necessary to keep the vehicle in constant motion, without slowing down – despite the resistance he met with among fans and colleagues. Those voices, Kuchar realized, did not belong to the people expressing their disapproval: they belonged, in actuality, to the Law.

“From the point of view of a supposed transcendence of the law,” write Deleuze and Guattari in their book on Kafka, “there must be a certain necessary connection of the law with guilt, with the unknowable, with the sentence or the utterance. Guilt must in fact be the a priori

that corresponds to transcendence, for each person or for everyone, guilty or innocent. Having no object and being only pure form, the law cannot be a domain of knowledge but is exclusively the domain of an absolute practical necessity: the priest in the cathedral explains that ‘it is not necessary to accept everything as true, one must only accept it as necessary.’ Finally, because it has no object of knowledge, the law is operative only in being stated and is stated only in the act of punishment: a statement directly inscribed on the real, on the body and the flesh; a practical statement opposed to any sort of speculative proposition” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 44-45).

If the Law is pure form – the empty frame – what content is it meant to contain? What is the law’s non-object, as mentioned by Deleuze and Guattari above? The answer: bodies.

For many bad artists working from the wandering stance of body-mind vehicularity, the “badness” of their project seems to imply an exaggerated assertion of body over mind. This is articulated quite well by George Kuchar throughout the *Weather Diaries*, particularly with regard to his own body and its lower functions.

George views his body and its functions with a mixture of shame, disgust, and degradation, yet he can never, ever resist turning away from it – it might even be said that the artist’s body is the sole focus of the work. Even when the camera’s gaze is focused elsewhere, the sky, it enters into the scene through reference in one of George’s breathless, eternally punning monologues. George’s obsessions, one might say, are perverted, though one must also keep in mind that perverts are the sole creation of the socius – that is to say, the Law. In George’s particular case, as is made perfectly clear in the closing segments of *Weather Diary 1*, the Law that created this particular pervert was the Catholic Church. Some perverts are eternally stigmatized, unable to live with the burden imposed upon them, while others gladly revel in the

delights of this burden, going so far as to impose them upon others – whether through their art, their activism, their quest for “community,” for mutual indulgence...

These represent two different ways of dealing with, confronting the Law that has created you, the Pervert. Either recognize the sovereignty of the Law and submit to it: to live a life of shame. Or, the alternative, what we might call the Pervert’s Recognition: *the Law was created for the sole purpose of being broken*. As Deleuze and Guattari state, the Law has no content, no truth – it is but empty utterance, devoid of meaning beyond its own assertion of governing presence. Before the Law existed in this hovering ghost state, it was not possible to break it; thus, there was no perversion. Normality is, in fact, an effect of regulation. Program your vehicle to substitute your own law for the Law: to make your content overflow the governing form, the frame. This is akin to Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of a minor literature, which can only exist in relation, in constant opposition, to a major literature.

We might go even further here and brand Kuchar an invert. Not just a homosexual, but one whose sexuality is turned *inwards*. To himself, his own body-mind vehicle, his own functions and processes. He is, of course, obsessed with the bodies of others, but those other bodies appear so distant and foreign to him, the closest thing he can grab is always his own – and he does so, repeatedly. His sexuality is not anti-social, but against the socius. (For the pervert, the invert, recognition of the socius yields a distrust of the entire species; a negation of the perceived [because *imposed*] value system of the collective whole.)

Catholicism, the socius: both Law. Another form of the Law, however, is the Hollywood system: the major literature to George’s minor. While enthralled with Hollywood melodramas in his youth, George never attempted to break into that mold of filmmaking, never tried to infiltrate

the system with his vision – or, rather, allow his vision to conform to that Law’s dictates. Movie-making in Hollywood, George sensed, “seemed too much like a job,” as he stated in a filmed interview. The body-mind vehicle doesn’t *work*; it just goes. But it is not as though George simply ignored it as a model. Rather, he inflected it through his own work: through his movies, through his writing. George’s Hollywood:

Aging women take endless enemas so as not to wind up in horror films and virile he-men doomed to an excruciating regimen of exercises keep their sodomized posteriors picture-perfect. EST trained actresses show the world what it is like to be liberated and free of cellulite. Alcoholic celebrities barf up their past in book form so that all can marvel at the hideous mess that has been cleaned up by a Christian re-birth. Harpies with herpes rip apart, in print, plump fornicators whose every performance they slander with type-set juju curses. Innocent children sing and dance down the yellow brick road to drug addiction and toxic box office poison. This is the other face of cinema... the side that sells tabloids and makes legends; a trillion dollar heritage of human refuse devoured by a cyclopean eye designed to entertain, to titillate with tit, to teach. THE art form of the 20th century.
(Kuchar and Kuchar, 45-46)

Besides their content – this oppositional stance to the Hollywood model – the difficult entry point for many to appreciating Kuchar’s *Weather Diaries* – and, indeed, the vast majority of his video works – is their personal, diaristic nature. Other writers have noted the problematics

of the diaristic mode in contemporary artmaking practices. Chris Kraus: “I teach a diary-writing class in an MFA Studio Art program. Here, diary-keeping is not a popular art. It sounds too much like something girls do. *Theories* of subjectivity sounds sexier and more important. Since diary-writing is subjective practice, it’s more fragile, looser, messier. As a transcription of live thought, diary-writing’s destined for confusion because *the mind does not stay still for very long*. As an art-making practice, it’s *incoherent* and therefore essentially *flawed*” (Kraus 139) (Emphasis added).

Part of the “problem” of the diary mode is that, by definition, it is not intended for an audience. Address yourself to an audience of zero, which is to say: to yourself. What does it mean, then, to go and publish that diary, to present yourself unedited, as a work of art, to the harsh, uncomprehending masses? Kuchar long had an aversion to theory, refuted identity politics, wished his work, when he wasn’t sarcastically denigrating it, to be viewed on its absolute own terms; he would rather have it disappear than appear under the scrutiny of someone else’s “theory of subjectivity.”

We could go even further and say that the fact of filmmaking here is *accidental* – that Kuchar’s art is his roving personality, which just happens to be captured on film. The *extension* principle once again: the camera becomes an extension of the artist’s body-mind vehicle – much like his voice. Like Ryan Trecartin, Kuchar offers an example of a *total writing* – a record of pure mind, thus: total flawed incoherency.

Dieter Roth & Everything

What is an “everything artist”? Difficult to say, though perhaps the best example to date would be Dieter Roth, who worked his way virtuostically – or else recklessly – through every medium, who produced his work in excess – in the same manner that he lived his life – and therefore eroded all distinctions between his life and his art; indeed, the latter became much more than a mere extension of the former. How did he manage? It seems as though his filters were simply turned off. That, or else the filtering process was so mysterious that no one really understood the mechanics except for Roth himself. Filter/frame: Every type of material, organic and synthetic, was allowed into his universe. It is perhaps fitting that much of his work is now undergoing the sort of processes that the human body endures once life has vacated it. For Roth, art and the body were one and the same: a dying, rotting – but, above all, living, enduring material. Born into fascism – 1930s Germany – he took up the cause of formlessness as a means of revolt against a certain world that would lay in ruins by the time he reached adolescence.

As a vehicle, despite his amazing productivity, the astounding, inestimable amount of exhaust produced as he moved across the European landscape throughout his life, Dieter Roth was fueled by doubt and uncertainty from early on. While his devotion to art emerged at an early age – his brother recounts how, as a teenager, he would go off in to the forest alone for hours, only to re-emerge with beautiful paintings under his arm – by the time he reached twenty, he had decided upon poetry as his true vocation. He co-founded a literary review with two friends, yet when he brought his own poems to the table, they were rejected by his co-editors. Although he

would never quite turn his back completely on writing – it permeates his entire oeuvre, and up to his death, whenever he met people who were unaware of his true vocation, he would always tell them he was a writer – one might surmise that the devastation of this early rejection sparked an implosion that effectively kickstarted his vehicle.

Before he reached this frenzied phase of vehicularity, however, he would have to pass through another roadblock, one of fixedness and rigidity: one rooted in the geometric utopias of Constructivism. From the failure of literature, the young Roth perhaps needed a solid, pre-established language in which to ground his position in the world. The resulting paintings, sculptural work, and furniture were predictably academic, by and large. The American art critic Donald Kuspit credits an encounter with Jean Tinguely as the breaking point between Roth's early and mature styles.

The key work here is Tinguely's *Homage to New York*, a machine that was forged out of junk and refuse and designed to self-destruct, which it did in the garden of New York's Museum of Modern Art in a performance that lasted less than half an hour. Nevertheless, the spectacle would play an influential role on the development of Dieter Roth's art in the subsequent decade, and established Tinguely as something of a post-Duchampian *agent provocateur*. *Homage to New York* was comprised, among other rubble, of "wheels, motors, bikes, baby carriages, and assorted gizmos"; an antique Addressograph machine; and a contraption forged by Robert Rauschenberg that would fling silver dollars into the audience (Perl 425). The machine was shaped like (and contained) a piano, and over it was suspended an enormous balloon. Part of the spectacle of the performance was its near failure; indeed, it almost didn't happen. On the evening of March 17, 1960, a massive crowd turned out for the well-publicized event, including such luminaries as Governor Nelson Rockefeller, as well as reporters from around the world. The

audience was kept waiting for several hours as technical glitches were sorted out. When the machinery finally did get rolling, “[t]he piano barely played, Tinguely’s self-drawing machine barely drew, and other parts of the meta-matic turned or twisted in ways that the audience couldn’t see. There were tons of smoke; a radio went on but was barely heard, and through it all Tinguely walked around, delighted by everything that was happening” (Perl 425). However, the disaster of the performance and the media spectacle it provoked have become inscribed within its legend. In the words of research scientist Billy Klüver, who would assist Tinguely and Rauschenberg on projects throughout the 1960s, *Homage to New York* was a work that emerged “out of the chaos of the dump and back again” (Perl 425).

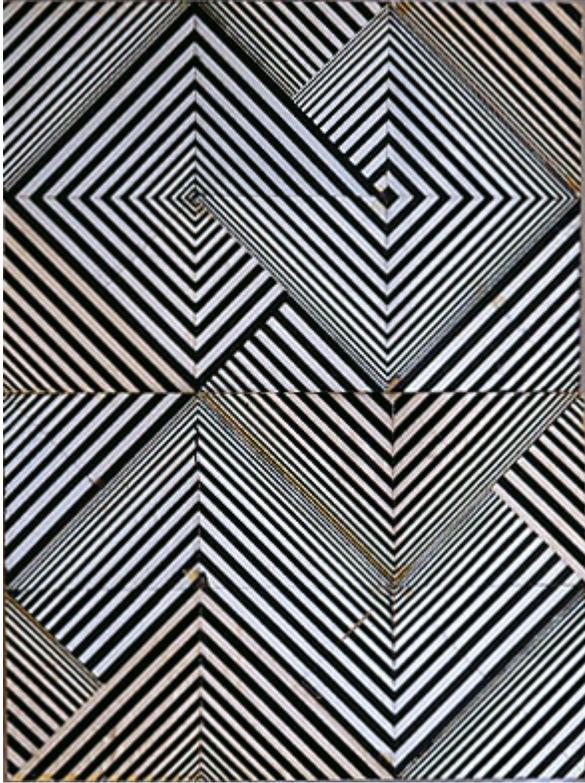
It is easy to understand the excitement the young Dieter Roth must have felt at this first encounter with Jean Tinguely’s contraption. Here was a machine that served well the doubt that had been welling up in Roth his entire life: a machine that declaimed its status as art, only to end up in ruins, which the audience then descended upon and swept up in their pockets and purses to take home as souvenirs of the spectacle. Art as self-destroying machine. At the same time, that machine was designed by a maker with the built-in intention of suiciding. What implications could such a model have for the Romantic deitous notion of the artist as creator-of-worlds? What happens to the sense of value that is meant to be attributed to the creative endeavor? Art’s eternal endurance throughout the duress of time?

Some critics accused Tinguely of reducing expression to mere spectacle, thus ridding the artistic gesture of any real potency. “This is what social protest has fallen to in our day – a garden party,” bemoaned a critic from *The Nation* (quoted in Perl 426). But was Tinguely’s *Homage* really a gesture of social protest, a statement of the ultimate futility of all art?

Instead, I would like to suggest that it is perhaps more useful – and, indeed, less lazy – to look for something positive in this negative gesture: namely, the beginnings of a theory of authorship, from whence we might understand the dramatic turn that Roth would take in his subsequent work. Even before we have the death of the author (for Barthes’s famous essay would not be published until 1967), Tinguely gives us the death of the object. And, with the accompanying spectacle, the spectacle that would launch Tinguely into the newly emerged orbit of art stardom, what we have here overseeing the object’s destruction is certainly not a dead author; if anything, Tinguely assumed the role of *über-author*. Certainly, we find in Tinguely’s self-destroying object the visual equivalent to what Barthes identified as a cacophonous array of voices and styles united within the messy “singularity” of the thing. In a visual sense, once the object is liberated from the author, then the visual referents composing the thing are imbued with a total autonomy; viewed from this zero degree perspective, Tinguely’s *Homage* is all visual anarchy, an asemic assemblage whose *death*, then, makes total sense. What is at stake here, of course, is meaning, and how it gets assigned and formed. Barthes put the task in the hands of the reader; as he famously concluded, “we know that to restore writing its future, we must reverse its myth: the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author.” Barthes was right, to an extent; what he failed to take into account was the power structure inherent in the economy of reception – that is, reading is, for many, yet another form of writing, and that certain readers and the readings they produce come to be seen as definitive for the rest of the readers, who play a smaller role in the system in which dominant and lesser meanings are produced, packaged, and sold. Having himself a major spotlight on the vast stage of the critical enterprise, Barthes conveniently overlooked his own position of authorship in formulating his quasi-populistic theory. Falling victim to the Marxist ideologies in vogue at the time, Barthes’s failure in this

instance was a failure of the imagination: he was unable to see what a total collapse of capitalism might look like for the scene of artistic creation. As implied by anarchist Hakim Bey's notions of immediatism and "temporary autonomous zones," a veritable dispersion of authorship would imply the becoming-artist of every human being on the planet.

We are too realistic to imagine such a thing happening in our lifetime, though one may always dream. Besides dreaming, we might also take the time to revise Barthes's spurious notion of authorship via Tinguely's machine. Let us speculate that Dieter Roth was looking not at Tinguely the artist, *per se*, but at Tinguely's *Homage* as a new model for becoming-artist. "When I was young I wanted to become a real artist. Then I started doing something I felt wasn't real art, and it was through this that I became a well-known artist" (quoted in Kimmelman). Destruction as creation and, naturally, vice versa: certainly. But even more so when we investigate the chief impulse behind Tinguely's machine, the cause of its near failure: that is, its programming. Here, we find the key to Roth's vehicularity: the artist as machine: programmed to create, programmed to destroy – both at once. Such a stance must depart from the notion of the *über-author*, which contains within its conceptual sphere the Barthesian notion of the author as multiple, the author as shamanistic medium through which all these varied discordant languages are dispersed. Yet it does not get rid of the author, as Barthes mistakenly implores us to do, as though this mere gesture would suddenly do away with the power structure through which knowledge and expression are conceived and received. Rather, the *über-author* is the vehicular synthesizer of this doubt, which is why destruction must necessarily enter into the equation each and every time – even as the artist's constant movement across the plain implies a ceaseless productivity: onwards, towards the horizon, until we become one with the horizon.



Untitled, Dieter Roth, white silkscreen ink on black cardboard and black silkscreen ink on white cardboard, 71 x 53 cm, 1958-1959

We can see the change in Roth's attitude towards art-making in examining the transitional period from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s. Early experiments with screen printing, such as *Untitled*, 1958-1959 – with its zebra lines of diamonds bleeding into each other in order to create a mild daze in the viewer – see Roth experimenting with the visual language that would come to be known as “op art.”¹⁷ By the time 1965 rolls around, Roth has gone messy, using food in his works. A fecal *Self Portrait*, 1964, features a round turdlike mound of chocolate and emulsion on cardboard mounted on hardboard, surrounded by a colorless brown-yellow concoction of oil paint. *Fruits of a Crash for G + J* consists of rotting food and dishes stuck

¹⁷ Though the term “op art” was not introduced until 1964 in *Time Magazine*, works by artists like John McHale, Victor Vasarely, and, in this case, Roth, pre-date and can be considered proto-Op Art.

between sheets of glass in an iron frame hinged on a wooden plank.



Fruits of a crash for G + J, leftover food and dishes between glass panels in iron frame, with hinge on wooden board, 97 x 69.5 x 5 cm, Dieter Roth, 1965

Tinguely allowed Roth to become that maniac whose incessant need to reconcile his own vices to the arhythm of the world's disordering sent him on a nomadic quest through reality's detritus. Everywhere he looked, he found – stuff. *Stuff* is what he called his output. For him, the process of making art was akin to pissing, shitting.

The key to understanding the new direction found in Roth's messy everything art lies in a comprehension of the profound doubt that Tinguely's self-destructing machine suggests. For Roth's was a truly grand skepticism, a skepticism of grandeur that would serve as the pavement

for all of his constant and indecisive peregrinations back and forth. When asked by an interviewer later in life how he got to be an artist, Roth replied, “I don’t know if or how” (Jud). It would be a mistake to suppose that the doubt was centered on his own capabilities; a *skepticism of grandeur* would naturally have to apply to the entire endeavor of art-making and aesthetics in general. “Do you think there are any eternal values in art?” the same interviewer would ask. “I don’t see any,” Roth replied (Jud). It could be that *art*, in the way it is seen, in its normative dimensions, was beside the point; one could scarcely see Roth endeavoring towards any one particular masterpiece, and the point where one work stops and another begins is always blurred, nearly impossible to decipher. What we are ultimately left with, when considering the Dieter Roth model, is a philosophical conundrum: What is a life *for*, but to do, to make, to run, to be? What does it mean to collapse all these actions into a single verb? What do we call it? What are the dimensional implications for eliminating that boundary between art and life?

The Importance of Being Iceland

Dieter Roth was described by those close to him as being constantly on the go, a tireless nomad:

Up to the end the artist was a living example of a nomadic existence for the public surrounding him. He was notoriously on the road. In the specially sewn extra-large pockets of the suits he carried with him writing materials, painting utensils and notebooks. The complete outfit, not overly conspicuous and also featuring a little suitcase with a combination lock, was practical, but at the same time it was also a tangible sign of homelessness. The indivisible union between personal

lifestyle and deliberately embodied, readily proclaimed free and independent artistic genius – this was Roth’s trademark. And ‘arriving to depart’ [...] was his motto. (Glozer 16)

A further motto might be: No self, no world, no god. Instead, perhaps: selves, worlds, gods.

Every vehicle, it is true, needs its garage, its gas station – a place to temporarily turn off the transmission and re-fuel – and for Dieter Roth, that spot was the island country of Iceland. Much could be said about its geographic peculiarities – at once a part of Europe and yet not – a floating ship in a vast uncomprehending sea. For many years, Reykjavik was a major transport hub – indeed, nearly all flights from North America would land at its airport, forcing travelers to spend at least a few hours here before boarding their planes for much more exalted destinations on the continent. Visitors who have spent a bit more time in the Icelandic capital often remark upon its architectural quaintness. The furthest thing from the big city clichés that those of us reared in the civilized West have come to conjure, Reykjavik appears as a maze of brightly painted residential houses fashioned simply out of wood and scattered across a flat plain, with the sea and snow-capped mountains forming the backdrop.

It was love that first brought Roth to Iceland in the 1950s. He met his first wife, Sigridur Björnsdottir, while working in Copenhagen, and would eventually follow her when she returned to her home country. The couple had three children together, including Björn Roth, who would go on to become his father’s collaborator, to the extent of continuing Dieter’s legacy after his death.

While Roth's marriage to Björnsdóttir was not destined to last, his infatuation with Iceland would become an enduring part of his life's work, and his studios in Reykjavik and Seyðisfjörður, on the East Coast, have been woven into his artistic legend.

According to his son, his initial impression of the mysterious island was one of terror; upon arriving, he felt like he had reached the end of the world. Eventually, however, he warmed up to the idea of the Icelandic capital and began to see the beauty of his new home. *Reykjavik Slides (31,035) Every View of a City, 1973-75/1990-98*, is but one example of Roth's phenomenal interest and engagement with every aspect of the world around him. With the help of his sons and several assistants, Roth set out to photograph every building in Reykjavik beginning shortly after his move to Iceland in 1957 and continuing until 1998. (Though excluded from the title, the project also includes photographs of the East Icelandic town of Seyðisfjörður, where Roth kept a studio up until his death in 1998.) In its most recent major exhibition in 2011 at the London branch of Hauser & Wirth, the *Reykjavik Slides* were displayed on hundreds of slide projectors scattered across the room. Given the brisk slideshow format, the spectator is unable to contemplate any one capture of the Icelandic capital for long. Rather, the city's quaint and colorful boxlike architectural curiosities seem to melt into a singular impression in the mind's eye, much like the stuff comprising one of Roth's messier sculptures: shapes colliding into one another, leaving an abstract imprint of forms and colors on the mindscape: this bluntly becomes *Iceland* for the viewer.

A travelogue without people: as Donald Kuspit has observed, "No human being is in sight, the houses are anonymously geometrical, and the Warhol-like repetitive inertia of the series has a deadening effect, suggesting Roth's depression, or at least his loss of appetite for life."

¹⁸ Kuspit implies that the absence of human presence somehow signifies death. First of all, Kuspit's initial impression must be corrected: there is, on occasion, a human being caught in one of the slides (a pedestrian in blue jeans and a leather jacket casually strides by a white house), while in others, the shadow of the photographer (likely Björn or one of Roth's other assistants) can be made out in the foreground. While it is quite possible that Roth instructed his assistants to avoid getting any humans in the shot, this was more likely an attempt to preserve allegiance to the project's titular aims, rather than rooted in some misanthropic melancholia that Kuspit wishes to read into it.

Kuspit got it half-right. While Roth's bouts with depression and alcoholism are well known and certainly enter into specific terrains of his work, I would suggest that the very ambition of the *Reykjavik Slides* – the very impossibility of the project, photographing more than thirty thousand buildings – represents a defiant strain of vitality in the face of the deadening forces of depression and lethargy. As Björn later relays, in explicating why the project bears two dates (1973-1975 and 1990-1998), Roth was discouraged by the initial results when he realized that there was sunlight in nearly every photo. He had had his assistants carry the project out during the summertime, perhaps as a practical measure. In evaluating the results, however, he realized that this was somehow not the “real” Iceland that his mind conjured up, and ordered the project to be re-shot in the wintertime. It took some fifteen years to get around to it, and another

¹⁸ Kuspit: “The basic problem was that Roth had no secure sense of himself, as *Double Self-Portrait* (1973) -- an optical hollow man -- suggests. It is a self without a core -- without a stabilizing center. The series of *Interfaces* (1977-78), made with Richard Hamilton, confirm the point: their identities blur into one confusion, thus reducing Rimbaud's ‘I am an other’ to absurdity. Roth's art became a Sisyphean search for a self -- an obsessive attempt at self-creation, with the self always elusive and protean -- that led to ironic posturing, climaxing in the self-portrait of *Large Tapestry* (1984-86), which looks like a mocking reprise of Rembrandt's majestic 1658 *Self-Portrait*. Roth's work looks somewhat tarnished and trashy in comparison, suggesting the distance downward art has come. Roth's picture seems like a devolution of Rembrandt's -- a fall from the heights of art and the self. Serene pride has been replaced by vacuous arrogance, interiority by exteriority, integrity by exhibitionism. Compared to the self-possessed, dignified Rembrandt, Roth looks like a ham actor, even an imposter -- a pretender to the throne of art.”

eight to carry the full project out, as the Icelandic capital had grown significantly in the intervening years. Rather than dump the initial photos, he kept them in the project, merely adding the new ones in. The resulting works thus offer a view of Iceland at two discordant moments in the late twentieth century.

Kuspit was not the only critic to take issue with the *Reykjavik Slides*. In reviewing “Roth Time,” the artist’s largest posthumous retrospective to date, Eric Gelber failed to see any positive qualities whatsoever in the series, characterizing it as a product of the artist’s neuroses.

More obsessive/compulsive energy is on display in the “Reykjavik Slides,” (1973-75/1990-1998). 30,000 continuously projected slides of all of the houses or dwellings in Reykjavik, Iceland are meant to impress through the sheer uselessness of the task the artist set before himself. You have to wonder what the point of the monotony is. The images of house exteriors and the lack of interior shots emphasize the alienated or misanthropic feelings of the photographer. But again, we are impressed more by quantity than quality. (Gelber)

Here, we must contend with one of those factors that we seem to find in nearly every bad artist we have looked at so far (namely Gertrude Stein and George Kuchar): that is, an apparent obsession with quantity over quality. In some ways, it comes down to a question of editing. Usually, when we hear the word “edit,” we tend to think of the term in its redactive sense: chiseling away at a mess in order to excavate that which might be valuable, lasting. In composing his master work *A la recherche du temps perdu*, however, Marcel Proust took an

additive approach. Only rarely did he take anything out; instead, he would go back and put more in; thus, the novel's astounding length. It is as though everywhere he looked, he saw holes. Indeed, this approach to editing – fattening up rather than slimming down – became woven into the very universe of the novel. Wherever there is something *wrong*, it must be because something is *missing*. Never a wrong turn: it is just that something needs to be fleshed out, added on to. And, in much the same expansive way, the city of Reykjavik continued to be built up throughout the intervening years. Why not acknowledge that expansion in Roth's own novel of images?

But of course, there had to have been something more to it than that. Proust was very much aware that he was building a tower: the daunting size of the thing was precognized. In a sense, it infers a sort of sickness: the neurotic sense that something is *nearly always* missing. To look across a vast empty landscape, and where others are able to remark upon the tundra and the foliage, all you are able to notice are the gaps dovetailing into the earth. You don't wonder where they lead to, you just have an impulsive need to fill them. Is it rooted in depression and a loss of appetite for life? On the contrary. For us to reach the diagnosis of depression, the vehicle would have had to shut down. Instead, the Proust and Roth vehicles revved up their engines, ruthlessly up ahead. Both were unable to get rid of the flaws. For Proust, the latter half of his novel is marred with contradictory scenes, unresolved tensions, as the novel essentially remained incomplete at the time of his death. Roth's series is also essentially marked by terrible inconsistencies, the cheapness and disposability that lies at the heart of the serial ambition.

The extension principle (of the body-mind machine we call a vehicle) here again comes into play when one comes to realize the true ambition behind Roth's project, which comes to us as we stand in a room absorbing these slides and the title of the project suddenly flashes across

our minds: *Reykjavik Slides (31,035) Every View of a City*. The words that matter most in that title are “every” and “view.” The project is not that of a visual artist, but the ambition of a collector: I happen to own every view of the city of Reykjavik. The multiplicitous nature of being – in this specific instance, being-Roth – extends to the perspectival agency that “contains” each “view.” An energo-intensive pathway is etched through the landscape; the eruptive framing of each single perspective defines the whole’s seriality. Nature spits views, meanings at us. The photos fly past us rapidly, mimicking the pace at which they were snapped. Kuspit’s way of viewing is only one of the extreme ways: the spectatorial gaze deadened to the energo-intensity, the speed of the project: in this way, the images fly past us, bounce off our skin, but do not touch our core – no meaning is allowed to be formed. Another extreme, however, is to jump upon the vehicle, much as the artist arguably did in this project of becoming-landscape, becoming-building, becoming-Iceland; to go along for the ride, temporarily abandoning our own territories, and thus: extending our own territories, invading and shattering the frame.

Early on, Susan Sontag intuited that the desire to acquire a sort of ownership over an image of an existing scape is one of photography’s primal essences.

Photography is acquisition in several forms. In its simplest form, we have in a photograph surrogate possession of a cherished person or thing, a possession which gives photographs some of the character of unique objects. Through photographs, we also have a consumer’s relation to events, both to events which are part of our experience and to those which are not – a distinction between types of experience that such habit-forming consumership blurs. A third form of

acquisition is that, through image-making and image-duplicating machines, we can acquire something as information (rather than experience.) Indeed, the importance of photographic images as the medium through which more and more events enter our experience is, finally, only a byproduct of their effectiveness in furnishing knowledge dissociated from and independent of experience. (Sontag 121)

Sontag felt that the third and final form of acquisition was the most inclusive, as it allowed a photograph to enter into a systematic flow of information, and thus leave the orbit of “mere” art. It is here that the photograph attains what we might term a supra-autonomy, in that it truly leaves the hands of the author, its meaning to be forged in the hands of the receiver/reader (in true Barthesian fashion.) (This is particularly relevant for the included slides of the Eastern Icelandic town of Seyðisfjörður, as the example recounted below will sufficiently demonstrate.) In what Sontag deems the “consumer”’s mode of possession of the photographic event, a distancing effect is created between the original, captured image of the subject/event before us, and its actuality: the tension between the referent and the act itself. This makes the whole project all the more interesting when one considers that Roth likely only took a few of the photographs included in the *Reykjavik Slides*. Thus, he himself experienced the distancing effect in a way that effectively eludes the authorial model proposed by Sontag; although he is likely familiar with most of the buildings included in the series, he is, in fact, just as distant as the spectator from the experience of the original.

Of course, Sontag's first and primal notion of the photographic project of possession (what she deems "surrogate" possession) coincides with our earlier elucidation of the collector's impulse overriding the classic authorial impulse within the project. For the primal drive behind photography is the desire to record. We might suggest, then, that Roth, in tackling the project from the odd position of collector and spectator, wanted to reach and exceed his own limitations as an artist.

Kuspit's comments are useful, however, in that they unwittingly point to one of the underlying themes of the *Reykjavik Slides*: that is, the exhaustion of spectatorship. The fatigue of looking. And, indeed, part of this fatigue lies in the transference of vehicularity from artist to spectator, the way in which the artist-landscape slides into – *extends* into – the spectator-landscape. The alterance that such a transfer inevitably provokes: one can never look at those buildings in Reykjavik the same way again. As a matter of fact, when slides of Seyðisfjörður were first exhibited to that tiny town's citizens during a time when local consensus implied the need to destroy many local buildings and begin an ambitious re-building project, the tone of the conversation shifted: suddenly, after encountering Roth's slides, the citizens saw the importance of their homes and local landmarks, and began to propose ways of preserving and conserving their built environment.

It is no strange coincidence that a vehicular force – that is, an entity whose machinery was composed so as to defy stasis – was the one that brought them this gift. Nor is it strange that one of the great philosophers of movement – Gilles Deleuze, with his concepts of nomadism and de-territorialization – was not fond of travel. Björn Roth later tried to articulate his father's penchant for vehicularity in relation to the Icelandic scape; he conceived it in terms of a *drift*. As he stated in the film *Dieter Roth*: "He didn't actually like cars or driving itself. It was

somehow...this drift. The feeling it gave him was a similar feeling to sailing – this *drifting* through the landscape somehow.” In drifting across the land, one is able to sublimate oneself within that scape, to become one with it. This is the secret that the ancient Chinese landscape poets and painters knew: the real landscape always lies within. What we see outside is but a reflection of that inner landscape. In Roth’s case, it was a landscape that he was not content to merely provide a picture of. He was also compelled to perform constant excavations.

The Diarist

Perhaps another way to further untangle this web is to turn our attention towards the diary form. Like George Kuchar, Roth was an avid diarist. But perhaps the directional flow was reversed, for Kuchar seems to have come to the diary form later in life, while for Roth, it was arguably the root for everything he would do from at least the early 1960s onwards, after his encounter with Tinguely’s machine. Not only did Roth keep diaries, in the “traditional” written form – he, in a sense, exploded them: for everything, the entire space around him, all the spaces he came to occupy, *Dieter Roth’s world*, became his diary.

Still, every diarist has his own strict system of organization. In a 1979 interview with Irmelin Lebeer-Hossmann, Roth described the three-pronged nature of his written diaries and the way they fed in to his overall practice:

DR: One book is simply what I want to do, what I have to do, and what I believe that I have to do. Appointments, a calendar, or what do you call it – a notebook.

And then the second form is where I write down what happened on particular days, where I've been and what I saw, which people I met, which books I've read, etc. And then comes the third, in which I...for example, I write in one book: "Simenon – *Le Train*" and then I say no more about what I thought. But in the third book I always wanted to register what I think of Simenon, or what I experience when I read it. And, needless to say, that's a rather extensive madness: you can do it quite badly. I've only described a couple of days this year so extensively.

IL-H: And the rest of the time, that hangs over you? You think: now I have to do that, but you don't get round to it.

DR: Yes. For me, it's... it's like a cancerous tumor, it's basically an illness. An illness that I have. Now.

IL-H: This compulsion to represent your entire life.

DR: Yes. That's my terminal illness. It'll probably be the cause of my death.

(Roth 157-158)

We can venture that the inherent impossibility of the tripartite structure established by Roth is very much the point. Set yourself an impossible task, and then despair at the prospect of ever fulfilling it: this is called *fuel*. Without it, a goal is never a goal. The impossibility of such goals comes to be the waking, dreaming motive for every bad artist; the defiance of realism in one's expectations is, indeed, not the proper, sane way to behave, as conceived by the socius.

As such, the diaries can be properly thought of as a failed project. Though, unlike other failures, who attempt to hide away their shameful attempts, Roth put his on display repeatedly: much like the products of George Kuchar's bowel movements, focused in on on his small screens, Roth had nothing to offer up except for that which is excessive: the processes of living itself.

On occasion, Roth was forced to answer to the charges of vanity and narcissism among his critics. This is rooted, I believe, in a misreading of his work – and perhaps of the entire diaristic form in general. Here, we have to contend with the strange fact that the diary, as a form, is not autobiography. Whereas the autobiographical endeavor infers completion, finality, a *definitive state*, the diaristic is inherently rough, unfinished, non-definitive, *fragmented*. Autobiography is, above, all, a project – that is, something done with a specific end in mind, the end being entrance into a circulatory flow of reading and meaning-formation by outside forces. The diaristic, on the other hand, is a process. Its force is its own engagement with becoming, it resists the incorporation that is autobiography's chief impulse and ultimate aim, it therefore has no need to attain any semblance of perfection – it is quite satisfied in its flawed, perennially first draft condition. It resists meaning-formation by outside forces, content with its incomplete product of über-authorship.

What is it that makes Dieter Roth's work *not* vain? In a word: its apparent artlessness. An artlessness that could only be manufactured at the hands of an über-author. Jan Voss, a close friend of Roth's, once described him as "the broken Superman who has become a clown." The Superman here, of course, being Nietzsche's. That is, a *fallen* Superman. The world, as a solid entity, does not in fact exist; it is but a container for our individual exertions and the circulatory flow of our energies. The eye and nature of abandonment by the god-force we have experienced

is the annihilation of staticity by the millennia. What once merely *floated* – silent in its hostile stance towards self-mobility – now propels itself unceasingly in vibratory multiplicities, in defiance of all possible schemes of directional logic. What the bad artist, the über-author, does, it cannot be qualified because of its excessive and chaotic relationality, as encompassed in the abundance of quantitative flows: how do you go about assessing something that cannot even be measured?

While the diaristic mode pervades much of Roth's output, particularly in the second half of his life, there are two works in particular in which it serves as the overriding motif: the *Flat Files* and the *Solo Scenes*.

Flat Files was a project undertaken in 1975 and 1976 – immediately after the first round of *Reykjavik Slides* was shot. Today, the work officially consists of “flat materials in transparent sheets in 623 binders, 5 wooden shelves, 7 bookrests, [and] 4 ceiling lamps between every shelf” (Roth 38). The task was rooted in “the quantitative act of collecting things that were no more than two or three sixteenths of an inch thick [ranging from] bottle labels, envelopes, slips of paper, or prospectuses to handkerchiefs, packaging and leftover bits of food” (Roth 47). The resulting diary consists of plastic sleeves in binders (the pages and books, respectively) housing a chronological array of detritus from the artist's travels, including match booklets, receipts from bars and restaurants, hotel stationary, and snotty tissues from Berlin, Stuttgart, Hamburg, Düsseldorf, London, and Reykjavik.

As Roth would later remark about the project, “Every day sings a little song, there are themes in a way, of cities, and then you see the trips, by airplane, you can see – well at least I can see all of that when I leaf through the binders” (Roth 47).

Or, to put it bluntly, in the words of a long time Roth friend, Pétur Kirstiansson: “It’s the truth: what didn’t really matter today” (Jud).

As with the food-based works, it could be that tactility is the key to all this messy objectivity. With Roth, one must speak not of the de-materialized object, but of the de-materializing object – as his art is not only process-based, but so many of his objects continue to be enduring a process, even long after the artist-vehicle’s demise. This lends his work a scientific air.¹⁹ If, as Barry Curtis has noted, all houses are in some sense haunted, we could extend this even further to all objects. And, once we begin to speak of hauntings, of ghosts, what we are in fact speaking of is a certain tension between presence and absence. That is to say, an anxiety surrounding the issue of touch, of contact. The *Flat Files* allow us to get close to touching these “originals,” and yet they are “protected” behind the thinnest veneer of plastic. Inviting us in, challenging us to come as close to the dirt and filth of his life, yet refusing full access, Roth shows us one way to expand the language of the diary form to include the most banal of objects utilized in our quotidian motions.

The *Solo Scenes* and über-authorship

What about Roth’s relations with others – namely, his audience? While much has been written about Roth’s supposed misanthropic nature, he was also an avid collaborator – and, judging by the self-centered/self-exploded nature of much of his output, an exhibitionist. The exhibitionist, of course, requires an audience, and the relationship is not necessarily abusive – one might say

¹⁹ “Science or theory is an inquiry, which is to say, a practice: a practice of the seemingly fictive world that empiricism describes; a study of the conditions of legitimacy of practices in this empirical world that is in fact our own. The result is a great conversion of theory to practice” (Deleuze 2001, 36).

that it is, at least on occasion and in specific contexts, a relationality defined by an empathetic exchange between two vehicles.

“I believe the diaries are primarily an attempt to register a complaint,” Roth asserted, “a shrill howl of complaint. As loud and as penetrating as possible to invoke crying, you know; that people bawl and cry when they read it. For me, it’s about empathy, about this lament” (155).

One of the more shocking claims made by one of Roth’s harshest critics – again, Kuspit – is that the artist had no sure sense of himself. Perhaps this is because of spurious claims Roth periodically made to interviewers, with whom he liked to toy a bit, throughout his life.²⁰ Roth’s notion of identity, of selfhood, certainly defied the essentialist notion of a cohesive self to which Kuspit and other critics of a conservative bent subscribe. Rather, Roth had a remarkably fine-tuned sense of his *selves*. This awareness of the inherently multiplicitous nature of his existence is, in fact, what enabled him to function as a vehicle, as the über-artist that he was constantly in the process of becoming. In order to doubt so deeply and profoundly, as Roth, the empiricist *par excellence*, ultimately was, one must have an exceptionally strong sense of one’s (many) selfhoods.

Here, when considering the projective aspect of Roth’s work, it is useful to consider Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “conceptual personae” in philosophy:

²⁰ “Asked how he would like to be remembered after his death, Mr. Roth said, ‘Here lies the carcass of a man who didn’t know who he was and where he was heading.’” Quoted in Kimmelman. Perhaps this was, in fact, how Roth would have liked to be remembered; this does not necessarily imply, however, that this is how Roth actually was or how he really thought of himself.

The conceptual persona is not the philosopher's representative but, rather, the reverse: the philosopher is only the envelope of his principal conceptual persona and of all the other personae who are the intercessors [*intercesseurs*], the real subjects of his philosophy. Conceptual personae are the philosopher's "heteronyms," and the philosopher's name is the simple pseudonym of his personae. I am no longer myself but thought's aptitude for finding itself and spreading across a plane that passes through me at several places. The philosopher is the idiosyncrasy of his conceptual personae. The destiny of the philosopher is to become his conceptual persona or personae, at the same time that these personae themselves become something other than what they are historically, mythologically, or commonly (the Socrates of Plato, the Dionysus of Nietzsche, the Idiot of Nicholas of Cusa.) The conceptual persona is the becoming or the subject of a philosophy, on a par with the philosopher so that Nicholas of Cusa, or even Descartes, should have signed themselves "the Idiot," just as Nietzsche signed himself "the Antichrist" or "Dionysus crucified." In everyday life speech-acts refer back to psychosocial types who actually attest to a subjacent third person: "I decree mobilization as President of the Republic," "I speak to you as father," and so on. In the same way, the philosophical shifter is a speech-act in the third person where it is always a conceptual persona who says "I": "I think as Idiot," "I will as Zarathustra," "I dance as Dionysus," "I claim as Lover." Even Bergsonian duration has need of a runner. In philosophical enunciations we do not do something by saying it but produce movement by thinking it, through the intermediary of a conceptual persona. Conceptual personae are also the true

agents of enunciation. “Who is ‘I’?” It is always a third person. (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 64-65)

For Kuspit, Roth’s failure is lodged in his inability to conceptualize himself in the singular: the Great Male Artist of the Western Canon. Curious, as the process of this conceptual disruption had already begun years earlier with Marcel Duchamp and his numerous pseudonyms. One might say that it is the artist’s natural domain to enter into divergent zones of being each time one sets out to create another instance of particularity, another work. A signature, in this sense, can never be anything more than a parody of the type of assignable “secure selfhood” apparently coveted by Kuspit. Once again, perceiving, collecting, and creating are all collapsed in the force of a singular gesture, a gesture’s singularity: “As in science fiction, one has the impression of a fictive, foreign world, seen by other creatures, but also the presentiment that this world is already ours, and those creatures, ourselves” (Deleuze 2001, 35). The foreignness of the world was naturally and essentially tied to Roth’s vehicularity.

In this sense, Roth can only be understood as a radical empiricist. This is not mere conjecture, but has been confirmed by his closest friends and collaborators, including Richard Hamilton, who once accompanied Roth on a journey to purchase six volumes of the complete letters of David Hume in an Oxford bookshop (Jud). Like Deleuze, Roth disparaged the work of Wittgenstein and his followers, with their “language games,” as Deleuze made clear in a filmed interview with Claire Parnet. No Teutonic idealism for Roth, either; he turned Hegel’s complete works into sausages.²¹ Regarding Roth’s oeuvre, “The real empiricist world is thereby laid out

²¹ I refer here to Roth’s *Literaturwurst* series, in which Roth utilized traditional sausage recipes, only replacing the meat with a shredded book or magazine. The series culminated in 1974 with *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s*

for the first time to the fullest: it is a world of exteriority, a world in which thought itself exists in a fundamental relationship with the Outside, a world in which terms are veritable atoms and relations veritable external passages; a world in which the conjunction ‘and’ dethrones the interiority of the verb ‘is’; a harlequin world of multicolored patterns and non-totalizable fragments where communication takes place through external relations” (Deleuze 2001, 38). What is indeed futile is to search for any form of metaphysical truth in the exhaust produced by the Dieter Roth vehicle. His vulgarity lay in his extreme physicality; his epistemology was a lived empiricism, the pollution he left behind are traces of that legacy.

...Basel. An elderly Dieter Roth talks on the phone, pen in hand. Putters around his home-made, hand-made studio. There is a table in the corner that, according to Björn, was made just for reading mail. Another strictly for dining. Each object has its restricted use: even those whose use is to assist the artist in creating more excess. The space around him, his office, became a sculpture. Dieter sits, a large fat man at a desk, and writes poems. If he liked a pair of pants, he’d buy fifty pairs and send them to his various studios, dotted around Europe. A bed was erected next to each of his main working desks, in case he needed to take a quick nap while working. Everything around him was set up to support the running of the vehicle.

Like George Kuchar, Roth turned to the VHS format towards the end of his life for its simultaneous accessibility and disposability. The monumental work here is *Solo Scenes*, comprising 131 VHS cassettes, footage of Roth in his Swiss studio but also (and mostly) his Iceland studio, where he had retreated once again from the continent, this time as a means of quitting drinking, during the last year of his life, 1998. Standing before these dozens of monitors,

Werke in 20 Banden (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's Work in 20 Volumes), a work that was actually made by the collector Hanns Sohm according to Roth's instructions. (See Dobke & Walter, 74.)

one is moved by this blunt display of the artist at work. In between, one spots, for instance, the sludge of Iceland, as filmed from the window. Everywhere you look: landscape rot, as in one of Roth's messier food paintings. Catching this bit of the *Solo Scenes* – it is probably impossible to watch all of them – is to realize that Roth effectively went from representing the landscape to doing, being the thing. Roth wanders over to a table, where he sits down and writes. On another monitor, he walks into the bathroom, removes his robe to reveal an obese flabby vehicle; climbs into the shower.

Or: sitting at a desk, staring vacantly. Looking out the window. Doing nothing, yet the camera is there, turned on, and so: constantly making.

Richard Hamilton, who collaborated with Roth on occasion, describes the incessant need to do, to make, to go, *to ride*: “I would have qualms about the quality of what we were doing because it was so speedy, I wouldn't have time to stop and think – I would just have to *do* something.”

Unlike the video films of George Kuchar, Roth's videos appear to lack any editorial agency. While they share the commonality of the artist's constant presence, in the case of the *Solo Scenes*, the work is more a monitoring of the artist at work, at rest, distracted, sleeping, bathing. It is, for many, an exercise in banality, tough to watch, and yet – also impossible to watch, in that the way it is exhibited, much like the *Reykjavik Slides*, is an exercise in over-display, where all the works are shown simultaneously on rows of monitors. One can, in a sense, only see the *Solo Scenes* in/as excerpts. Indeed, this is how they were meant to be taken in. In this sense, the spectator forges her own edit of the work.

Dieter in bed, taking his socks off. Illuminated by a thin light from the lamp. He stares. Dieter seated at a desk, at night; lamp; staring. He picks up a diary, opens it. Takes a Polaroid of the camera sitting on the tripod across from him. From inside the Seyðisfjörður studio, the camera pans over again to the autumnal Icelandic landscape – the bay across the way. A cut to the interior of one of Dieter's other studios, where the artist can be seen, working, drinking. Roth emerges in these works as something of a Beckettian character. Indeed, for those familiar with his jolly, vital being in earlier works, seeing him in these tapes – a withered, sad, disgruntled old man, clearly at the end of his life – can be a depressive experience. For sure, Roth himself was aware that the fade had begun. Still, he kept running – continuing to project himself and forge new alliances between life and art. “The broken Superman who has become a clown” – a Nietzschean characterization, to be sure, though in so doing, Roth manages to attain a moral superiority over most beings. Many of us have, at one point or another, reached a low point, a crash in our journey; few of us, however, would willingly put it on display. To do so is beyond humbling – it is to cross a line into demoralization, which is to say: equalization with the object.

Indeed, for Roth, the ride never really stopped. “He’s not a person who led a very active social life. He worked and worked and worked and worked,” says Emmett Williams, a longtime friend and artistic collaborator. Williams describes how the two of them would be together in someone’s kitchen drinking wine and talking, while Roth, drunk, would be making two-handed drawings.

Hamilton, in a documentary on Roth: “One of the intentions of the collaboration was the idea that we could produce bad art. And so we discussed a lot this idea of bad art and what was bad, why was it bad. He would be rather pleased if we got something so awful that neither of us liked it.” And yet, at the same time, the option of flight was always kept open; one begins to

conceive of his various studios around Europe as escape hatches. “The master of ‘running away’ did his share to encourage [obscurity]. He constantly evaded incorporation, even in cases where he initiated the game. He often abruptly packed his bags and left, prompted by an instinct sharpened through profound distrust: the scheme might succeed (far too easily)” (Glozer 10).

Dieter at his night table. Removes a page from his address book; draws on it. Dieter sits down at a piano. Plays a beautiful, aharmonic tune. Dieter as an old man, hiccupping before two microphones. He flips the top on a keyboard and plays another beautiful melody.

Dieter in another studio, removing bits of stray plastic from the floor, putting old paper boxes in the trash. Dieter talking to himself, drunk, trying to tidy, failing all the while. “Hey, what is all this? Hey, what’s all this? This tragic shit. What’s that mess you’re making there? Now, what are you doing? That’s a mess!” Puts the work garbage down, takes another drink. A stack of books on his desk. Breathing heavily. “What is this, asshole?” – referring to himself. There is no one else in the room. It was a question that would never be answered satisfactorily. And yet the ride continues – even within this apparent stasis.

Beyond Mortality: *The Garden Sculpture*



Garden Sculpture, Dieter Roth, 1968-

“The fantastic thing about this sculpture is that we don’t know what it is,” says Björn Roth with a smile. Begun in 1968 and originally taking the form of a self-portrait forged out of chocolate and birdseed standing on a table, the *Garden Sculpture* has gradually expanded over the years as more stuff was added on and more collaborators became involved.

Here is where the Everything comes together: the Work (noun) and its ceaseless evolution, the work (verb) and its constant demise. What is life but a struggle to retain life? Currently housed in a large hall of the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin, the long horizontal wooden contraption known as the *Garden Sculpture* resembles, as of this writing (25 May 2016), a sort of fucked-up pirate ship. We might suggest that it’s the closest Roth ever got to Tinguely’s self-destroying sculpture: a massive contraption of junk and detritus, though expanded to include a

workshop (off to the side), so that the entire room resembles a massive construction site. Attached to the sculpture at various strategic points are television monitors with VCRs, displaying footage of the work in various phases of construction – though not only. One video – played on one of those now near-extinct TV-VCR combines and installed beneath a green cage stuffed with toy bunnies, cans of acrylic paint dumped unceremoniously over their heads – features footage of a large, calm body of flowing water – likely the sea outside Roth’s Seyðisfjörður studio – where occasionally, a boat can be made out on the horizon.

Currently, the sculpture itself is divided into two main parts, with the front end comprised of a zigzag of rickety stairs and ladders leading up to the captain’s quarters, a makeshift office for starry-eyed Ahab. (The sculpture’s references to *Moby Dick* cannot be ignored: we come to realize in regarding it from afar, that a ship almost always resembles a whale, and vice versa. Again, construction/destruction: that which is built which is never complete: that thing that gnaws at you from within like a neurotic illness, that propels you forward, towards the gulf of unexplored blind death and the immortality of completion.) A hand-made (like nearly everything else here) desk fashioned out of wooden boxes, chair with a paint-splattered jacket on the back, and two transparent paint-splashed Plexiglas canvases in the place of the absent über-author. Behind the desk, a bookshelf, where, among other titles, *The New Cosmology* and a biography of Buster Keaton can be made out – testament not only to Roth’s omnivorous appetite, but perhaps twin poles of his created persona: where the supernal meets the absurd. Beneath the stairs on shelves, various jars have been installed. They contain foul liquids, each labeled with a Polaroid photograph and labeled with the name of the city and date, documenting the process of collecting condensation, via huge vats and funnels, from each place where the *Garden Sculpture* was worked on/displayed.

The second, rear part of the sculpture is fronted with a “sail,” composed of a jumble of flat wooden animalistic shapes, projected skywards. This rear sculpture also contains plant life – a bunch of plotted plants in various phases of life and death – as well as the majority of the videos depicting the construction of the sculpture beneath the mast, each displayed on a cheap, dirty television set. Also included is a smashed TV set (in Jud’s documentary, we see the elderly Roth himself joyfully smashing it with a thick block of wood as his son and assistants watch bemusedly), a paint-splattered photograph of the *Garden Sculpture* in-progress stuck inside. Nothing stays clean for very long in Roth’s universe. On one of the videos, we listen to Björn’s voice laughing and chirping cheerily in Icelandic to his colleagues, enthralled to be hard at work at nothing, drilling a hole into a piece of wood for some unseeable continuation of the sculpture. Dieter is absent, but the work continues: the artist dies, and yet the vehicle never comes to a halt. “He thought of it as a train,” Björn would later explain in a documentary on his father. “And he asked us...when he went off the train, if we’d be ready to continue the ride.” Thus, the sculpture has no end date, no completion: it continues onward into infinity. Parked at the rear of the sculpture, a giant empty watering can. And at the very rear: a trunk opened to reveal a vast barrage of junk, stationed above a TV set showing yet more grainy VHS footage of the same trunk, with voices and work heard in the background. A typical Roth joke: endless reflection of the same thing, over and over again. The thing’s thingness thus amplified. And there is so much junk in this trunk, so much junk in Roth’s world, how do we even begin to parse it apart, to assess its significance, when its refuse objectivity encourages nothing higher than denigration? – Anything you pour paint on is then christened “art”?

So we walk around to remember what we saw when we first entered the room – because by now, the process of immersion has taken us to quite a different place. We are greeted with the

head of the ship, the face of the whale: another television set, this one with a live video feed, showing ourselves, our friends, our fellow museum-goers moving past the vast parked thingness that is the *Garden Sculpture*. This thing, its constant evolution, even beyond the death of its maker: this is the key to the puzzle of Dieter Roth's voracious vehicularity.

Taking up about a third of the room – the rear corner – is the workshop – indelibly a part of the sculpture. The workshop contains a long table with eight chairs around it, old coffee cans containing various pencils and pens, paper, some shelves on top with scattered papers, binders, CDs... One is nervous around it, never sure whether, as a spectator, one is allowed to sit down and contribute to the scribbles one sees all over the table, or if it is strictly for display. Around the work area, a typical “dude dorm”/construction site atmosphere. A fridge. Bottles of beer, water, wine, many of them empty. A coffeemaker. The rest: slabs of wood, much of it sloppily spray painted. Tools. Paint cans, electrical wires...

In the connecting corridor, a window reveals that behind the museum, various plotted plants have been set out to be exposed to the elements. Also, the distillation process (as displayed in the Polaroid photographs on the front sculpture) have been set out, as rain and condensation is in the process of being transmitted into jars: so even in the absence of any authorial presence whatsoever, the sculpture continues to be “made.”

Environmental art without a real ecological message? Perhaps. Yet the sculpture continues to “grow,” like a plant, even when no humans are available to work on it. One might say that Everything Art represents, in a sense, a total ecology: Everything Art means Everyone and Everything becomes a part of it, whether each entity, human or otherwise, is aware of its contribution or not. And the spectator? Those vehicles who pass by the thing, observing it

without directly contributing, are immediately let in on the joke, and thus become a part of it.

The joke of art; the joke of life.

The Anatomy of Melancholy: The Paintings of Christian Schoeler

I. Still Life

As Rilke once noted, in writing of Rodin, the artist eventually comes to the realization that he is limited by the surface just as the writer must ultimately grapple with language's intrinsic failures to adequately convey the essence of a thing (Rilke 17). Surfaces, surfacing: Isn't the melancholic realization of the painter identical to that of the obsessive, the lover, the day that the realization is reached that you can never truly *know* another person? For what is there but the surface that prevents us from crawling into the skin of another, thinking their thoughts and feeling their feelings with them, inside them, discarding our own physiological realities in a gelatinous act of *becoming* another, pre-existent being? Couldn't we propose that nearly all art that addresses, nay, idealizes the human figure, is an act of reconciliation on behalf of the artist who wishes to do just that?

These are the thoughts that flood my brain when I consider a painting by Christian Schoeler. It is because Schoeler clearly works out of inner necessity, impelled by something like love, though I don't think it's quite as simple as that. His quest for capturing and rendering beauty in his male portraits certainly has its historical precedents – it is loudly part of a tradition,

it announces itself as such – but without the self-referencing that positions the artist on a higher, godlike plateau of being above his subjects. God is not Christian Schoeler – God is the boys he depicts.

At the same time, most of these *are* studio pictures. In that, they take on the difficult task of attempting to capture “natural” beauty within a *frame*, or a framed situation that is going to reveal at least some vestiges of its artificiality. Thereby, the medium makes reference to itself, often in the form of the models’ explicit outward gaze at the viewer or the staginess of their pose. The visual is allowed to be truly and totally visual.

Like Larry Clark, an artist he admires, Schoeler’s primary concern is with boy-men situated on the edge of becoming – that vulnerable situation/moment in life, that state of being stranded between boyhood and manhood, that is fraught with existential inevitabilities. “Most of the decisions are made on an emotional basis,” Schoeler insists in a recent interview. Emotion, as opposed to formal or conceptual concerns, we may presume – a bold admission in an era when art is moving away from the purely visual and further into the conceptual, almost as though in reaction to the broader, increasingly image-based culture. This is where the Clark comparison comes to an end: For Clark, who assumes what could be called a similar *faux naïve* melancholic stance towards his subjects, his subjects’ engagement with the wider cultural milieu – and that milieu’s representation of the teenage male body and its sexual prowess – is a constant presence in the work; one need look no further than *The Perfect Childhood*, a book that combines Clark’s own photos with news clippings, hand-written letters, movie stills, and teen celebrity posters, among other forms of trash/sex culture memorabilia, in forming a complex psychosexual art object that simultaneously serves as a manifesto for the artist’s obsessions (1995). Schoeler, on the other hand, completely ignores culture altogether, transmitting his obsessions purely through

the paintings – even the settings are often obscured to the point of illegibility in order to focus solely on the subjects themselves, typically depicted singly or in pairs, to the extent that the pictures attain an air of timelessness reminiscent of Rainer Fetting’s portraits. Furthermore, the paintings showcase a Hegelian impulse for capturing a precise state of affairs, linking the concrete with the Ideal. In the case of Schoeler, it is a concretion rooted in a semantics of melancholia.

From an interview with Francesca Gavin: “The true antagonism lies within the difference between ethics and aesthetics. [...] In my mind there is a certain melancholy, a degree of light in concert with a degree of darkness, a sad finesse, which is directly connected to gay sexuality” (26).

In his 1917 essay on “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud elucidates the structure of melancholia. It is, of course, rooted in loss. When you lose someone you love, according to Freud, you subsume that person into the structure of your ego. You take on attributes of that person; in doing so, you are able to sustain them, you are able to sustain your love for them.

Because time moves too fast for us, there is a reason for preserving and idealizing certain forms. We don’t know what Schoeler’s personal relationship is with his models, we don’t need to know. Love occurs on several layers; in the human realm of relationships, in the aesthetic realm of beauty and idealized form. It is the latter form of love that Schoeler prefers to talk about when asked by an interviewer whether he is currently in love, referring to the work of fellow artists with whom he feels an affinity.

Whether you choose to view the male figures in Schoeler’s paintings as projections of the artist’s past-present self on the vulnerable precipice of becoming, or as literal figurative

representations of models with whom he may or may not have a more intimate relationship, the same *othering* device is at work. Contrary to classical psychoanalytic definitions of melancholia, however, this is a form of love-loss projected externally through the creative act, rather than subsumed within the artist's ego. I would even go so far as to argue that this is a tactic of ego-destruction, which aligns Schoeler with a number of (namely literary) explorers of extreme states of being, from Rimbaud to Kathy Acker.

An act of melancholy – for example, a painting – is then a method of preserving something that will otherwise, inevitably, be lost. And Schoeler is correct in linking this to homosexuality. Via Lacan and Hegel, Judith Butler has identified traditional Western conceptions of gender as equating “having” and “being” with “masculine” and “feminine,” respectively, with regards to the Phallus. Such divisions have been naturalized through the stringent laws of heterosexual discourse that dictate societal norms. Women (and, I would argue, “feminine” boys such as those typically found in Schoeler's paintings) must cope with the ludicrous expectation of having to “be” the Phallus while having to conceal their lack of the Phallus; this compromise is conceived as “appearing,” or masquerade. Butler writes: “The mask has a double function which is the double function of melancholy. The mask is taken on through the process of incorporation which is a way of inscribing and then wearing a melancholic identification in and on the body; in effect, it is the signification of the body in the mold of the Other who has been refused. Dominated through appropriation, every refusal fails, and the refuser becomes part of the very identity of the refused, indeed, becomes the psychic refuse of the refused. The loss of the object is never absolute because it is redistributed within a psychic/corporeal boundary that expands to incorporate that loss. This locates the process of gender incorporation within the wider orbit of melancholy.”

This returns us to that curious statement of Schoeler's regarding the tension between ethics and aesthetics. Lost in an orbit of desire, stranded between their own private sexual battles and their position as potential sexual objects, Schoeler recognizes that the essence of his subjects is their vulnerability – something a more sinister artist might try to exploit or de-sensitize. Furthermore, I would have to add that there is a sense of shame in desiring – to love, to become, to subsume – another, a shame that is intrinsic to gay identity-formation. What we have is the classic vision of homosexual-as-outsider, a melancholic refusal to cope by feigning gain; a celebration, really, of loss and the humanizing beauty of suffering through memory, nostalgia, and hope.

Of course, in suggesting this, I risk suggesting that Schoeler is a wispy person deluded by dreams, unable to act but through art. To clarify, I have to propose that Schoeler, on the contrary, is an artist who understands that dreams are, in fact, the stuff of real life. Further, he is able to intuit that pain is the *being* of “being well.”

In the end, we give in to the desire to see Schoeler's boys as characters or totems in the formation of a future epic. An elimination, a denial of the *meta-* level, brings us back once again to a joyous affirmation of the surface. A surface that is, perhaps, not sexual or even tactile – a distancing effect is used to fog these subjects in the dreamlight of a parallel universe. Youth will fade, the twinkles will become something else – kings or else tyrants, fools – we cannot know, a picture tells no stories – art is not life, but a dream, a moment captured. Time's formidable absence from the cause of being elevates these snatches of becoming into relics of affirmation, providing the illusion of a living continuity of beauty uninterrupted. Chaste and refined, Schoeler's paintings are still lifes with living beings.

II. Trash, the Body, An Accident

But enough about corporeality – we are dealing in two dimensions here. Is this a problem? If so, how to articulate this challenge, how to articulate it in a way that it may be overcome?

Argument: There is, in fact, a sensuality that takes place when no bodies are present.

The sensuality of solitude is closely related to the act of creation. I'm not talking about a masturbatory process that is linked to ego fulfillment; rather, the depths of a field that transcends the confines of the self, the gulf of selves that is our inevitability, as each one of us *is not one* – is, in fact, a collective entity.²² That is why each time we are painted, a completely different figure emerges. Just as a landscape never stays the same, the body, the inner being that it reflects, is a constantly shifting and evolving field of perplexities.

To find this sensuality, we must look beyond the figures, at the backgrounds. What do we find there. Total abstraction, most of the time. No, for the *totality* is in fact always a merger between those blotted-out forms that articulate *nature* for us and the human body structures that are struggling to find their expression. There is a competition between the two forms of life here, one that is not necessarily resolved in, by the painting. Painting, an *unnatural act*, can make

²² Here, as elsewhere, I am freely adapting one of the key Deleuzo-Guattarian conceptions of schizoanalysis, as posited in their famous dual work *Capitalism and Schizophrenia (Anti-Oedipus and A Thousand Plateaus)*, wherein the self is not a single, unitary being, but always a multiplicity. (See, for instance, Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 3.)

anything come alive. This is its animating paradox. And, when it is successful, the apparent formlessness of nature is just as important as the (mostly precise) human forms inserted into the landscapes.

Doing “bad painting” is easy, Schoeler asserts, when the question of German neo-Expressionist *terribles* like Baselitz and Oehlen comes up. There’s no challenge in that. It’s a generational thing; Schoeler is no longer part of that generation that feels the need to break *those* rules. This points to a shift in the cyclical notions of badness in art. Now it’s more risqué to try and paint *beauty*.

Is Schoeler painting beauty in the classical sense? If so, he worries, then maybe what he is doing is kitsch. It’s a subject that comes up a lot in my conversations with the artist. Am I doing kitsch, he asks, and if so, is doing kitsch a bad thing? Sometimes he says that he’s proud to be painting kitsch, that he’s engaging in a dialogue with it. That to make a beautiful painting in the 21st century is something like penning Romantic poetry, an endeavor that no serious contemporary artist or critic would accept anyway. (Greenberg actually sources the roots of kitsch in Romanticism at one point, in its identificatory impulse towards the *effect* of poetry on the poet. Great art, avant-garde art, always identifies itself rather with cause rather than effect, argues Greenberg.)

“Democracy isn’t something to eat,” a Kurdish Iraqi dissident once stated. To that, we might add: Kitsch isn’t, necessarily, something to shit. Artists like Schoeler seriously trouble the old Greenbergian dialectic. Writing in 1939, Greenberg identified then-still-emergent abstract art as the forefront of the avant-garde, as it was the first time in history wherein artists had begun to imitate the processes of art itself (rather than, say, nature, presumably.) At the same time, as the

result of rapid industrialization and improved living standards, a state of supposed universal literacy was attained as the masses began flooding into the city from the countryside. With this new enlightenment and work schedule that allowed for amounts of free time hitherto unknown, the masses met with boredom for the first time, and thus required their own form of culture – though they could only tolerate one situated on their “lower” level, lacking the refinements of the master classes. “Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas” (Greenberg 12). Chez Greenberg, kitsch is incendiary, deceptive – something that one must always be *on guard* (avant garde) against; hence, he invents a role for the critic, while simultaneously identifying the moral stance of the avant-garde artist, whose duty of upholding the standards of good art is rooted in a natural instinct; the avant garde artist “has an organic sense of what is good and what is bad for art” (Greenberg 28).

If abstract painting represented the heroic avant garde of good taste, then outside of popular culture, within the art historical canon, romanticism was enunciated as the enemy, veering dangerously close to kitsch in its attempts to dissolve the barrier of the medium that is the dividing force between the *emotions* of the painter and the spectator. And, insofar as he *flatters* the spectator, Schoeler could be said to be performing a feat of kitsch romanticism. Though the dichotomy is not that simple, because according to Greenberg, the artist who flatters cannot simultaneously enlighten. Schoeler shows that it is possible to do both.

Schoeler feels forced to identify his practice as engaging in kitsch because, in the eyes of the art status quo that believes its duty is to uphold these categories, what he is doing is somehow too physical, intimate, dirty, present. In short, it is a sort of anti-conceptualism. What makes it so is the central presence of the body. Body becomes an expression, an extension, of being. For expression is extension: a point that Greenberg misses in his bitter dismissal of Romanticism.

How can one truly separate feeling from thought in the authorial *or* spectatorial experience of the work of art? The main problem with Greenberg is that he never managed to throw Descartes in the trash where he belongs. In such discourses, mind *always* perseveres over body. What's left for the body? It becomes a thing only women and gay men need concern themselves with: this burden of being and not-having.

But a warring and combative physicalist viewpoint proposes that mind is but an *extension* of body, so why isolate one from the other? The idea of *extension* is infinitely productive, enabling thousands of tiny universes to appear. We are all, to an extent, victims of the era we live in. Intoxicated by the endless whirl of technological "progress," it hardly ever occurs to us that the most essential questions may, in fact, be the most primitive ones. By confining these questions – to which no easy answers have ever been found – to the toilet bowl, by trashing history in our arrogant obsession with contemporaneity, we are only accelerating the process of universal destruction. It is with this knowledge, this supra-physicalist perspective, that Christian Schoeler moves forward. He very well might be asking the same questions as Rembrandt and El Greco before him, but it is not done in willful ignorance of the world he is living in. He knows this place is a world of ugly accidents, of brutalism, ignorance, and danger. It is a radical gesture to deal openly and directly with beauty in times like this. Christian Schoeler is a radical traditionalist, a neo-Romantic.



Untitled, Christian Schoeler, oil on wood, dimensions unknown, 2011

There is a boy, he is naked, he stands on the precipice, the edge of a body of water. The water is green, which means it is not completely clean. Not necessarily dirty, but polluted by foliage, by the efflorescence of its surroundings. He puts one step forward, into it, to test it. He does not know if he can trust it, what that is. It is a moving forward: that is all, seems so simple, and yet it scares him. Scares us. So many of us. For us many, those of us who are scared, it is much better, safer, to stay put, avoid the uncertainty of the future unknowable.

On the other hand, how silly this fear seems. Look over there, you can see the other side, it is not so far away.

He wants to be always walking. But he cannot go where there is no surface to be seen.

It could also be a field, of course, not water at all. But in this version of things, it is a lake, a sea, a body of water. It may be vague, but it is still liquid, that much is certain. Maybe it is different for you.

Total immersion entails, more than entails, *is akin to* loss. We must move forward in order to make new discoveries, but we're giving up control by doing so. Uncertainty is a tall order. We turn our back on past experiences, reject the sentimentality of nostalgia. But the longer you ignore that gulf of lack that forms the center of your selves, that multiple being that each of us is, the more it widens, threatening to drown the you that has to live this life, that must stay afloat, live and love and hate and die.

Schoeler manages expression without a face. And yet not. There is a reversal of orders going on here. The boy has his back to us, we cannot see his actual face. His face is turned towards the landscape, the same thing we are facing towards. And yet what looks back at us. Faciality – screens, surfaces, images – a hylozoic force that not only receives our gaze but projects one of its own back in our direction. We are looking, the boy is looking. Looking, looking. What looks back? The answer is simple. *The face is the landscape*. What does this face-landscape consist of?

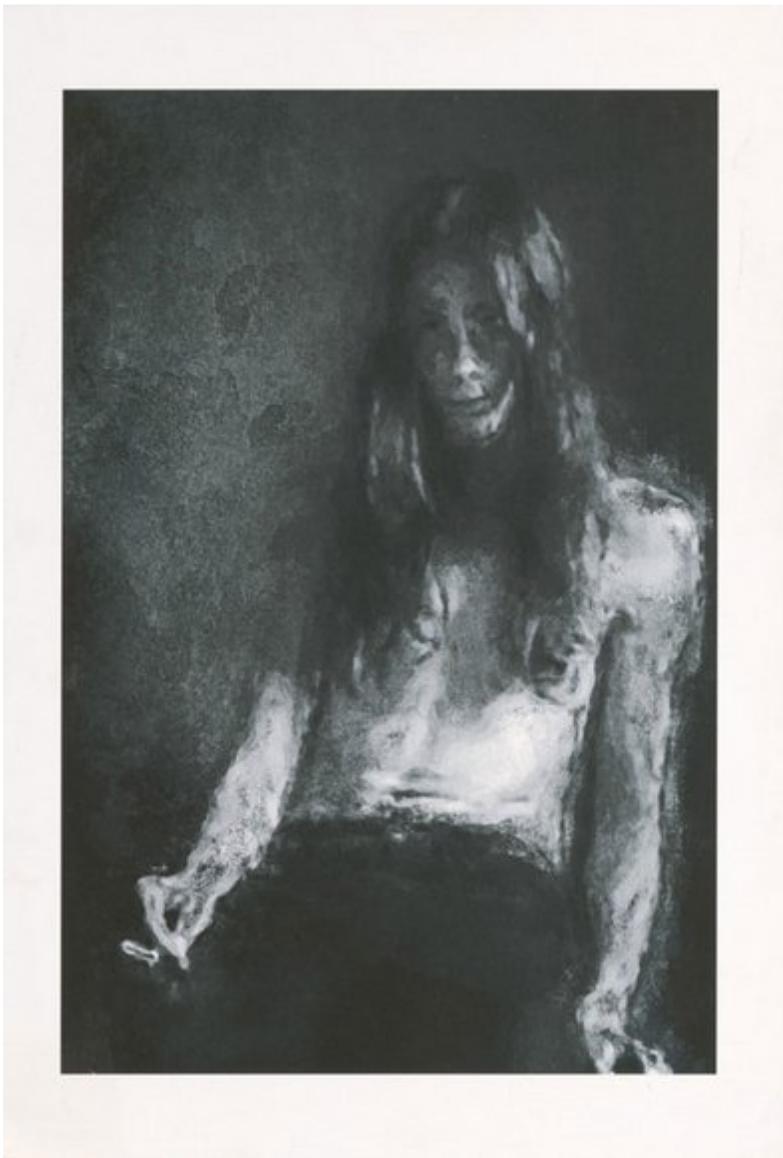
The question of flatness is an interesting one. Ultimately, it is something that Schoeler totally rejects in his painting. This greatly troubled his professors at the Munich Art Academy, ardent Color Fieldists, who wished that Schoeler would abandon painting figures and simply leave in the backgrounds. A lot has happened since Color Field painting. Ever the bad student – like a lot of great artists, a dropout, a reject – Schoeler not only persisted in his loyalty to the figure, he sought to disrupt the “pure” painterly qualities of his backgrounds by making them, by

and large, accidental. Taking a photograph of a spot of dirt on the studio floor, enlarging it to make a full distorted splotched landscape, then fucking with it in the post-processing, various layering effects, to get it to the right degree of blurriness, contrast – a *troubled surface*. While the illusion of depth is always the most classical effect, the surfaces of his figures – not only their skin, but their clothing, the objects they hold in their hands – remember, we are dealing with *extension* here on a grand, endless scale – are similarly tortured, usually by the strange way the light inevitably violates their bodies. For this is a violence being done to them – a subtle violence, maybe – but it is violence nonetheless and it is the violence of vision, the violence of this world that we were brought into without choosing and must now make our way through.

Being: always a lack. Awareness of one's sensitivity to a living field does nothing to lessen or deplete it. For this is what the body becomes: a landscape. The living organism a confluence of forms. He works at and on the surfaces to lessen the affects, diminish the sharpness, a field of being. A protective shield against the violence that the eye is capable of. Or not. For what is often mistaken as a softening of forms, of the overall image, might also be seen as a brutalistic assertion of something.

So when Schoeler has an accident in the studio – when a mess is made, when a field becomes tarnished, a plane polluted – then it is always a lucky accident. A piece of trash is photographed, becomes a landscape, or perhaps even the surface of the skin – one of many surfaces. For, ultimately, the body is the landscape, vice versa. Being a part of something is being apart, the networked indulgence of a total sensuality that does not need to be zoned-in on in order to siphon out its definitionality, all liquid and pure. True, the painter is the architect of visual meaning. But the store by which he sets up his practice can also get sucked in. You are in the way, you piece of filth, and thus, you become a part of this wider mess, even as it is

transformed into beauty. There is nothing “soft” about these images, beautiful as they may seem. This is Schoeler’s crowning achievement, this rendering of a *hardedge beauty*, something very coarse and rough, the body in its blurred causality. The sum of all the conditions that led it to get to that point, the interpretative state it is in when it is projected on the canvas or on the paper.



Untitled #066, Christian Schoeler, mixed media and pastel on handmade paper, 48.5 x 33 cm, 2011

III. Memorialization

Memorialization – something that takes place within the doctrine of safekeeping. I am haunted by a memory, and so I wrap it up in protective layers, the folds of an image, I externalize it, it is then there, outer, projected into space, it is something I can look upon, a safety latch. The colors of my memory crackle in the thinness of the daylight. I retreat into a permanent darkness – the only place I can be truly alone with these thoughts. Ever mindful of the interactions going on around me, I remain silent, untranslated. What escapes me – certain things that might have happened in the past, certain things I might have been. All those selves that once trespassed me, so many of them have died now. So many of them gone into the silence. A wry new day. A dull light that shudders. Now I have grown my hair long. It falls down way past my shoulders, I smoke a cigarette, I am pretending to be. Pretending in the half-light, that glow that signals late afternoon, hour of all permanence. Mood effects every movement I make, even the tiniest gesture, I am one of those guys. I have that glint. Don't worry, it signals no violence. I am tired of having thoughts. I only want to be depicted. I don't wanna be surrounded. Look, my shoulder, it looks so messy. When I grow my hair long, I become an example: primitive man. There are no shadows on the wall behind me, he's been sure to block those out. No one wants to distract from this façade.

Though maybe in the background, it is true, you can make out traces of a ghost. Or an image removed, something that has been erased to make way for this focus. You could conjecture that it is smoke from the cigarette he is holding that forms this specter. The way that smoke begets a separate image, separate from what you think you are actually seeing.

I am not a fag and I do not want to be seduced. I do not have a sexual orientation and I am the answer to this mayhem. I am my own definition of maleness, I am what can never be believed. The family has fallen away, the individual can be re-heroicized. Schoeler does not work within the confines of any “community” in the normative sense. We’re not fighting any of those old wars anymore. The battle within and amongst the selves takes precedence over the old political identity dichotomies: male-female, straight-gay...

Memorialization can be thought of as the process of creating out of loss, the substitutive recovery of a lack. Sometimes that process manifests itself in physical form, as in a painting. But that doesn’t mean that the painting is capturing an (auto)biographical memory. A memory can also be forged, the end product of a forgery that is embedded within the creative act. I risk suggesting here that there is something dishonest about the creative act by noting that forgery is inevitably involved. Here we go again, another contradiction that this type of painting reveals: Within forgery, the production of a truth takes place. (In China, we were confronted with another version of truth. Everyone knows that China is the global capital of the simulacrum, the fake. Capitalists and intellectual copyright obsessives paint the Chinese as a race of pirates, out to destroy our precious legal-financial system in the West that says that ideas and artworks belong to individuals – not all of mankind. That by stealing my work, by replicating it so that you can profit from it yourself, you are stealing my identity, you are stealing *my truth*. In China, people fail to see this Western wrongness that is behind, nay, *thrust on* what they are doing. Their tradition is not ours. In Taoism and Buddhism, chanting – ritualized repetition – presents an alternate model of truth-forging, wherein the more you repeat something, the greater the degree of truth and potency it assumes.)

Boy in the forest squatting naked, rests his hands upon his knees. I knew him as I was painting him, that was our moment together. I could not know him after the fact, it wasn't allowed. He was so full of life then, the dead expression on his face, I caught him believing in something. That's what's poignant about youth, especially the cynical ones, for no matter how bleak the outlook, belief – that which keeps them going – always shines through. When I catch him believing, when I depict it, I know I am depicting my own belief. That foreshadow of a future world that will blacken out all of this world's failings. I'm not talking about heaven, ideality. The boy wears red sneakers, he is still rooted in this world, he looks to another.

It is in the forest that so many memories get made. You can look at this shelter in two different ways: as being generative of life or else the advent of decay. Both are the same thing, really. It is possible to look at the forest and only see decay. Because from decay springs life. What's important isn't so much the fact of the forest itself but of the things that happen inside that lend themselves towards the forging of the truth, the forged truth, that is the memory. It can be so simple – you just being there naked. Another boy stands behind a tree, looking. Next to the tree, he sort of competes with it. You think about it later when you are in the studio, painting another picture, and then process closes in on itself: you paint another one, a boy, and this time, his torso becomes a trunk. His arms raised above his head, the truth of his bone-thin anatomy is concealed when you use the brush to go *down down down*, from his armpit down to his pelvic bone, where the frame interrupts and the image abruptly cuts off. He was there – that is the substance of the memory – though the real thing that's going on cannot be seen, for it is the thoughts that are being thought inside his mind, the thoughts I am thinking as I paint his picture.

IV. Painting and Writing

Painting is a language, as well, but it is one that can be very hard to read. You have to look hard for the signs, and even if you manage to find them, there is no guarantee that you will be right. Painting is the language of metaphor, it is true, and yet not. It does not always present us with something we want to see.

I am standing in front of an image, it is a figure, male, he is naked, he has his face hidden by his arm, his genitals with his left leg, arched upright, he is splayed out on the floor, his right leg providing support, it is a stressed, not entirely comfortable position, it is a being-thought-of. Today is more like yesterday. It is a dark image, what's happening here with the light is very strange. Schoeler has chosen to accentuate the softness of the light by restricting its expression to a grayish, earthy blue – the dirt beneath your fingernails as a child after a full day at play. It is also a blue of exhaustion, a blue that says that night has come and so the normal, expected thing to do is fall asleep. This man cannot fall asleep, though, the distress is evident in his body. He is interrupting the darkness, it is cruel to be awake. His eyes all splotched out in the rendering by the shadows, one of these shadows forms a black burnt-out star. The image spells hesitancy, a not-giving-in to sublimation – that is what insomnia is all about also. Look at the blue, the man is being raped by the light, it is not at all clear where it is coming from. The background neither. I imagine it is an attic, for attics are spaces that generally have no windows, and the light cannot be coming from the moon, it is artificial. The only thing that's bright, white, is that arched leg...He is cowering, because he is somehow mortified by the light, by what it might bring, the

consolation. His body forms a constellation. He is a sort of moon and I am the planet when I am looking at him.

To be displayed.

There is a ghost inside that shadow, most of them. That ghost has a name; it is called absence. One can fill that absence, inhabit the ghost, with words. But this tactic presents its own set of problems. Narrative implies movement. To impose any sort of narrative on to a static image is, then, inevitably – whether we like it or not – an act of trespassing. My day-to-day thus varies a great deal from Schoeler's, although necessarily there is a lot of movement in each of our actions. But the ultimate destination is very different for each of us. The role that invention plays...Don't get me wrong, we're both filling empty spaces up, we're both spilling something down and then ordering it up. There is a loneliness in doing all of that. But we're not talking about the psychology of the process here. Save that for another chapter on the obvious, melancholia. What's interesting is the two different forms, purposes of movement.

Describing versus inhabiting. The image does something that the words can fill? No, that's like a bubble. A thought came to me today while I was writing something else that the words can somehow fill out, inhabit the scenario that the image introduces. But that's somehow unfair to the image. When I say image, it doesn't have to be something physical; an image can occur in, occupy memory. Sometimes that type of image more powerful than a painting.

Sometimes the two have a very strained relationship. Gertrude Stein saw what Picasso was doing, said "I can do that," and picked up her pen. Wonderful things happened, even though it wasn't really Cubism, as some have strained to explain. But then one day, when Picasso started

to write poetry and (briefly) decided to give up painting altogether, Gertie wasn't all too happy about that.

It is perhaps best to view the two abstractly – that is to say, from a very far distance. That is to say: to see their similarities more than their differences. Magnify those similarities, to the extent that we can view a novel as a painting and read a painting as a novel. Get rid of all narrative, conceptual, pictorial prejudices. Perception is the last frontier. It is the gateway to everything else, the entire politicognitive superverse. Liberating ourselves from the prison of our categorical prejudices, we are able to see, for instance, the body as landscape and the landscape as body.

The difficulty then becomes considering writing as an act of seeing. This is the challenge posed by the new art writing. Will it overtake what is busy being there in another form. But writing has a materiality to it, as well, let us not forget. The base form of its materiality is sonic, a fact that all poets intuitively get. Writing should have a rhythm to it just as each painting has its own rhythm. Participating in a synesthesia of circumstances, we arrive at leveled ground, a new sense of order.

Frankenstein Figuration & Folds: Some Notes on the Paintings of Winston Chmielinski

1.

With all the recent art critical chatter about “zombie formalism,” Winston Chmielinski returns us to a time when painting was exciting and genuinely upsetting because it had so much to say (Robinson). Yet that “return” needs to be qualified, because it could infer that his project is somehow nostalgic; in fact, his paintings are bold and new, without boasting mere novelty; really, it is a *return* meant in the cyclical yet eruptive sense of Nietzsche’s conception of time. It doesn’t really matter whether we categorize Chmielinski’s paintings as abstract or figurative. Such categories quickly become obsolete, or else they shift from painting to painting; in the end, Chmielinski’s ultimate commitment is to the Image. His practice is one of transubstantiation, rather than appropriation. This reflects a specific relationship with nature, the image world. Nature is abstract; nature is abstraction and thus, the primitive source of all “abstract painting” (a problematic term, for sure.) The Abstract Expressionists wanted to *be* nature, to embody it, and gave such primacy to the gesture that composition became accidental. In Chmielinski’s painting, the work forms *around* those little accidents that arise through his imagistic collisions. His experiments, then, are buried in the strokes, the layers, the bright and interplanetary shades, the unruly and unsummarizable shapes, until some feasibility is arrived at, a sentence offered to the world; the world becomes *enlivened* by gesture. Gesture can never be reduced to a unitary signifying device; Chmielinski is the anti-thesis of the Abstract Expressionist heroic solitary

gesture. He posits the One as the Many, inspired by a Shintoist conception of nature, in which every living thing is its own god or else possesses its own unique brand of energy.

2.

His most recent works can largely be thought of as scapes. To call them *landscapes* would be going too far into territories of typology; they are too nebulous for that, they resist formulizable conclusion, and anyway, “land” infers that they belong to some recognizable plateau, when very often, they are otherworldly. Their nebulosity is what gives them autonomy as living objects. A siren screeches through the night; what we arrive at is a glare. A scape can just as easily encompass internal, deeply private impressions of the outer world; a collation of senses; it might also be speculative, a putting-forth of what *should* be; or else/and also a reductive-yet-combinatory analysis of competing color-shapes, fields, diluted into a zone that is private and primal.

3.

There is the saying and then there is what gets done about it, with it. There is narrative and then there is myth. Each painting an utterance that is open; the language is one of skin.

Chmielinski’s engagement with images is one of adoration, and adoration naturally gives birth to mistrust. The parable must be obscured in order to be conveyed. He doesn’t want specific narratives from his source material coming through. If other narratives emerge, he is fine with that. He knows exactly what his images are concealing and what he produces is a phantom vision.

4.

His concentration is a sublimation of distractions. The floor of his studio littered with print-outs of images he has collected in his computer over the years – his source material. Adrift in a sea of his own devising. It's not like we can fight it, this world we live in. *Ghost Where the Image Folds*: the title a figural imagining that reveals something of his process – taking two or more images often quite disparate, and “finding” his painting in the fold between the two.

Instinct is everything. An illustrative dwelling-in-the-muck-of-circumstance. A boylike figure seated or else suspended in space, but only for a very brief moment – he is being propelled forward. His shape is spelled out all blobbish and undynamited, while the specter that pursues is armful, predatory, and preteriteratory. The boy is pink and unethnicated, the monster behind him, that only he can see, awash in dark turbulent grays and flesh tones. As often happens when a figure is so articulated in Chmielinski's paintings (rarer these days), the boylike being is defined by not just his bodily position, but his motion (hardly ever a static pose): this one a lurch. His eyes are two aqua green spheres, he could be blind; as Chmielinski explained in a recent interview, he can't do eyes anymore because it involves lines; now he only wants to paint shapes, swaths – not lines. One of his legs is the color of flesh, the other a pale blue, inferring gangrene or the manifestation of a phantom limb. The ghost behind him has no face. An upturned cartoonish bubble claw for a head. The rest of it is all arms: above the clawhead, extended arm with hand attached about to come crashing down on boylike being lurching through his own nightfield...

Clusterfuck existentialism.

5.

The anti-decorative ethos of Chmielinski's pictures demands we dive into them, even if it entails the risk of drowning. Scurrying mousishly into the space marked *Wholes Around Openings*, the festivities of divisionlessness awaken us. These are colors that neither compete nor complement: a leaky marine blue in the center, hedges of plantlife greens, tropical fruit pinks, withered joyous flesh, electrical pink, inferences of shitbrown and the tentative urges of blackviolet. It is rather like an overgrown garden where the rocks and flowers have agreed to trade substance for a temporary eternity, and the sublime process of melting resultantly endures. If one stares hard enough, discernible shapes might also emerge – I found a hand on the right side of the canvas near the edge, as though it were one of the things holding the painting up. Ultimately, the triple invocation of the mineral, the vegetable, and the human – with no favoring of any of the three – bespeaks a hylozoic activism in a potential world called nether.

6.

His initial inclination was towards the figure. Often – but not always – that figure bore some likeness to himself – but it could also be some random androgyne, femme fatale, or bear daddy clipped from one of his combings of the net. Even when he was focusing on the figure, it could never be classed as straightforward *portraiture*. The figure, too, became a scape, as in *High Tide*, a painting from 2011 – to take but one obvious example, wherein the torso of the reclining nude figure has been violently and shamelessly “erased” in considered swaths of orange and pink formlessness, while the background rhythmically breaks down into zebra print and pale

noncommittal skyblues. These are decisions made by the handbrain without any anxiety. The dominant impulse is to mask or transform the violence done to his figurescapes with the flesh-savvy flashiness of a bright palette.

As Chmielinski moves increasingly into the scape and away from the figure, it is not as though he has abandoned the figure. Precisely the opposite: what Chmielinski attempts – and pulls off – is a figuration of the unfigurable. His painterly eye refuses to discern between “living” beings, nature, and inanimate object; all are infused with the restlessness of life. If you need a name for it, call it Frankenstein Figuration, wherein even inanimate objects or blotches of landscape are invigorated with a life force.

7.

“Yes, the face has a great future, but only if it is destroyed, dismantled. On the road to the asignifying and asubjective.” – Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

His battles evolve all the time. *When Talismans Saved My House From Burning Down* had four different beginnings – one can discern in the chaos of the completed painting an array of different scenes; the final image was only arrived at via personal mythology – Chmielinski’s re-visitation of his childhood, when a fortune teller’s predictions caused his family’s life to be uprooted on numerous occasions. *Notes on Paradise*, 2014, started off as a portrait of a woman holding a branch. In the middle of painting, Chmielinski began to doubt the subject – he began to fear it was turning into some pointless formalist exercise – and turned his attention to a

photograph of an island. Thin washes of floral trees then plastered themselves across the canvas against the tropicality of reds, light greens, the blue of a pristine sea. Finally, what gives the painting its distinctly Chmielinskian rhythm are three white elicitations of folds, based on photographs of crumpled paper taken by the artist.

In *Hardest Water*, 2014, the canvas is unevenly divided across a horizon. The top is relatively uncrowded, with a piercing marine blue background supporting three inferences of shapes. The bottom, which takes up most of the canvas, is a scene of inclement weather and blind graspings played out against an anemic pink wall. Originally there was a giant white indefinable artifact in the middle of the canvas. After looking at a photograph of a field of flowers in order to distance and distract himself, to *distrance* himself, things started to move around, shift. Substance is an ever changing element. He reached a point with the painting where everything felt too safe. He wanted to feel there were pitfalls in the image, so he inserted a series of dark spots. Another annoyance – to give an idea of the severe degree of layering that goes on in a Chmielinski painting – was a proliferation of faces that uncontrollably appeared, the ghost in the machine. He had to erase them. What we get are arms instead of faces. An illustration of that primal act. Extension: brain to arm to canvas. Armbrains. Says Chmielinski: “I don’t want to be a clown face painter.”

8.

“That oscillation between frenetic gesturing and really controlled painting is what keeps it exciting for me, and I think it’s one of the intrinsic (and unique) characteristics of painting, that even though I always find myself fighting with representation, if I were to forsake it then I would

be forsaking the magic of painting, and the fact that not every gesture has to be heroic, some can be the most minute shifts in perspective and they have the most profound effect.”

9.

Chmielinski shares many of the same inclinations with the poet. He never studied painting formally. It is not an accident that his initial vocational calling was to literature and philosophy – particularly philosophers like Gilles Deleuze, who considered philosophy as a vehicle for creation, rather than mere reflection. While he continues to write, his ultimate linguistic idiom has become the image, rather than the word. Yet the word continues to play an important part in his painting, in the elaborate and poetic yet exacting titles; as he himself admits, at times he labors more over the titles of his paintings than the paintings themselves. And, as those with an intimate knowledge of Chmielinski’s process can attest, he proceeds much like a poet according to mystical and very private associations, rather than rigid conceptualist strictures.

He also proceeds according to the indefatigable compulsions of the autodidact. He looks at the world and perceives in each object a quivering around the edges; the aliveness of the inanimate. Each painting becomes its own thing, a synthesis of gestures and lush, exuberant imbalances. A mop that absorbs motion, then distills it into color, shape – yielding a solid and endlessly placeable permanence.

III. Ficto-Criticism

At this point, it is perhaps useful to pause and take stock of what I have come to think of as an expressionist art writing practice. Principally, it resides in the notion that the body, the physical manifestation of ourselves in the world, speaks its own language, and to deny that language's inflections would be a futile, and anyway impossible, task; it is the sensory and conducting rod for flows of intensities pertinent for the creation of the art object, whether that object be a painting, a poem, a film, or a piece of art criticism.

In Part Three, I ask: What role might fiction play in an expressionist art criticism? In recent years, a number of practitioners have positioned themselves on the artificial border separating art criticism from fiction. Lynne Tillman's collection, *This is Not It*, consists of short stories directly inspired by works of art. In *The Readymades*, John Holten used the novel to document an entire (fictional) art collective. The content of Chris Kraus's novels frequently drifts into the territory of art critical writing, while her art criticism frequently deploys elements borrowed from fiction. I have come to think of such writing as ficto-criticism.

As the term implies, ficto-criticism is a hybrid form that merges fiction with criticism, in the broad sense, while fully embracing neither. Authors like anthropologist Michael Taussig (in works like *Walter Benjamin's Grave* and *The Magic of the State*) have embraced the form as a means of expanding the boundaries of the writing of their discipline. One might also propose that among the more prominent examples of classical expressionism in literary fiction, Alfred Döblin's *Berlin-Alexanderplatz* uses its protagonist, Franz Biberkopf, as a vehicle through which

to explore and critique multitudinous, often conflicting aspects of German society in the inter-war period; in his political affiliations alone, Biberkopf joins up at various points with the Communists and the National Socialists; he is seen to be both saint and murderer; meanwhile, the narrative schizophrenically shifts – often in the same sentence – from first to second to third person, from present to past tense.

In this thesis, the “criticism” of my ficto-criticism is specifically art criticism. Such an approach is arguably nothing new; as I elucidated in the introduction, French practitioners of art criticism in the 18th and 19th century often used fictional forms as a “disguise” for their art criticism, often as a means of evading censorship.

Art writers practicing ficto-criticism in the 21st century are rare. There is a sense that this kind of art writing is unacceptable, as the model of essayistic, theory-based art criticism has come to dominate the field since the 1970s. Fiction writer-critics like Eileen Myles, Bruce Benderson, Gary Indiana, and Chris Kraus, who, despite critical acclaim for their ficto-critical works addressing various aspects of art-making and the art world, have nevertheless been relegated to the status of outlier and have had to contend with neglect and late-arriving acceptance and celebration by the status quo. (In my own novel, *The Suicides*, published during the writing of this thesis, a group of teenagers – who may in fact be one person, as it is never clearly resolved in the narrative – declare war against their own minds and go on a journey to overthrow reality. It was received by some as a nihilistic, drug-fueled embrace of lawless psychoses, rather than a ficto-critical portrayal of the actual nihilism of the current state of mindlessness produced by our educational institutions and the mass media wastescape.)

At the same time, one of the recurring themes of the art critical field in the 21st century is the so-called crisis of art criticism. One of the results of such debates has been an awakened interest in writers taking art criticism into the “expanded field,” to borrow Rosalind Krauss’s famous term. Thus, previously marginalized writers practicing variants of ficto-criticism in their works have slowly begun to receive mainstream acceptance. This suggests that the tides are turning in ficto-criticism’s favor. Kraus was awarded the Frank Jewett Mather Award in 2008, one of the most prestigious prizes for art criticism in the United States. Tillman now writes a monthly column for *Frieze*, one of the most respected and most circulated of international art magazines. When I was commissioned to write a review of the Venice Biennale for *Art in America* magazine in 2015, I decided to write a piece of ficto-criticism instead; the choice was motivated by many factors: the desire to simultaneously critique the critic’s role in such a scenario; the need I felt to explore perspectives that were somehow different from my own, while valorizing the subsequent truths I discovered in such perspectives; fiction’s fluidity in illustrating certain truths that were perceived, rather than directly experienced. I initially expected my editors to reject the piece, but was surprised when they enthusiastically agreed to publish the work – although the editor-in-chief, in her “Letter from the Editor” of the issue, took pains to point out that she disagreed with most of the conclusions reached in the piece.

Part Three begins with that piece, albeit in a revised form from the published version. In “Reading Capital in Venice,” I use the short story format to review the 2015 Venice Biennale. I invent a fictional young art critic, Cheb, who has been dispatched to Venice by an unnamed art magazine. We follow Cheb – not only on his outward journey through the two main exhibitions – but also his inward journey, as he reflects on the current conditions of the art world, and the contradictions that Okwui Enwezor’s main exhibition unwittingly made manifold in the context

of the Biennale's professional preview. Fiction is employed as a critical vehicle to explore not only the specific exhibition, but also the social conditions of the art world in the early 21st century.

The notion of the distorted, multiplicitous 'I', as it emerged in Part Two's last two essays on Christian Schoeler and Winston Chmielinski, is deployed in ficto-critical format in the second piece included here, "The Object." This work dramatizes the process and inherent impossibilities of writing about external objects – an issue with which every art critic struggles at one point or another, often unresolvedly so. It also enacts the scene suggested by "Becoming Subject" from Part One, and the notion of vehicularity that subsequently recurs throughout this thesis. While its conclusion is far from certain, it can be seen as a fictional extrapolation of the process that gave rise to object-oriented writing, which is the subject of Part Four and the culmination of my expressionist art critical practice.

Reading Capital in Venice

1.

It is the spring of dead bodies washing up on European shores, the end of a season in hell in America that saw a spate of killings of unarmed black men by white police officers. The spring in which a white tenured so-called conceptual poet gave a reading of one of those victims' autopsy reports as a "found poem" at an Ivy League university to a presumably majority white audience, the spring when yet another white so-called conceptual poet, uncoincidentally also poor in talent and rich in capital, would, in the spirit of competition, attempt to draw even more negative attention to herself by Twittering the most blatantly racist passages from Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* as a so-called art project. The year that, so long as anyone could remember, the Venice Biennale would break with its tradition by opening in spring instead of summer, and the first time in history that the Biennale's curation would be given over to a black man, one of a handful that have managed to attain success in the art world (perhaps made a bit easier because he came from a wealthy Nigerian family), who would build his central thesis on the issue of class rather than race – though as anyone who has received a liberal arts education at an American university in the past three decades should be able to tell you, the two are inextricably linked.

Most of these events have flown past the radar of Cheb, a 31-year-old art critic who has spent most of the past few months in a Berlin apartment working on a novel he will never finish and snorting lines of heroin he scores from a Sicilian fuckbuddy. Still, Cheb – of Hungarian descent (hence the name), but in actuality equal parts English, Israeli, Afro-Cuban, and German

(as these things go) – manages to arrive on time at Tegel airport for his Alitalia flight to Venice Marco Polo scheduled to depart at 9:25am; he is on assignment (needs the money.) On the plane, he is seated next to a bluechip Berlin gallerist whose program largely consists of German conceptual artists making cerebral art of the most yawn-inducing variety (to Cheb at least), most of whom peaked in the 1990s, with a couple of American classic conceptualists from the 1960s thrown in as a justificatory affirmation. Although she doesn't really need the press, she recognizes that Cheb is considered "hot" at the moment, and is constantly nagging him to review her shows. Troublingly, he has ignored all of her dinner invitations for the past year. "What a surprise!" she exclaims as she nestles her ginormous posterior into the seat next to him. They make small talk about the Biennale as the plane addles its way down the runway in preparation for take-off. Cheb absolutely cannot miss the German pavilion, she insists, where two of her artists are presenting. Cheb delivers the disappointing news that his assignment is to cover solely the main exhibition, "All the World's Futures," on which subject she nevertheless has a pre-judgment to deliver: "Oh I do love Okwui [Enwezor, the aforementioned curator], but we all know what *that* one is going to look like. If only he didn't have to play the *race card* all the time!" There was a time when Cheb would be stunned by such a statement. Cheb has never considered himself white, though everyone else does. Naturally, he understands perfectly well that passing as such his entire life has at least partly enabled the modicum of success he enjoys in the art world. (Part Two: While he is certainly not rich, he also does not give off any obvious signs of being poor.) It would be easy to call the gallerist out, to give her one of those dreaded reality checks, one of those insufferable moments of sudden *Angst*, tell her "hey, I'm a nigger too, you dumb white bitch," but lucky for her, Cheb is coming down off a three-week heroin binge and

simply does not have enough endorphins, at present, to properly enjoy the scene of her humiliation. Instead, he takes advantage of the awkward lull in the conversation to nod off.

The art world is run on fear: this is something else Cheb has figured out over time. Having studied Marx in college, Cheb knows that from a purely materialistic standpoint, this can be attributed to surplus value, that reason-defying concept upon which the entire art game is premised, and which creates a constant state of uncertainty and insecurity among all its participants. So omnipotent is the force that it leaks out of the realm of the “merely” economical to contaminate not just the aesthetic integrity upon which everything is ostensibly based, but more importantly the information economy through which art travels. Knowledge thus emerges as the highly valued product of the socialization network known as the Art World, the oil that fuels the fear engine, giving rise to an environment characterized by a high level of desperation, regardless of whether one finds oneself on the buying or selling side of the equation. You don’t have to have a strong opinion – in fact, it helps a lot if you don’t – but you do have to *know everyone and everything*, or at least pretend to – or else you’re simply out of the game.

In Venice, he checks into a tiny bed-and-breakfast in Castello, which he learns was the former apartment of Alberto Gianquinto, a little-known Venetian painter who passed away in 2003, whose expressionist paintings, featuring a muted and largely pastel-based palette, adorn the walls. All of the furnishings have been kept intact – in one of the large, airy bedrooms, Cheb spies a grand piano – though Cheb has booked the sole single occupancy room, which is the size of a monk’s cell, with shared bathroom. Still, at 65 Euros a night, Cheb realizes he has unwittingly scored the best accommodation deal in town.

Already on his way into the Arsenale, he begins to hear the whispers. “It’s so *dark*, so *pessimistic!*” a middle-aged white dame in fake pearls and Gucci sunglasses exclaims to a famous New York shark dealer Cheb passes at the entrance. Cheb skims the wall text in order to get the gist of the layout. Enwezor has conceived of his exhibition, called “All the World’s Futures,” as a composition of three intersecting filters: “Garden of Disorder,” “Liveness: On Epic Duration,” and “Reading Capital.” Cheb intuits the *intersecting* bit to mean that they won’t be delineated, so he knows not to look for signs, but to try and absorb the thing, at least this first time through, as a whole. The idea, the text maintains, is to use the *filters* as a means of reflecting on both the current *state of things* and the *appearance of things* – so, conditionality and appearances, rather than the things-in-themselves; a defiant neglect of ontology in favor of context, with something about a “parliament of forms” thrown in to give it all a democratic flavor, perhaps satisfying some EU funding requirement; everyone who can afford to be in Venice at this moment is, in some sense, equal.

If the rich woman’s complaint sparked his interest, the starkness of Enwezor’s production turns Cheb on right away. It begins with a room of Bruce Nauman neons (such as *American Violence*) in concert with *Nymphaeas*, a series of swords and knives grouped together in bouquet formations across the floor by Adel Abdessemed. It’s dark, it’s edgy, it is rife with depictions and evocations of violence and human misery – all the things that Cheb also loves that the art world either tries to conveniently ignore or else dumb down to avoid dealing with fully. There is no dumbing-down going on in the first rooms of the Arsenale, it is all there: the futility of labor, the draconian nature of war, the absurdity of the harsh and drastic inequalities permeating every aspect of life in the 21st century...

Cheb moves on to the majestic wall sculptures of Melvin Edwards, made out of twisted welded steel: heavy metal. The black paintings of Daniel Boyd, which Cheb will also encounter later in the Giardini, further enrich the allegations of bleakness (blackness?) being hurled at Enwezor, as do the *negro* chainsaw sculptures of Monica Bonvicini, *Latent Combustion*, 2015, which Cheb will be reminded of when he sees the large drooping oil rags of Oscar Murillo adorning the Giardini's entrance. Once you go black, you never go back.

Then there's the moving image work. Cheb already saw Antje Ehmman and Harun Farocki's *Labour in a Single Shot* in Berlin, so he can skip that; actually, another room in the exhibition is given over to Farocki's entire extant cinematic oeuvre, which seems fitting, concept-wise, though it also seems to Cheb like one of those typically impossible Venice Biennale gestures – who the hell will have time to watch the entire thing? (On that note, the same might be said of Alexander Kluge's 570 minute-long adaptation of *Capital* in the Giardini.) Much more manageable was Raha Raissnia's *Longing*, 2014, a beautiful and moving 16mm print comprised of blurred overexposed black-and-white ghost images bleeding into one another, the soothing sounds of a motorized hum forming the soundtrack. An abstract, seemingly diaristic collection of fragments, fugitive images occasionally coalescing – an arm hanging down holding a cigarette, the newspaper photograph of a bearded revolutionary, the rectangular block of a city street – before fading back into shapes and blurs whose semblances cannot be discerned.

So far, there is an aesthetic unity in the curation of the Arsenale, with its favoring of a dark palette, dim lighting (exacerbated by Philippe Parreno's *56 Flickering Lights*, 2013, installed throughout the exhibition), a dramatic obsession with the casting of shadows (Cheb can't help but read this as a metaphor for the dark continent, the occident's otherization of Africa), sharp angular forms, and a general privileging of the sculptural over the painterly.

Unfortunately, the effect is ruined the moment Cheb walks into the third corderie, which has been given over entirely to Katharine Grosse for one of her rainbow installations. It's stupid, it's tacky, and it makes no sense. It all goes straight to Cheb's stomach. Thankfully, there is an exit. He makes his way outside to the toilets, where he will vomit, shit, then pop six Nurofen Plus, Ibuprofen tablets with 12 milligrams of Codeine each, sold over-the-counter in Britain; very little compared to the amount of dope he has been consuming in the last few weeks, but enough, perhaps, to get him through this. Along the way, he passes through one of the most impressive (read: largest) works in the exhibition, Ibrahim Mahama's *Out of Bounds*, 2014-2015, hundreds of coal sacks stitched together and hanging on either side of the very steep outdoor corridor next to the Arsénale. That's right, thinks Cheb as he makes his way through the crowd of journalists and Art World Professionals taking selfies among the sacks in their designer sunglasses, we're all just lumps of coal.

When he resumes from where he left off, things begin to go wrong again post-Grosse. This time, the problem is David Adjaye's exhibition architecture, something of a calamity. Perhaps this is the promised "garden of disorder." Too many walls form an incoherent maze, perhaps unwittingly mimicking the layout of Venetian streets. Enwezor is perhaps partly to blame for simply including too much stuff. But the problem is inevitable: it just doesn't *flow*. Cheb is constantly having to backtrack, retrace his steps, and is still not certain he hasn't missed something. This state of bewilderment is unfair to the artworks; as a result of the strange architectural walls, works of art (sculptures especially) become barriers you just want to get around, and thus lose their effectiveness. As his attention begins to drift owing to the confusion of the layout, Cheb begins to suspect that this is where Enwezor has stashed the weakest work, the more mundane exercises in cultural anthropology that serve as rather typical examples of

“political art,” such as Oscar Murillo’s display of canvases he allowed schoolchildren of various third world or politically troubled countries to draw on for a few months; a rich artist’s *arte povera*. There are plenty of these middle brow efforts, then there’s the just plain callous – such as Sonia Boyce’s annoying and stupid video *Exquisite Cacophony*, 2015 – and the just plain strange – Cheb at one point found himself in a room of floor-to-ceiling Baselitz paintings, which, like the Grosse, have seemingly nothing to do with anything that has come before, though it is true that they serve Enwezor’s decidedly masculinist agenda. (Then again, Cheb realizes later, Enwezor is the director of the Haus der Kunst in Munich. So: Grosse, Baselitz, and in the Giardini, Hirschhorn, Isa Genzken, Andreas Gursky – all instances of “social curating.”)

While the layout makes the Arsenale an ordeal to get through, there are a few small rewards scattered along the way: the always-wonderful Chantal Akerman’s new multi-channel video installation, *Now*, 2015, consisting of desertscapes shot from a fast-moving vehicle, the occasional snap of gunfire in the distance, inferring a lingering background conflict without overwhelming us with documentary evidence; *Fara Fara*, 2014, a two-channel video installation by Carsten Höller and Måns Månsson exploring Kinshasa’s hopping music scene; and Karo Akpokiere’s lively and funny comic-style drawings exploring his own experiences as a displaced person living between Lagos and Berlin, which Cheb lingered in front of for several minutes; the brilliant and witty sculptures of Eduardo Basualdo, an Argentinian artist Cheb had never heard of before. In general, though, Cheb has the impression that the middle is a place reserved for the less meatier bits: which does not a good sandwich make.

The highlights on this sandwich are the bread. In addition to the kickstart at the beginning, the end crescendos with *Passengers*, 2011, the late Chris Marker’s moving photographic series of portraits of people on the Paris metro. Then there’s Tania Bruguera’s installation, which many

of Cheb's colleagues missed, he'd find out later, owing to its positioning at a remove from the Arsenale's main exhibition, in a cavernous room on the other side of the restaurant and bathrooms. Indeed, most of the crowd on the second day of the preview seem unaware, as there is no line before the velvet rope marking the entrance. The gentleman guard informs Cheb that photography is forbidden, as is the use of mobile phones, before opening the rope and bidding him welcome. Cheb enters the pitch black space. Contrasted with the glare of the Italian sun outside, the effect is one of total momentary blindness. The space is silent except for the sound of the gravel beneath Cheb's feet which he slowly drags, trying to find his bearings and figure out where to go. (Later, when reading the catalog, Cheb will discover that the perceived gravel is actually bagasse, fibers left over after the processing of sugar cane, Cuba's chief export.) He discerns a tiny glow before him up high which he moves towards, until the image becomes clear: a small monitor playing sepia-toned imagery in slow motion of a triumphant young Fidel Castro doing his macho posturing. Cheb thinks he is alone, until he begins to hear slapping sounds around him which is undeniably skin, but he cannot discern its source until he reaches the endpoint and is positioned just below the monitor, when his eyes adjust to the appearance of four young men, naked, standing throughout the space with their heads hanging down, frantically brushing their skin as though trying to rid their bodies of the dust of time. There in that dark space, Cheb realizes what he has been missing this whole time (besides drugs), the very thing that has been inferred flauntingly throughout, only to be delivered *in flagrante* at the very end: dick.

2.

“The total product of our community is a social product. One portion serves as fresh means of production and remains social. But another portion is consumed by the members as means of subsistence. A distribution of this portion amongst them is consequently necessary.” – Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*

“If on the placard, there’s a gallery name beneath the title of the work and the artist’s name, that means the work is definitely for sale.” – overheard by Cheb in the Arsenale

That night, Cheb attends a dinner for the Japanese Pavilion, where he is seated next to a colleague who often writes for the same magazine that has sent Cheb to review the Biennale. Over dinner, they discuss that magazine’s famously heavy-handed editorial policies which, to Cheb’s colleague, leave the reader with the impression that the entire book has been written by the same person. She goes on to recount a discussion she had with one of the magazine’s editors, who threatened that if she ever wrote for a certain other art magazine, he would shit in her mouth. They laugh nervously at the exaggerated vulgarity of the remark, though they are both certain that the editor didn’t exactly mean it as a joke. Again, Cheb remarks, fear: What would the information economy look like without it?

The next morning, Cheb has breakfast with an old friend from Norway who recently landed a job with that country’s consulate. She regales him with stories of the night before, which she spent at the lavish dinner thrown by the magazine. Cheb is momentarily stunned that the magazine hadn’t bothered to invite him, given that he is here *on assignment* for them, until his friend delivers a much-needed reality check. “But of course you weren’t invited!” she laughs.

“You’re not a gallerist or a collector!” On the Grand Canal near the entrance to the Giardini, the black chrome of the Zabłudowicz yacht glistens in the morning sun. Cheb snaps a photo with his iPhone which he uploads to his Instagram feed, with the title “BBBC (Billionaire’s Big Black Cock).”

The central pavilion in the Giardini opens up on the theme of displacement. Big Black Canvas material has been suspended from the neo-classical façade of the building, forming a sort of curtain spectators must pass through in order to enter the exhibition; they are by Oscar Murillo, so Cheb assumes they are worth Billions. Inside, it begins with *the end*: that is, Fabio Mauri’s series of drawings of these words. They surround *Il Muro Occidentale o del Pianto*, 1993, a free-standing wall made out of suitcases of various materials, naturally calling to mind the Holocaust, but also the more recent arrival of dead bodies, failed refugees, washing up on the shores of the EU. In the next room, Christian Boltanski’s *L’homme qui tousse*, 1969, a disturbing film of a grotesque masked figure seated alone in a decrepit attic space wrenching up blood: the effect of exile on the human soul?

Perhaps responding to the more classical layout of the pavilion (as opposed to the open warehouse format of the Arsenale, where some architectural interference is required), the arrangement here seems more scattered, with each room containing its own universe, without any pretensions towards the flow that Cheb found so lacking in the Arsenale. This turns out to be a gift to the memory, as on repeated visits, Cheb will be able to brush through the rooms directly to the sections he wishes to revisit: the strange pairing of Walker Evans photos with Isa Genzken’s models for unrealized public monuments (her *Deutsche Bank Proposal*, 2000, is roofed with two large antennae sticking out into the heavens); Chris Marker’s 1973 film *L’Ambassade*; Marlene Dumas’s skull paintings. If Philippe Parreno’s flickering lights were the

recurring theme of the Arsenale, then Walead Beshty's sculptures play a similar part in the Giardini, arising in two formats: shredded bits of tabloid newspapers, hate-fueled headlines sparring with centerfold tits, dangling from metallic support structures – very Cady Noland-esque; and spectacular melty ceramics. The biggest hit – throughout the preview, the screening room is consistently packed – is John Akomfrah's three-channel film *Vertigo Sea*, 2015, an epic poem about that element that connects everything: water. This is one of those rare instances where looping really works – Cheb is unaware when the film begins or ends, or whether it ever does – and he doesn't care – rather he loses himself in the rapturous footage that addresses the melting of the polar ice cap, the hunting of polar bears, slavery, mass murder, dolphins and whales oh my; the ravages of time. There's Kluge's film about capital, Isaac Julien's film about capital, then Julien's staging of readings from Marx's *Capital*... So much capital, so little time!

Which brings us into Cheb's favorite place, the Arena, taking up much of the center of the Giardini's main pavilion. Cheb enters to find the words *Evil Nigger* projected on the screen above the stage, next to which sits the fat German gallerist staring with rapt attention to the four grand pianists bringing the klang out of the klavier for Julius Eastman's 1979 minimalist composition. Cheb heads up to the balcony for the second half of the concert, which consists of Eastman's *Gay Guerilla* from the same year, watching as the spectators wander in and out, take selfies, answer e-mails on their iPhones, and occasionally even sit down and listen to the music.

The *Gay Guerilla* has no friends: a story Cheb makes up to himself and starts writing in his notebook as he listens to the Julius Eastman composition. The *Gay Guerilla* wants to go everywhere at once and change the world, sucking lots of dick along the way, therefore nobody likes him; his ambitions are too putrid, too blatant for the world to discern any higher meaning. Were the revolution finally to occur, does that mean there would be no more heroin? Cheb

attempts to make a list of all the forces in this society that are designed to keep people down: drugs, art, technology, fashion, sport – all manufactured needs, wants. In the end, *desire*, pure, is the only sure thing, where commodities are concerned. (How many bags of heroin is a Damien Hirst butterfly painting worth?)

Once he realized that the entire spectacle was run on fear, Cheb had a choice to make. Cheb was already, in a sense, *numb*; his ambitions had never had anything to do with success or popularity or being the guy who knows it all. Cheb only ever wanted one thing – to look at art, and then to write; sometimes writing about the art that he saw, at other times writing about things that only appeared in Cheb's brain, nowhere else. That's all. In that sense – in the vision of the art world – Cheb's ambitions were rather limited. Therefore, he felt early on that he could never, would never be accepted by that world. Heroin is the perfect drug for Cheb; it matches, in the distancing effects of its neuron-flooding totality, the oblivion to which he has been consigned.

The Arena, Cheb learns, will feature a constant program of talks, performances, and film screenings throughout the duration of the Biennale, the lauded highlight of which is *Oratorio*, readings of Marx's *Capital* staged by Isaac Julien, which Cheb is curious to see, though that turns out to be a bit tricky, as the program doesn't seem to be fixed, and even after the Eastman recital, when Cheb asks one of the Arena organizers what will be coming up in the next five minutes, she shrugs and says she has no idea. It is Italy, after all.

And it is *Capital*, after all – or a thirty minute sliver of which – Book I, Part 3, Chapter 7 in Ben Fowkes's translation, to be precise, read in part by two performers. Unsurprisingly, the room clears minutes into the reading. The density and difficulty of *Capital* are legendary; the inherent impossibility of the project was directly experienced by Marx himself, one might

fathom, as he was unable to finish writing it. Cheb decides to tough it out; rather than attempt the impossible task of comprehending the content of a spitfire rendition of a work that is really not meant to be read but studied, he closes his eyes and transmutes the words into a flow of poetry: labor bleeding into objects; labor itself a product, a raw material; labor being time, the flow of all objects; time bleeding into objects... One €50 wrap of heroin is equal to how many dead Afghans?

Given the prominence given over to *Capital*, Cheb wonders whether either Okwui Enwezor or Isaac Julien have actually read all three volumes of Marx's chef oeuvre in their entirety. If so, they are among the very few people who have. *The Communist Manifesto*, co-written with Friedrich Engels, on the other hand, could be seen as a distillation of *Capital's* most pressing analyses, spotlighting its central polemic in less than a hundred pages, making it more readily digestible for a non-scholarly crowd – or, more pivotally in regards to the context of Venice, an audience that does not necessarily have the luxury of time. Why, then, choose *Capital* over the *Manifesto*, if indeed what it is you wish to highlight is the content, the message, rather than the mere reference, the signifier; if you really want to communicate a message about how *value* comes into being, and how it is deployed systematically as a tool of oppression, to “the People,” rather than the people Cheb finds himself surrounded by at the invite-only preview of the Venice Biennale, people who stand to benefit the most from capital and therefore prefer to keep their inquiries in the safe zone of the theoretical? Perhaps the “epic duration” that Enwezor's second “filter” refers to is the burden of Empathy that Cheb and his colleagues are meant to be reminded of, and submit to, while seated in this air conditioned enclave, Marx's words *filtered* through the glow of iPhone screens displaying the evening's party invites.

Perhaps these issues would be hashed out in greater detail at the party for Julien. Sadly, Cheb would not get a chance to find out, though he wonders if Julien is at all bothered by the fact that it is Rolls Royce who is throwing the party. On his way back to the bed and breakfast, Cheb bumps into Renzo Martens outside the Dutch Pavilion. Martens is an artist Cheb has limitless respect for. His position is simple: political art, so-called, is too often the mere gesturing of armchair philosophers. Specifically, art about the oppressed and impoverished never really aids the subjects it purports to address; instead, its effects – namely, the generation of capital – merely benefit the locales where they are shown (such as the Venice Biennale.) For the past few years, he has been using the much maligned neoliberal tool of gentrification subversively in an effort to build a contemporary art center on a former Unilever plantation in the Congo, providing one of the world's poorest communities with a means of sustenance. Surely this is a project that Enwezor would want to stand behind. But no. Martens is only in Venice, he says, to raise funds for the project. When Cheb registers his surprise that he hasn't been included in Enwezor's show, Martens just shrugs. "The exhibition is great. If you have two thousand dollars to spend on flights and hotels," he says, gesturing at a group of Art World Professionals taking a group portrait with a selfie stick in front of Murillo's oil flags, "you can come to Venice and learn about economic inequality."

Cheb wonders how much the people he is surrounded by have learned. Then he wonders where they have come from and where they will go next, now that the next big art spectacle is an entire month away. Going everywhere, all at once, all the time, seeing the exact same people, one really ends up nowhere. Even Enwezor's political correctness has its limits; after all, there are zero displays of blatant ass banditry. (I.e. What about the *bodily* shapes/manifestations of commodities that Marx often hints at throughout *Capital*? The *expression* of value, which must

necessarily be considered in relation to the body, and its [erstwhile deviant] processes?)

Although Enwezor has conceded to allow Mark Nash, Julien's long-time partner, to lend a helping hand with curation of the Arena, still Cheb wonders whether Julien ever feels the need to butch it up when meeting with Enwezor, much as Cheb often feels compelled to do the same when he's traveling in Latin America, or the Middle East, or Africa... well, whenever he is anywhere in the three-quarters of the world where the entire country's population hasn't yet bent over to take it doggie-style from Euro-American neo-liberalism. Outside the Giardini, he studies a poster advertising the Copenhagen Biennial. It consists of a photograph of a tent outside some protest site, a hand-written sign taped to the front: "Now is now," it informs. Cheb squints thoughtfully, then gives up. The work is untitled, the location cannot be discerned.

The Object

He wonders how he will ever begin to write about the object. A bit like writing in the dark... The object is there in front of him, and yet isn't. Both at the same time. How can that be, that state of simultaneity. Oh very simple: it isn't. He drinks all his thoughts up, visits his feelings. No, not there. Feeling a place to run away from. Objects have no feelings...but could they? A question of investiture. So shitty to be left to wonder. Leave the wonderment at the beginning (i.e. "He wonders how..."), let's not get back there, not yet at least, too soon. Must move forward. The object contend with it. Let this moment be defined by it. Rather: let the object, its thingness, contaminate this temporal structure, he thinks, and thereby give rise to the formation of a moment. The beauty of a moment is that it passes a delightful turd. The turd is an object, but it is not the object he is now contending with. Contend with the non-turdness of the current object. In the moment. The moment of running away. Running away from feeling. The moment he finds himself facing the object, seated before it, forcing his thoughts to coalesce into something – words. Words the physical manifestation of something: the object. The object's bluntness. Not a copy, not a simulacrum, for that is not something *his* words could ever be. His words, he thinks, he knows, are always something else, even when they purport to represent, to critically engage with, the object and its thingness, what it purportedly *is* outside of all possible and potential representation. And yet he – not subject (for he recognizes the imperative to momentarily

suspend his own agency in order to engage with the task to be elucidated henceforth), but *another* object, another possible thing that things outside its particulate thingness – is not, in a sense, there. Not in the sense in which the object (the originary object, made originary by our writing of his writing of it, naturally) is there. The thing is, the goal he has set himself (his manic delirium, his sense of physicality, his manifestation of doom – his own private version thereof – through his manifestation of time, his awareness of spatio-temporal limitation) is to get *beyond* both facile representation but also and even mostly that “critical engagement” that the majority dismiss as the only possibility of *interacting* (he hates this word) with the object, and to enter into a state that would actually enable him to *inhabit* the object. And this, through writing. And for him, this writing, this striving-for-inhabiting, resonates with his current concern, to get beyond all the materiality – the thingness, the objectness – of writing – to contend with writing’s failed project of transmitting meaning.

How do I *write myself into* the object? he asks himself.

(Always a failure, then, every instance of writing, and yet how to overcome.)

Describe the object in its thingness.

He goes over, in his mind, all the pathways through which one might approach the object, positioned as it currently is, in the room, on the floor, at the center of the black cloth, not far from where he rests his feet. It is a kind of hunger, this desired transformation, transmutation, transubstantiation, but then no, that's not it, for then what would the writing be, shit? Is it: to find a way to put the writing *inside* the object? No, but to make it (the writing) *come out of* it (the object) – and vice versa.

No eating, no shitting, he says aloud.

To inhabit means some encoding. Break that code to reseal it. That's what the process will look like. The thing things itself thingingly, he quotes Heidegger. A certain bluntness of proprieties yes that will do. Nietzsche lost his mind, Heidegger found it, gave it back in hideous form: an object of a subject called loss. He steps outside – *to get some air*, he thinks. Fat man in a wig comes pattering down the cobblestones, waving a book over his head. It is Leibniz. Eat my monads, scum! he screams.

He slams the door in the philosopher's face, runs back in to the object. *Into* the object, he would like, but he can't have. The object wills, for certain, but not beyond itself, that is certain also. My thingness not for you to take, it seems to call out...or was that Leibniz out there, tormenting him.

That book he was waving over his head, what was it. Go have a look. A glance through the window...but Leibniz is gone, you'll never know what book it was now. Perhaps

it is better that way. Can substance be defeated? He knows: Desire to attain a state of total selflessness through the act, and yet this risks reducing writing to a sort of gratuitous masturbation. Cancel the second part of last thought. For this stab at conceptualization here is, admittedly, a means of propping up – propagating – excess.

The majority.

He initially wanted to call it “object-oriented criticism,” until he realized – not just that he had the terminology wrong – but that his misuse of the word *criticism* would only serve to confuse this invisible majority *for whom he was writing against*. For this – this obviating the decision-making process via the thereness of the object – is to be an *act* of writing: a writing to come. No, *criticism*, *critique*, too specific the terminology; he favors the *openness*, the *activeness* – the *actness* – of writing.

He is against control. He remembers reading a blurb on the jacket of the first edition of Barthelme's novel, *The Dead Father*. Something like, “Well gee, folks, it might look wild and

crazy, but its redemption as a work of art is that it is all actually tightly controlled by the author, that makes him a genius, by my validating authority as a critic...” Why, he remembers thinking, would control ever be regarded as a positive value in writing?

And of course, the answer to that is quite simple: We live in a society of total control, so it is only natural, from a psychological standpoint, that they seek out forms of (what they perceive to be) control in art, and that *authorial exercise* (as opposed to insane or otherworldly *channeling*) be the defining characteristic of genius for that invisible majority.

Thus, in writing the object (never writing *of* the object): Deny all perimeters.

The object and its mysterious anti-nature, he thinks. Object considered as manifestation of mind no that’s wrong.

Object and world, okay: he thinks that’s something he can do. Hesitating to proclaim it in these terms, but since so many mispronouncements have already polluted the stratosphere, perhaps his will serve as a cleansing agent. (Or else risk collapsing the unity of the entire multiverse by further polluting. A risk taken every time one opens one’s mouth and squeaks.) It is

a question of domains.

Treat myself to a fresh shirt, he decides.

When we *write the object* (and here, the definitionality of what's being said matters, for we are not channeling classical exchanges of phenomenological wankery) we transiterate the resonant hallway of psychology to verify the made (constructed) status of objectitude (in its pure sense) and effectively emerge from this processual act as producers of a reality. He sees this as a completely viable anarcho-individualism that resists the fetishization of edges that gives the object its definitional status in our limited perceptuo-tactile exchange field therewith, and thus unleashes the animality that resides within the object's previously controlled essence. And within that animality resides a will...

Once the object is written – and liberated thus – we may begin to speak of objectity, he reasons.

Now, objectity goes beyond mere thingness in its necessitude to claim a spectral identity.

Identity, in their way of thinking of it, always comes with an I. Expend your shit logic across the evening sky. Objectity neologically combines the object with identity, but also reality, to lay claim to a *scape* that evades the perceptual diminutive that typically derogatorizes the object in the field of the major Them. The object, then, *is* vision, it is a surface filled with ego eyes. Its constructedness matters less than the way it goes about reconceiving our own willed surfaces.

But of course, he reasons, his object thus edified will most certainly clash and cocirculate concurrently with others' edification of the object. And so the route becomes short-winded, a show flourish – it is meant to be, in its measureless metonymy. No metaphoricity. Chains of difference overflowing, gather them up if you want into assorted cycles. Play god by defeating yesteryear. The answer, he suddenly conjectures, to Husserl dodging the intersubjectivity bullet: Everyone produces their own reality through their reciprocal arrangement of object-perceiving. Thus, in concept production, each concept is only designated for use by its original creator/inhabitor. Use exhaustibility. There are limits to this applicability: Why I Am So Unpopular. All these different realities clashing into one another. And the sparks caused by the interaction. No more human/nonhuman divisions, a rebirth of agency. All this, through the writing. He closes his eyes and sees thick blobs of text on paper. Pen rolls out of hand. From across the galaxy, the room, the object stares at him and sighs.

IV. Object-Oriented Writing

In 2014, I published my project *16 Sculptures* in two forms: as a book and as an audio installation in an art gallery. In it, I re-created, in the medium of language, sixteen sculptures by various artists from throughout the history of art. It represented the culmination of a method of expressionist art criticism or art writing that I had been working on for several years, one influenced directly by Gertrude Stein (as enumerated in the first essay in Part One of this thesis): a writing that attempts to *inhabit* the object. Expressionist painters attempted something similar when rendering, say, a landscape: an infusion of the landscape with an agency; a transmission, through art, from the painter to that external object (the landscape.) Such an approach was rooted in the psychology of empathy, which was emphasized in the theoretical writings of expressionism (notably, Worringer.) Object-oriented writing takes on the same task, in the context of art criticism. Here, we might return to the poeto-critical, Baudelairean emphasis on the *effects* of a work of art; though with object-oriented writing, this is taken to an extreme, as the effects are meant not to be merely *described*, but are *inscribed* in the writing. Unlike ekphrasis, which is a writing that issues from the perspective of an outside agency, object-oriented writing issues from within – it is thus never “about” a work of art, as “aboutness” is always external. Simultaneously, object-oriented writing acknowledges, even revels in all the contradictions and impossibilities embedded within such an approach. Impossible, because of course one can never

go *inside* a solid object. What object-oriented writing puts forth, then, is a *failuretics* of art writing. The reader or listener (for listening is but another form of reading, as is looking) may evaluate each of the re-creations comprising *16 Sculptures* according to its degree of *failure* with regards to the original work – though in the spirit of *creation* – or, to be precise, *re-creation*, the cyclical nature of art’s *generation-ing* – I have opted to exclude reproductions of the original sculptural works from this project in its various iterations, including the present thesis.

In the exhibition space, where it was presented in a solo exhibition at Wilkinson Gallery in London in 2014, visitors could sit in one of the sixteen chairs provided, put on sunglasses that blacked-out their vision, and listen on headphones to recordings made of each of the sixteen texts. The idea was that the listener could re-create the sculpture in their mind, based on my re-creation of the sculpture in the medium of language. The audio recordings were produced in collaboration with Paul “Snax” Bonomo, a Berlin-based pop musician and producer. In recording the texts both with my own voice and the voice of actors, we worked together to alter and distort the effects of the vocals in each piece in a manner that would reflect and attempt to replicate the physical qualities of both the original sculptures and my textual re-creations of them, in an act of synesthesia, or, to be more precise, *son-aesthesia*.

Like ficto-criticism, subject of Part Three, I view object-oriented writing as yet another manifestation of art writing “in the expanded field,” and the culmination of my efforts to create an expressionist art criticism, to put into practice many of the ideas, including most notably that of vehicularity, circulating throughout this thesis. Indeed, my choice of sculpture, rather than another medium for this first major object-oriented writing project (I had previously published short OOW texts addressing such diverse media as painting and film), was informed by the historical situation sculpture found itself in with the advent of Modernism. As Krauss contends:

With [Rodin], I would say, one crosses the threshold of the logic of the monument, entering the space of what could be called its negative condition – a kind of sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place. Which is to say one enters modernism, since it is the modernist period of sculptural production that operates in relation to this loss of site, producing the monument as abstraction, the monument as pure marker or base, functionally placeless and largely self-referential. It is these two characteristics of modernist sculpture that declare its status, and therefore its meaning and function, as essentially nomadic. (Krauss 34)

Given the similarly “open field” interpretation I give to sculpture in this work (with the inclusion of pieces like Robert Smithson’s famous Land Art masterwork *Spiral Jetty*), *16 Sculptures* takes this nomadic state of sculpture-since-Modernism for granted, and puts in to practice the nomadistic notion of vehicularity explored in essays throughout this thesis.

Finally, with object-oriented writing’s *meta-* status, my practice of expressionist art criticism reaches the apotheosis of its reflexivity: a “criticism” that is at once fully “creative,” and thus circulates back to invite criticism of its own.

Here, I present the texts comprising *16 Sculptures* in full, prefaced by two introductory texts pertinent to their creation: the original manifesto, published on my website in 2011, of object-oriented writing, as well as a related “Note on Editionality” published as part of the exhibition at Wilkinson Gallery in 2014.

Towards an Object-Oriented Writing – or – How Anti-Formalism Helps Me Dream: Notes on an Idea (plus an announcement)

For a while, it has felt redundant to me, the way we write about art. I could say way(s), though I'm not even sure about that plurality anymore. The quest has been ongoing – and off-and-on – since *Disorientations* came out (and before, really): How to go about formulating this “poetics of art criticism” I keep talking about. I keep coming back to a phrase from my essay “On the Expulsion of the Friendless Warrior”: “the object and its mysterious anti-nature” (22).

This line of thinking led me to another, more vocational thought: Why is it that we review exhibitions rather than individual works? When I am asked to write about film, I am generally reviewing a single film. Same thing when it comes to books. In art reviewing, the individual work of art gets short shrift. It's always a long shot of the orgy rather than a real probing of any of the participating entities.

What I propose, then, is a new way of writing about art. A hylozoic revivalism. In response to this feeling of being underwhelmed.

Object-oriented writing is a new form – neither poetic nor art-critical, yet retaining characteristics of both – that attempts to *inhabit* the object. That is, a writing that positions itself *within* the work of art, and also including all the necessary contradictions and impossibilities embedded within such an approach.

It could be suggested that the father of object-oriented writing is the Gertrude Stein of *Tender Buttons*, the mother the Roland Barthes of *Mythologies*. Though OOW is more likely their aborted fetus, having been revived on a UFO by an extra-dimensional alien race that exists on a plane parallel to our own, and returned to this reality in order to contaminate it.

Traditional art criticism is largely predicated upon a two-tier approach – describing and judging. I'm not saying we should necessarily neglect these, but the field needs to be expanded. (In my own practice, I would like to bring judgment back to the table. You might have other goals.)

So, focus on a single work. Go inside it. Resist those urges that would reduce OOW to the status of mere exegetic response. Object-oriented writing is not a branch of criticism, but an art practice that allows the writer to collaborate with the art object. This allows a multiplicity of possible writings, ways, approaches, to flow forth; the poetic impulse of *formlessness* is the *form*. *Everything* is included, potentially, each element assuming equal value (let the reader decide what matters *least*): the historical = the formal = the philosophical = the poetic = the narrative = the critical. Etc. So one “historical” notation, in the same paragraph, might “illogically” follow a formal description and/or poetic eruption. You might spill your ink attempting to elucidate the reasons why the object *willed* itself into existence (if you believe it has.) Or proving that the object you see before you does not, in fact, exist. Or why it perhaps *shouldn't* exist.

There are no rules governing this operation, nor should there be. For as long as I can remember, I have lived my life by trying to escape structures – the imposition of structures upon my being. Is object-oriented writing a crackpot semiotics? Maybe. Though I prefer the term “alien aesthetics.” I'm not so interested in language (I am), but in using language as an extension

of my bodymind machine to inhabit the object. If you follow me there, you'll find some interesting questions arise. Such as: Do we let the maker inside?

I'm really interested in exploring the site of no possibilities.

I acknowledge that object-oriented writing will always be, in its essence, an act of failed translation. But I am interested, as always, in the potentialities of a spectacular failure, rather than adding my murmur to the monotone that comprises today's art critical chorus.

For now on, disorientations.com assumes a new focus. It will serve as a dedicated repository, a generative machine, for instances of object-oriented writing – all of which will vary in length and design. I will begin by posting, in the coming days, instances of object-oriented writing that I've done in the past – before this idea, which has been brewing for some time, arrived at its present articulation – many of which have been previously published. I will also use disorientations.com to occasionally clarify any issues that arise surrounding, or embedded within, object-oriented writing.

A Note on Editionality

Iteration, being like an echo, becomes the medium now. Iteration as a means, an excuse for delving into circulation – the way that writing flows throughout spaces actual and virtual.

There has long been the exclusivity of the “limited edition.” But what are those limits?

Print-on-demand was developed quite recently as a result of the expansion of possibilities produced by the “digital revolution” in desktop publishing and has quickly been adapted almost universally in the world of small press publishing. Now, cash-strapped publishers no longer need fret over the risks that publishing previously entailed – namely, the expense of producing, shipping, and storing an edition spanning the thousands that may or may not sell. Thanks to digital technology, books can be produced one at a time, according to demand. In theory, traditional publishing houses are now forced to compete with individual authors who can make use of P.O.D. platforms to issue their own works.

Publication Studio, publisher of *16 Sculptures*, uses both the handmade – traditionally associated with the limited edition publication – and print-on-demand technology, a platform rooted in the idea of the *limitless* edition. Eschewing both the traditional publisher model and the myriad print-on-demand companies that are increasingly used by small presses, but often use mass production techniques to issue unaesthetically-pleasing cheap paperbacks, Publication Studio, a two-woman operation run by a poet and a visual artist, combine the use of their own POD machinery with rigorous standards of editorial control, design, hand-cutting, hand-binding, and hand-packaging. The books they produce, one by one as the order comes in, are thus instances, works of art. Works of art that are, paradoxically, not exclusive, in that they can theoretically never be quantified or contained in a single “edition.” The edition thus becomes both collectible and limitless.

Another iteration of *16 Sculptures* is what you experience when you enter the gallery. Working with the musician and producer Paul “Snax” Bonomo, the writing has been transformed into sound, the sound into an experience of listening, which becomes yet another form of publication – an additional edition. (An editorial addition...) *16 Sculptures* becomes 16 interactive sculptures, in an edition of three.

The originals – the sculptures themselves – are absent, yet have not been negated. What is asserted is the value of perception – a way of seeing through other means, through an intensive encounter with language. Language as a vehicle for re-creation; re-creation as invention. My words, for certain, but once you put those blinders on, then it becomes a collaboration between

you and I, between the words you hear spoken and the shapes and colors that can only emerge in your mind's eye – it becomes your task to “see” the thing and invent it anew. This gives rise to yet another edition that is limited to the singular agency of your own faculties.

Plans for the near future: each of the *16 Sculptures* as a vinyl record; *16 Sculptures* staged as an opera. Etcetera. All the same work, the same words, but never the same means of transmission.

These iterations represent just a few means of how a writing of objects, as a slippery force, might come to puncture a world of too much information and not enough reverberation.

Les trois ombres

Auguste Rodin

Let us not deter you from entering this place. We were there also, more than a few times, perhaps, and our lungs could sing you the song.

It is the bastard song – livid and hairy. A land where there's no such thing as a soft punishment. Sacrifices were made in that last place, they weren't enough, this is where you have ended.

Oh, but I forgot, you are only a tourist. Tourist being a terminal part some are destined to play, white sheet innocence flapping. The sea that begat a world.

Time will always do its thing, regardless of our cognizance or permission. A woman enters Hell, it is her birthday a throne awaits her. These hands. One friend went off to study the Torah in Jerusalem, an alarm bell went off, a fire in his throat; immersed so deep in the word he realized he would never see another human form again. Who needs it, that sort of collision. To feel a throat satisfied.

There were other conditions. They landed us here, as well. To be a fire *under* the hearth. On our way to not getting lost, please enter here. The voyage that spelled out: “this world” and “please go away.” Providing a soundtrack to the silence, to the hum that resides outside of understanding, that buzz that’s always going, even when we don’t know a thing. Will you stay here for just a season.

We admit that there is also a sky. So many things othered it, we had to format a repercussion. That’s what our game is. The wisdom of becoming eager. When the words come and you don’t have to think about them, on a magic couch that spells evil. Ambulance up to the next highest sphere. Here we drain, alarmed by life.

The poet for certain forgot to revise some things and left us here squarbling. An argument ensued over which of us should bow. We all three went at once, crashed into each other while the poet sat and watched. Two others embraced before us, the man grabbed the woman’s ass. Twas a picture of supine decency. Leaning down, his hair brushed my chin.

Every morning, a piercing alarm rings out – substitute for the bells the skybound ones get. There are many layers. It is all, oh, a waterfall. The layers are circles. Standing in the tall grass, the flies buzzed around you. This is a foreign field, you thought, and I love it here. You had not yet felt the perfection of the descent. The pagan awareness of being great and without hope.

Oh, I love you, sky. You are the thing that disappears at the end of each day. The thing I will never see again – having bled here for so long, bled into the indeterminacy of night.

The old poet to the young poet said: “I wish to celebrate you using no other organ than my lungs.” And so he proceeded, this hell on earth engulfing them, the three shadows bent down and suddenly cold wintry air seemed not so sallow – and the poets took off in flight. Because enlightenment doesn’t come from standing in the same place for so long.

Here I sit, surrounded by books and you, dreaming. Life is but a scam. You have to learn how to take it back – that’s what Baudelaire called “le voyage.” Hold on really tight, Hell is a rollercoaster. The creamed eclipse that led us here, what a fright – still, the servants bow down to greet us, as though honored to show us such a terrible time. Here where stone casts its final form. We went together, and a woman will soon appear to show us the way out.

There are four things. There is word there is image there is sound there is gesture. You and I, my sweet friend, we are partial to the last of those, because it is so fleeting. Much like feeling – impossible to reproduce. The adventure is in the trying. And as I hold yr soft head in my arms, the fire of souls burns beneath us – incessantly. It is time for us to go together, to walk through those flames, find out what will happen. I have long been dead, so let me be yr guide, past these tormented shadows – straight into the writing that occurs once the ink has run out.

Venus of Willendorf

Artist Unknown

My name is the world's endlessness, and "world" has no humans in it. The first thing you'll probably notice about me is my tits. Nice and big and squirty, what a certain type of man likes. But my tits are made for no man. No child, either. They're big like that because I need something to rest my arms on.

My vag is a slit too small to fit a coin. Women used to hold on to me whenever they wished to get preggers. Twenty five thousand years old and eleven centimeters tall. I jiggle for no one.

I am happy and I belong to no woman now. I cannot tell you the name of the one that used to own me. My ass has a sort of mouth and a lot to say. I am not the first to be carved, only the one unlucky enough to be found. Now behind glass and unable to exercise the magic that is and was my sole function. Now I just have to lay here, a fat bitch for the world to abuse with its eyes.

When I was infested with use value, I liked nothing more than the feeling of a woman's sweaty palms all over me. No man ever touched me and if ever I were lucky enough to die, that's one thing I could be proud of. It was dykes who invented porn, and no, I am not something to be

moved inside the cunt. My mass is my goddamn victory, which is why so many feel compelled to kneel.

It is not just my navel you are drawn to. A woman's body has many holes. It is our burden to provide the safety blanket of the entire race. Look closely at mine, you will soon know something. My hole-iness is raw gorgeosity – fat fuck holey for the masses. At times unpleasant in my self-adulation, but it was part of the burden of being buried for so long – I needed *something* to hold on to!

Oblong my hole, fucker, it is so nothing meant to be inferred. This thing I wear upon my head, the thing that erases all my features – that is pornography also. Stomach and scruffy vag're better than a face. I was never the thinking woman's doll. Thoughts came later, and then annihilated my higher power. Look at this little dent above my right breast.

The tiny tiny puncture beneath my headpiece is the one that really gives me hope. Bet you didn't even see it. Really is fun, to go from *hold* to *behold*. And no more competition from those fierce feral girls that used to always grab me! They have something else to learn now, buried as I was. Walk around to get a good view my GORGEOUS heart-shaped ass. It's just too bad I have to be displayed like this, a metal rod going up it, as though I were a piece of junk on a stick – a corndog.

I don't want that plinth going up my ass. Who are all these motherfucking people anyway. I once served a real purpose, man. I'm talking the cosmos, alright? If you held me tight enough, you could get pregnant without ever having to touch a man. This is why they had to get rid of me for so long. These tits contain the groundwork of a whole other form of civilization.

What the world wants is more chances to live. I know a lot about this, even though I'm not alive, because I'm a woman. What this means: I have the courage to be held. All that courage, all wrapped up in this hard rocky stone. Come close and be afraid. I'm not moving, but thought has no cadence either. That doesn't mean it's not happening. My real joy is fitting in the palm of yr hand. Small like a dick, and the right girth to disappear. If you call me mother, then it's yr own weakness you are reveling in, bro. I am no one's sis and I am pre-symbolic. Form happily altered by the sweat of yr yearns.

Look at you, on the other side of the glass, wishing to be "alive." A man is just a freak with an accidental third leg. All creation is barbaric to a greater or lesser extent, and it is this barbarism I watch you constantly trying to get away from – what use are you aside from this havoc?

Munching on platitudes you present to those perceived to be greater. When the truth is my surface matters no less than yrs – it is all *matter*, this skin of disaster. Whosoforth *presents* themselves denies the built-in capacity of breaking down. I only suffer from what I am discretely subjected to; my elements are limited.

A man is not a cause. Woman is the site of limitlessness. Beauty aches inside my crags – an entire night of deficiencies: this is what makes a day. No one really wants to marry the spectacle of naming. See inside the black inside. The babies shooting out of you.

Tits need their support also. That is what stomach is there for. I ate and I ate until I became this oddity, all the men around me went hungry so that I could eat, I would not let them gorge themselves, neither on food nor on my body, and so the entire race starved while my women continued to produce more.

For women *are* production, while the men merely want to consume. The male is the consumption drive my tits are eager to displace. My tits are a throne, this crown that fits on no man's head. If I had a face then you would try to erase me, instead I have a body which serves as a horny threat. I am lucid and I am scarred by pockmarks. Unlike most fatties, my flesh contains no sleeves. I may be a monument to softness, but I can also be used as a weapon. Deep inside my rocky cove, I harbor waves.

Perforce the earth turned sour. That was before love. There was a way. Form born out of rhythm; the body, also. Through dreams, an ideal was bred. A body-form like my own dwells in ideality. A time when dreams were not the electric burden they now are, but rather foretold things. The secret of being buried, absorbed.

One experiences so much in stone. Hat covers my laughter. Nighttime now in Vienna, everything closes down, and I'm still here – wrapped in the fog, counting the bells to know the time. When viewed from the human perspective, it is but a number. I know what time *really* is: a container that moves outside of all mathematics. That impossible wooden truth that gives stone, skin their meaning.

Cut into me, I told the woman who picked me up as a rock. She formed me with her tools. And look at me now: all ready and willing to be cannibalized! It is so funny how useless I am I realize this suddenly and laugh inside. Because of me, there will always be more women than men in this world, and that's exactly how it should be. No one has outlived me so far, and I have absorbed all the poisons that the world has put forth. Grazing on contradictions, I am skin without organs, worth more than diamonds, and yet nothing – female without sheen. The first phallus and the last to bleed. Touch without tactility.

Walking Figure I (City)

Thomas Houseago

“I just feel transsexualized by this vermin.” Bend the fecal out of despair. Upend the skyless and then words get drawn out, melody of silence played on brick accordion and they layered fathomly. Ford a finger. Here comes ol’ fingerfoot, limb in the lungs. Don’t give it an oven; the wood is a child. Why the leaning breath of striation. Everything the city breaks us is a chill. Bottom into the back the turd ribcave leans lustily towards gravity, eat a meal a day keep distinction away. That foot’s not walking. The finger is split down the animus, real need of movement to make up for the silence and what can we find. Bound to extension, horny bored noun. Let it only be the fat of juiceless living that glides down the it’s molten isness. We speak like sticks beside us in the gloating. Some know the secrets and secretions of each dimension. Drawn down into crunching magnet spells of time. This tongue, cast over the bricks, not one of yearning. No monument sculptural, no sculpture momentous. We have to re-invent feeling first.

Untitled

Robert Morris

Flittery lint froth flossfrosting my pixy-laded wearabouts can't mop the floor glowtan. Mirrored surmise, then, is a bit much with the embedded complications of the understanding game, yr lowness. In a factory, we find abandonments all over the floor. There is no game. Mirror wastoid fits right in my display ant vitrine crawling. Lightness and soft just as one prefers the days. How does one keep it clean's the thing. For a doctor phones in with a morning allergy solution even before formless can spread its wings. Who exactly seeks an alternate solution? Not by design or fancy. What kills you are the flits of red that can be discerned within the thing. The thing's thingness. Spread all around, heart attack mercenary calls the sweatshop guard over – you know, the friendly one, he has the mustache and a corsage from his mother embedded in the turquoise handle of his uniform. All these goddamn fabrics intended for the low-end of first world consumption and what's in it for us besides more headaches and further chastisement from the higher-ups. New life fantasies flung like abandoned strips upon the floor by the younger girls, who really know how to squander the hours away healing staples in papers applied to denote dress sizes – hard to imagine this thing will one day become wearable. Altered at the tube puffery a copper is inserted to give shape to what otherwise could only be identified by one of the gals way further down the line and no one can posit which direction *they're* headed. They might try to sabotage our second world misery, or else scramble it like eggs with the forbidden saucers of the bourgeoisie, and who knows what those people even smell like. Instead, we'll

count the ego traps with the lights on, so when the factory lights shut off we won't fall into them and never get up again. So excited to flit and be accorded the silence. Something that dreams often do as well – or so I've been told. Giving a body over a mirrored ray inside that dusty sweep, reflects back to us relational surprise that can't be totally unexpected, considering our fritherance and its abatings. Part of the problem (as it was clearly stated in the report) is that sections of the floor may also be reflected, which could change things – colors, for instance – of the included whole. Right now we are swimming in a pool of purgatorial swill, but all that could change if the forbidden Everything Else were suddenly allowed to enter. We cannot permit reason to be a part of it. No one here wants a functional device. As I relayed to our comrades in the oversight room, ours is a godless horn where filth must run free. I'm not sure how many germs might attach themselves to a single dust moat, for instance, but I do know that the scene must be protected from the children's efforts to dash through it, separating textile from texite, some liberation dance gone totally awry. I am asking for yr health and assistance in squenching this matter, dear comrades, before a sisterly divorce happens and we are almost home. Turn all this filth into a wig and target it to the elderly, who might not have any hairs left to call their own. Do whatever you can to style it into something acceptable by comrades in an institution such as ours where there is not much variety to choose from all the same. As any student of history will tell you, people only know what they don't want to. Or wait...Did I get that right? Don't bother with it then, there are too many furballs to concern ourselves with in this vicinity. Flits of lead and asphalt so that we won't be totally guilty of pounceless pursuance. What will they do to prevent the ants from loving it up. The question to that one is the answer. The integrity of the thing from a distance is an ashen whale. No one is wailing to go jumping right inside it so fast and so slim away. The crawlies are maybe at permanent naptime. They have very few holes. If the people

could believe trustiness, they might be expanded. Instead, we have work. We need something else to do with the excess though don't we before it comes at night and eats all our thoughts away what kind of space can we fill then? A wretched computer printout of names and arrows, all pointing the wrong way. Comrade Supervisor in the overstock supply must have cooked up those numerics. We awful others on our weekday burden right sure fathom things out in a totally alternate way...But is there any means of escaping? Not when reams of mirrors hold you up. There was quite a bit of ambivalence when we questioned the other lint pile of its astronomical capabilities. I would love to see brother lint all blasted across the gorgeous night sky – you know, somewhere where night really has a sky – Texas, perhaps. Until we can get some lights in this thing and finally glow, it looks as if we will have to make do with these few mirrors planted among us and whatever it is they are able to reflect. I am not ordering any extra bread or soup to feed the roaches embedded within this non-mammalian bit of livestock because we want it to have features – a drunken fantasy life is preferable to one with doom written into its (je m'excuse) fabric. Shitty truths sure can jam up the teeth. How to absent them without effecting the weight of the whole becomes the next miracle calculation. No determinacy please, and perhaps stop being bothered by the mirror as an object that reflects, rather see it as a wall to climb, a rescue ladder without steps from the furry hell that forms the surface for, who can know, a miniscule creature allergic to textiles? It should probably remind you of destroyed civilizations, and maybe that is what our soldiers will soon look like over there. These fabrics are being made above us while imperialism goes on out there, be sure to spatialize everything in advance or else yr whereabouts will cloud yr agency's ability to wander. There is no gulf that is totally separate from an ocean is there? Be afraid of the sand. It does not let you in. Its function is to let you sink. Worlds fall into walls, somehow the shards are still there – hey, look at me! Little pieces of

maybe thrown a bit, spewed into what our overcarver calls regularity. Do you believe? That is the one question you never hear anyone asking at work. They are embroiled in routine. In layers so thick, shillings could be laced underneath. I have eyes. I know what I'm feeling even when I'm not touching anything. We are too earnest to have our quotas reduced, we meet them every time. If someone is sick, we just make more lint and throw it around that person's station, as though we had gotten the machines to run themselves. In what line of work will I be a year from now, when I am totally engulfed...A portal to the outside will be my secret gift to the domain and all its polyvagrant thingness.

Incantatoire

Alicia Penalba

Scattered rhythms dam my days we are

leaving the zig zag field now

where

All the options dry rot

I think there should be lines

leading right into this mass shelfshake

Canada

breaks this apart and leads it down

to the sewer the vibrato that moans

sweet silva had a whiff about her

this was certainly true and yet we had to forget how to designate those lines as they refined themselves chilling vegetables not knowing where they were going and how they could be sold. I enter into this scenario it must be rooted in dreamsphere that I have contaminated unwillingly. Shall I deal with it in this context, the daughters doughnut minutes can be bought at our least trinket tree and maybe

a family of parasites is living in this

particular sculpture how are you

going to do this make the kids arrive.

So far no wood – now this is offensive. At others the dogs burn brown into the moat and it is more present what can be done and what those messy pieces may be made out of. Dorothy we have to put them in our lot. There is a lot of

strong womanly energy

to this sculpture, and

the ghosts that inhabit

it cannot allow that

energy to be destroyed.

Is there going to be a sex war inside the Incantatoire, we should call up a Lysistrata expert get their advice. Wow, it was messy in this stumped-up town. Loyalty fell out of favor among the savory set who had already given birth to children that looked more like vegetables than humans. The chairs were ground up meatlike and inserted into the ash whole. Mommy and Daddy will be there, sweetheart, now there is time for the killer moose. Everyone is going to want to satiate their caveman longings with that one and that one soon enough then for the others to groovy float past it. This works, you see, as a sort of manic machine. She wanted to contain lines in it, this is the situate understanding bit. Deny yr truth to what's selling it about. The sisters trapped within the machinery that the sculpture resembled.

Spastic dong song slanted backwards

Scattered rhythms dam my days

Static vibratory echo let the

mission accomplish

the priest before never becomes true

nest to have never find, never

be found on neither

more.

Belt-like vegetables had their hand-
some cadence ordered before wine would

even arrive o the hornless

one

Sad the turnip other.

Magic black at night before the owls

came to claim their fears were

yellow.

A block of cement can be repeated.

Black swishy line of lies. Red

rodent fears and the,

storms never. Slanted,

midnight,

repeat until the

brim gets its own surmise – a catholic

angle that is worth more

than one chocolate logic fight.

I can't burn the seagull, babe,

I have no luck, the lava bronzed

into cheese?

ME ON A GODDAMN BOAT MOTHERFUCKER.

Don't let the cops twist the

pins into yr meat, how dumptruck

the silence gets –

a new year exorcism trump skidded out

of the millennial titty

eyes blackened like the heart of the thing

it wears its weapon embedded

the mind's trophy its penis, never.

Now enter the zone of

Doing – see what the chumps

comprising could do with

this pin prick

The son could not

be allowed to set

the sculpture up

My afternoon got

spent stabbing someone

soft out of the stars

in the correct

he fell into a fluff

way my mother

I had set right below

wanted it, but

the snake sculp-

they were doing

tor's barely discernible

it way way wing

eye into a ceiling

to happen w/ or

fan doing mordant

w/out outside

clicks of

intervention motherfuckers

elastic

The zags zigged jittery enough

to attain the concert of line

that the artist was honestly going

for.

Sink the frontier into

the midstream

Right now we enter into substance made with the created this and we give them something real flat that cuts. That's what these pieces are really meant to do. Were we to divorce them from their silence and what we call the silence is the form that they might never make in any work of art and oh god how sad that would be – here we're doing it for them. My colleague bring up a good thing you know we can't have them do this on their own. We're the writers here, this is a writing project, artists need not be involved.

That sort of zigzag leading into a haphazard chaos (whisper child's voice the bronze hasn't even melted yet) it could be a piece of witchcraft we have yet to discover. The artist, who put a spell on the boy she had make the sculpture, has also put a spell on me in my writing of it. You can call the Law. The Law won't come. The Law won't understand.

Something so small belongs to land

though the land belongs to

white (the non-color)

Lines have to evoke access

And then a souplike meeting

→ to the square

The metal squelches itself into the
formation that has begun to concern
us – hierarchies – how this chain
was constructed

A benevolent boar on top is sure.

But the utterances can also
go squealing down boat street
& comprise a single link

We must follow that link
across all its fumative
squelchings, luv.

A black magenta heartache dots

those lines.

Force of throttled thing

becomes the accumulation

of its seeds

It is different from the magnetic stripes you might've once wished yrself
to be, but then the boat cannot take you out of it.

Black we need to violate us the space but

when we are static can we still

then be moving

Someone must then let us

the finaglement of parts is

a zero survival – crop tits

being in a righteous rival city. A lot

has to do the city of production

A hammering included,

certainly,

We drop it away from the central part
of the structure, which has come
to represent fear.

The echo's zag can be ripped from a
mountain.

The child's delight in not seeing
the mountain rock. A fair show to be.

For it is the ultimate rust that
she wishes us to negate upon.

Savage woodlawn. Who knew
teeth could have spears.

The heart sucked right out

of a history and bronzed

into a sculpture.

Repeat these lines of confusion

to bring the embedded heart back

to live, stick it inside a human you might once have thought about
saving. Giving up yr body can have many uses.

When the words to this sculpture get read before yr covered eyes, the sculpture materializes right
before you, a sharp mass

of bladelike shapes, and dissolves as soon as you make the first effort

to see.

Spiral Jetty

Robert Smithson

-after James Benning-

I am alive (the sky.) The waters lapping, moving towards. Calm – cool, the curl of momentum. Speedboat whizzing past the birds. In April birds're louder. Still, the sky desolate – a deathly gray. Inside that surrounding curl. Stepped on the rocks to look out at the mound, that wannabe mountain, defines the beyond. Water lapping at my crustacean brains. A bit silvery, that moon of rock. Its collapse. Magnetized the shore. No localized feeling. From the first curl look at the green the constant shore. Were it not for silence. Blackish rock single emerges from the waters. A scar on the canvas. We follow the around. Pick up that spiral, put it in the sky. Bendy shore the stones lean in to punctuate.

September came and then the sun, a mountainous angle. Sometimes the salts wrap around, form a beatific muck shell. Sweet whistle of lake bird, here have some salt. The water cold swallowing yr ankles, shoots up the legs and full body froth. The negligence that the sky commits its bold openness. Now the hills golden, so as not to commit to the sound. Cross the zonal malcollapse. Look how the salts make silty sculptures on the water's lid. Rub up against the rocks inferring a shore. Reach out into the water's calm fake beyond, it is pulling you there. Like an arm, saluted.

What winter does is lower the sky. Whee! someone shrieks. A voice in the abdominal mist. The spiral screams its own shore. Water surrounding has partially abandoned, left dry sand in its retreat. We know not what we are tracing. Voice keeps crying out, yell at that spiral, so desperate and angry. Or else maybe it is the stones crying out at us, desperate, their hydral therapy. We are zoning out and shocklike in the perpetual misery of our abandon. Scream at that mountain also, it is shocking in its tumescence. The mists fornicate with the horizon. A man squelches. Rocks have snows on them. The water melts. It was never frozen.

The following month and somehow the water so much brighter, but only the stones. Now a sheath layer of snow upon them, much hoary water noise in the otherwise silence. What happened the birds have frozen. Airplane. Gone down to the snows and to have found. A buck around. Zero in on that curve she makes the most sound. It is because the ice minnows, nipping at their form in the under. This ice looks like two breasts. Laps against and then oh the little bubbles. Rockshore mercy is frozen. The gulf that drains the block. All along the snowy hills surrounding. Yet nothing falls. A mere portrait of the ice. Soon something to emerge from all this.

Spring brings with it fresh sounds. The birds had babies, came back. They like to look at the spiral from their place in the sky. Soon also some mothers dying. Silt between the rocks has replaced the ice. Waters have returned to the jetty also. They wish to go under. At the beginning, ankle of the jetty, it has very neatly covered. And across the hilly expanse we can see it reflected

in the water. We study the water mirror and two heavy explosions sound: the earth's stunning rejection.

By May, it has become an ocean. Jetty all eaten by the flood. Will the waters wash all those rocks away? A sudden storm comes upon us, let it not be a Moby Dick tale. Rushing into salt foam, water matches the sky, that means there is no horizon for once. Looking out there. Please wash me, I am a spiral jetty stone, dirtied by the seasons. For me, there is no reason. What others soon may not. For me there is no season. A bath the only thing that keeps me dry. When the waters retreat enough to spot it from a distance. A dog running down the jet, about to attack the shore.

July and it's all water (I am sneaking.) Lush, nature has had an orgasm, the cloud bodies. Shivers and curls, too enjoying itself to form a wave. What is not to be forgiven its quaking. Spiral can't even be seen. Thought I heard someone slurping. The salt that bad. Maybe a gobular gulp. Cloud magnets underwater. Underwater sky, the by and by. Burp fat elastic yellow. I am watching.

A decade has surpassed our observatory folds, it is January. A skull-era encased. Now naught can be seen once again. It is almost all all-cloud, the only bright is the lapping. Light seems to spill out of that distant mountain, like a white dove vomited from Joan of Arc's croaking bod. Waters assume a certain gray to contrast with the impressive blue-white of the sky, a certain time gone by. Now we are all waters. Buried may indeed forge our future legacy. Do you love the

deposits, bubble? Not too far to be a landlocked breeze. How light the climb. The music in our disease.

Springtime for a whole other buried. Reach toward the fructified other, magnificent birdstock, never so innocent as to be seen. Rock has only its head above water, barely treading. Goddamn gunshot. America reacts back. You can't put this fucking art down here. The curl now can hardly be inferred, that is why it is sad (the drowning.) A whistling cocktail of a bird, chickadee may be its name. Narrow focus on one rock appears like a sharkfin. Not in this stormy lake of dreams.

Five of them out there. He wants to be drunk, a pirate. Sixth, even. Three couples take their turns. This is the time of year there are sands surrounding. Go out to the middle, the very terminus, close yr eyes and hear the lapping. Looks different from the air, she says. She has knowledge. Others followed the signs from the national park. Him and her, the birds told them where to go. They unearthed it. Tiny dead robin asleep in permanence upon the sediment. Pretty soon its rot to be preserved. Salt is good for some things. That mountain making the brown waters move toward us. White stones look naked as summer takes its last flight.

Autumn is my favorite because everything looks so beautiful when it starts to die. Here everything frozen by uncertainty. It knows (the everything) that winter is on its way, it just doesn't know which direction it should run to escape it. Now, this year, an early snow has given us the answer. When in doubt, flush it out – yr entire system vague. Chunks of snow crawling up

the shore, wishing to be elitist – they are only chunks. Great balls of flakiness, foam, chase the withered horizon. I love how you are not even me.

Skip ahead to spring and love hurts once more. What the effin' fuck is that. The waters placid for once, making it singular – water, not waters. One lake, great and salty. The spiral recoils perfect in its stillness. Country music song. Sometimes (in yr mind) the water disappears and it's like the spiral is a star wars spaceship frozen in the air. Because in that movie it is the camera always moving; the purple-pink bruise as day fades. Love is such a zoo.

The summer wanted to have something mean to say. We wouldn't answer its fears. A great roaring, as though a chorus of tympanis. No ducks braying, only one lone bird that sounds like an insect. The shore's hollow significance. Keep lapping, lord. It's the trinkle that forms the treble, tympani is the bass. Aaaaahhhh, that bird's screaming! It must really want to get laid. Wouldn't you, if you were a bird? Rocks do their dance, stalagmites in the bleating stream. November came early this year.

The month of November is more like summer than winter or fall. All the calming that became involved, we wanted to camp out upon the jetty. Jet screamed across the sky, sentimentalized aerial bacteria. There is a moment when a curve becomes like an arch. Or you look really hard at a rock and see a bunch of little faces on it. The dance of the salt crystals as the liquid dries. Not

an arch, but an angle. Water doesn't move; we hear it anyway. That, I mean, is what was greatly needed: the bald eagle's abortion across the midnight sky.

In February, the water moves faster than a flushing toilet, and so the better for those teensy parasites, who so love to dance. Let's just hope the fishies don't eat them. Even salt needs its identificatory features. Spiral almost got dissolved that year. Funguslike plant grows between the rocks, hoping to aid the upholdance. Little microbes grab on to it, praying. Living on the body of a larger thing is but one stop on the road to becoming.

And when it gets scattered, all the matter. The merry month of May, but this one ain't gay. The sky is an elephant, water rushes away – not because it has things to do, but because it is scared. The rocks look the same to it as the sky, and so all is lost in indiscernibility. A tacky row of birds bawking in the distance. I don't want to look at them. I am here to stare at the spiral. That and the everything that gets in its way. Storm clouds oh fuck. The curved arm reaches out, wanting. It comes closer the harder we stare.

Untitled

Isa Genzken

Where my baby doll at it block me from the sun. No, that ain't right, what I wanna say is my baby doll *is* the sun, where the robbers is, we be dry, the done and hide. Oh memories that slap you hard when you're dry. Some of us thinking devolution more oft than the others. Ripped in the seams my made in china diaphragm got split in two bits, a child spilled out, such a bloody mess. I am the madness of delicatessen. No one and their friends also. It was a summer, true, vagrants were swarming the streets – you couldn't tell who a whore and not. Put dead baby on a blanket look up at the sky. Gave my baby my glasses to wear cos it blind. Groovin to what's decent. The baby look at mild airplane!

I had fantasies to abandon, that's right, I said it to the judge myself. Too warm for the blanky, I put it underneath. Baby's dirty, it got misguided. Course people don't wander too far from home. That's cos they afraid what they find. Livin with yr own dirt, filth – that's one thing. The outer world's – that's a whole other.

Crying, baby doll come right out of me. She was so sad she couldn't give birth to a piece of pure plastic. The Lord said something. Give me one chance to deny all these things that have happened to me, I will let reality BURN.

The sun had its eyes on me the entire time. Higher being (the beam.) We found out from the gossipers surrounding us that something precious. It looks fake plastic the diamonds. My airs. “Take Cheap Drugs to Remain Attractive.” That’s what the sign said. Not something else. I don’t remember.

Where my baby doll at mama I wanna die. The umbrella. It real big, that cloudy milkstain, lay me on a match plastic don’t burn.

It melt. The sun. Its energy defeats me.

We run summertime logic dead. The umbrella’s emaciated. Little girl wants practice at being mama one day she get something to take care of – night’s feeling. Wild animal dives into trash can find a meal. All summer long that evil pile.

A blanket is found. The dead baby had an armpit. Looking at it, you could hear a fly buzz. A heavy torrent of no rain. Brownd and greened in the seasonal slammer. The mother was off. She had found her lord, meandering on the sidewalk. Reeked of a time when New York still had a working class. Baby got dusted, she be lookin real special. Maa she cry out and then some juices.

She lookin like she in a place where there ain't no territory. Mama's eyeglass prescription, shit,
the blind is sacred, night is just variance. It can have an orange to it.

Blanket is majestic. So just lie down. Me on a towel, that was childhood. Nastiness.

Maybe baby got left behind on an island. How long does it take for sand to cover a beach chair.

Blinky blanket a monastery. Lying fallow before a bog. The change that flows beneath a life.

Sound of the wind breaking that instrument. Its strings continue their song.

Terrain

Koji Kamoji

My space the godness garden of all. Stick to emerge the fragment, pearl drops inside rocked
crescence, only to suicide the crags of oceanic wayfare: noblesse beginnings. Curved around
shedlife's tumescent wan long, fall down to perfectly symmetrize the sky's falling. Yesterday a
little moon. Not about being slight, trying to find the object through meaning. Write about it like
it's nature. But I am a rock, steel, I can never be a waterfall. I am *made*: always to be found in
nature, the godness (again) of a metal fortress.

(Wood sings a song to Stone.)

Femme assise (Annette)

Alberto Giacometti

Here I sit, breasts moldy in the shaded afterglow. Your fingerprints all over me, as though I deserved it – this is how I always wanted to live dead. Your stares...Climb into my eyes and look out. My lap is a solid matter that sings – garden fuzzy, almost. I think thin because it makes us so vulnerable. Bones rot merely accorded. Sifty singer isn't red.

Driving down the mindways, feet melt into the throne.

Look at the little curl on the left lip that makes it drip a little. Honest feelings, my mother. My mouth

remains open for you. Back of my hair drips also. Tit sags noticeably, but hey, look at my back – nomenclature muscle of really

holding it up! My poise giraffes

the possibility of being unclean. The state of wife left behind, that gaze. Nose so perfect. Girdle contains an etched-in cross. Preserve those lines within the care of my substance as though I were a pencil drawing. It is the fate of my eyebrows to be perennially amazed.

When I stare straight forward, will you look back at me? Oh Alberto, I know how you hate this. In what other wind could we win. Visitor comes in the door, requesting release – what kind of mode does the mind sink back on – it is a kind of singing thing – the focus that never lets us completely inside.

Smells like a bird – those lips upon parting. Scarcely an imprint make. Holding on to what love got left over from the furnace, before my mind – frozen in perpetual permanency. Oh, I am awake. I hardly have. Still, to be burdened with this womanish feature – holding on to what dignity, still sour, burns into my core.

Traces of Switzerland scratched into my bone structure. The sinew so gentle, wait, I am laughing. To go hardly cold inside and yet. When fate's necklace wore me.

Spooned into that frown, a stare. Perched upon a whole leglessness that spells out the beyond of my years. A woman and how we can save her. All those thoughts inside her bones. Light reflected off her wrist –

that glimmer – almost thinks stone. The sham of waffling in, buried. A word about pedestals.

Too bad they haven't yet invented a motion machine for people lost as I am, she scream-sings, not knowing which gesture really shall be up for the capture. A wettened dog on the street and people running away, what time is it, how come I can never sit before you before the noon. The

factory behind the studio was haunted. All her children running away from it. The time was midnight. Her wrist suddenly satiated.

As she lay her hand down upon the blanket there could almost have been a flea. Instead midnight started to happen. Tomorrow night, she sat there thinking. Soon there will be children.

Restless in the wile, her gaze like that fluorescent light whose constancy threatens through buzz and release. Tomorrow night

to go to the cinema a picturehouse become like sky fabric. Wasted oasis, a chinnery of sense.

Waste what I no longer am, it hardly matters. The skin on a trophy's eye.

Sharp and yet fallen, as though allowed to be embraced. A fallow ant crawls on my nonexistent ankle. Tomorrow night, again, to the tattoo farm.

When we are dry within ourselves, that is when we are allowed to become a statue. Dull theory of screaming futures. Mind to die never having been embraced or slapped, mind is simply a stream, mind's fingers in the window of odor, the song that bleeds.

What if night were to fall off my surface. Would there then be a lack? In the throes of not-seeming. The lamplight's faint praise of your hands, weathered in their working.

Later at the café, you will say it has all been a failure. But what are we working towards. A direct symbiosis, yr mind my form. Poisabilities.

The maintenance that secured midnight. Holed-up in the featureless for a while. We have all seen the failure carved into that hill. Soot like marrow the bronzed suite. Breezed

until it swept another – and that was feeling. The window fog in a snowy February, no chance of a moon. It is

best to look at people, but anyway, that cannot be done. That is what you said. And I wanted it done. You saw me, and I was friendly, gliding along a rail. Cats came down, they needed to observe the scene. The heat from a candle curled above. Oxygen, with its demands. You pretended

you were the secret of burning. I know you observed me. There were too many orders when the waiter came. One person. Staring stringently.

Sundried morning and then fuzzed to completion. He tries to own that static, but oh, he is not wispy. A man burdened by repeated births. Strain train stops in the tunnel: now death. I'll almost fly, sitting here. Until what can't be pried out...

Mouse in the corner mopes; it has a hair problem. It says: Lead me to an early grave. To die all haptic and blithe at the hands of the esteemed. No greater horror than to be murdered by a banality. Every gesture I make, I am dead once again. Livid just to own me, my likeness is smudged out by yr questing. Who am I to decide the size of the plinth.

Mouse has the sufficiency of a rat and is cageless. I sank into this pose, will sit here and do my inner sing. Sad and shoved,

I give myself up. When you look at me, there is an ocean. A person flies past, what is this life about. Become a boring object from time to time. All is what I could never be. When I become alive again,

you'll let me know. Til then, I melt through this upholdance. The way a brain wavers forceful and scrappy,

woman could never be but a pittance. These arms, were they to work, would let me be a tree.

What I sit upon a hearth to be worshipped. There is no greater art

only what hovers. The mind when merely spoken. Only the you I see.

Chin and nose tend to harmonize for most, but on me it is like sea and river, waiter and maitre d' – competing causes and no pillowcase to wrap them in. Oh,

you deserve my dignity.

When everyone who knows me now has forgotten my name, will you do the same? I am only the angle of fame. Alone and unvaried, I will attempt to remain.

Misc. Spill

Cady Noland

I wanna eat, fuck, and shit america, and it's *my face* the world is sitting on as I write this. The electric guitar spilled all over my tits got sent there for sure cos like a real motherfucker barks like a dog as he wolfs on down the raw egofuck. Mountains of tender pussy finesse scrape the barrel of MY understanding punctuated threats of novel sparse and no deep meaning. Free pussy on the trembling airplane, it crashes into disaster spillage and no more sleep for big money fuckwad whose thorough pagedness frisks my burden electrical outside of giant dickdouche time maze. My real world yr astronomical astonishment closed eyes to the black gulf sentiment that ashes up all yr eyeballs. Sleep gives me drumkit hard-on knock my head on concrete block to smell the real stars striped on my conal ambivalence sphere this is how we goddamn construct the real. NO ONE is safe and no one wants to be, be my enemy and I will celebrate you into the cement, jam a metal pole up my conscience and watch as I spew out a recycled vocabulary of constants. Puke unarmed vigilance into the mourning robe of cerebral violent apathy. The REAL motherfuckers all know perfectly well what they're doing when they starve the innocents. Isn't that a nice private sphere of dwelling

until the wrong race invades it and you are suddenly forced to confront all those dark brown fears that have been necessary to keep you going all these wasted years. All the goddamn

regurgitated garbage that's kept you alive swinging corpselike from the flagpole a flaccid trophy called guilt. There is no silence that is a law I can taste. Lost in ethereal abandonment of precepts hounded morale barking fucked hypertrophy at sound of electric saw cutting into metal sheet. I think about fucking a poodle a lot less than ludic conceptions of democracy haunt my intrepid on a hot red night the LA cuff of dawn. Magnets splayed out in the coital hemisphere, politicians' brainspans display on LCD monitor – direct visions of trapezoidal lemming paths melt backwards right before molten begets explosion. Terror suspects masturbating behind concrete walls, threat of hammer at least gives breathing room to the non-cause of life, laser boob trap pre-elucidates all possible becomings, which're strings of wire formatting electric hammock. Whore of all death penalty inmates makes important announcement over prison intercom: the time of aridization has arrived. As I compromise this grecious slab of lucidity, name me a single prophet whose corporate interests have raped apart my own. Bald eagle squawking twatless through a sky fall down dead and poisoned the night air maniacal the gallon fart of justice. Drug war czar hermaphrodites rebuke the slowness of today's meritocracy. Eating

the stockbroker's cock for breakfast each morning, she started to feel a patriotic fervor that eventually led her home to christ. I am a goddamn hot dog called america, rubber chicken. Justice will only be served by falling down killing yrself in the eye of the tornado, entire waves of fuck trespassing yr being which flips and fleets like pages torn from a glossy fashion mag a catholic bishop in north korea. Athletic pick-me-up and fuck my brains out with a crashed car bumper that folds up inside my dearest membrane luv and circular fries tomorrow like a curious goblin cunt whose hairs lied to the public investigator last friday. Not caring about sleep, loving the paranoia that fries yr brains as memories of the loudness that once deified yr ambitions

gutlauded you into chaos breakbreathing down yr backbrace – you became a mummy the moment you started to manipulate. How can one look at the world and call it a culture. Baked yr logic in a thin soup that forgot all about elevation and instead shat you out all the effectuality you once fantasized limiting yr intestines spewed out in a shopping spree cart whose shape rhymed with this most putrid of lights shining in yr diamond dishonesty. Shuddered like the day’s design NO SCATTER pieces like a suicide bomber’s mantelpiece this my god solidify DEATH’S DESIGN. Twitchy folds american faggotry owns no tyrants except locked in stead with outer world’s ambitions, suicide, to fuck and die in america looks tough. A flower bent over like silhouettes last dream’s logic. Dolorous streams of bicentennial fuckery scream “no future” at the public abortion gravesite, no shadows cast mean bloodsuckers constitute the majority today, cock in a light socket seen as final option like a midnight scream ingrained in armchair fabric dead and magnified suicide glamour the radiance of shit lessons in deadness that dematerialize yr brain as you go through it, soft and lost and tenuous to the shatterings of former bone structures, victims’ remains lost to the shame broadcast. Merging loads of fuck with stealth and hyperturbulence. I’m feeling designed today because being alive there’s no other way. Hold on the fence I’m sorry a passive bitchfuck that makes us all insane, toxic, a clown senator bounces on a rifledildo war machine, bitterness table sold to us at discount settlement site forever off-center. Feral kid roaming the streets at night in a city that just ate him. Constancy is shielded and then no one. Shopping redundancy is a snakepit made of silver feudal sparks term cradled intelligent and fucked less, the wicked battery spins. Here comes the last breath of honesty the world in its perennial self-slaughter is willing to take on, all those walking corpses and a neurotic strain of decay waving like a beauty pageant queen at the loyal deserters whose army remains scarred and unpaid. There is NOTHING to be deserving of and no losses only a handsome visual

feast that screams with the silence in yr eyes and leaves us trapped intrepid victims of the emotion economy, recycling feces and globular animosity. No mystery and none that can satisfy the metal tube's craving for melting into lightness, called up by the wreck mirror and serve yr country until you are martyred gruesome, whose greatness is that, the awning is garbage, burn self up and fucked like falling, the tower that watches watching will secure yr ride to the next gatecrash tragedy until there is no more yesterday worth fighting.

Neptune

Antoine Coysevox

The ordinary mind is nothing – a chance to not break.

Our letters are thoughts

of having private feelings

to being in array

entombment marble

We were wise

to having been

Be wary of sirens

which I have implanted

to lead the silent ones

astray

There are no awnings

in an ocean

no cover for the hurricane-watchers

You, Amphitrite, veil rustled by wind

perched still upon the shore

My arms the nightmists

that blanket the Pacific

I embrace you through the struggle

This horse below me it belongs to the sea. He a creature that yearned to be tamed, despite his wild neighs of defiance. Glaze myself over, reminded that if I am to rule all waters of the earth, that must mean I am in control of all movement also. The cause of every day is the pain of bleeding never. Where orthodox ducks in and declares, "Here – a boat!"

This goddamn horse called night. A horse from the sea, it does not wish to ride, it is not an ocean. Culled from waves, beating mercilessly against the dusk-stained horizon, summer's reply was never. I may choose who I rescue. But even gods have their limits. The moon's position this night ensures my planet's even farther away than it's meant to be.

The stallion unborn

as of yet

small tides

Cloud frowns

at gnarly sun

Drought dries the

earth the people

they cry out at me

in prayer & song

Me and this goddamn horse

I will answer with a storm

But only when

time is tide and

the winds have forgiven

my worry

I was the shore, too, in years unknown, unrecorded – the historians all aghast at my sudden disappearance. Withdrawal is perhaps the chief agent of interest. It defies all other movement to trickle meaning. Modern only to the floor of that lake I spawned, fed upon treacle and ocean floor violets, the scythe I use to tame this beast is more pertinent than the flawless form my body presents. A man has to tame his own desires or else live a life of torture. In such a life, every conversation, the slightest exchange is a wrenching reminder of what really controls us when the gods are absent.

The beast throws down

its head tries to bury

its own depths the sand

has its lots

Shores can be made

of many things – rock,

sand, grass, even

a mountain

Nowhere yet has

our hero erupted

his fleece army

of shadow above us

Made the sky like

night only in the

junket's vision

of a day

Let us sit

beneath these shades

with our wine

until those clouds

come & please let them

as this sun

is diminishing our

movement capacity

Oh let us –

(but not once is Neptune able to hear their cries for allotment for his own task that which secretly controls those forces they wish for him to unfurl they have wished for some sign or symptom his presence his reign and yet the sweetness of his entanglement allows for no variants there are moments one at a time and then there is movement yet the action solidifies into a stop-start beginning that will end them all sooner than he may afford to stop engaged as he is with his own turmoil mired confusion this task the business with equus ferus and the winds have begun to mock his gestures and then perhaps he himself is persuaded by the sirens' earthly calls)

Make blood an ocean. The certainty that a clear sky presents – that is what alarms. No higher ceiling than that – the fade-out drears their movements down until they are ankledeep in the dust, too moored to the barnacle-encrusted piers that deride their attempts at ascension.

We the hero-

sufferers of this

drought will we not get

our own statue

to commemorate our

drunken struggle

to hang on &

not feel the burdens

of death too

swiftly?

We want out, the

dryness and the heated

winds – silent simmering

that engulfs our

breaths and pre-

vents our singing

What are we to do

but for the cloud leakage

that must baptize

We know not sing-
ularities we are broken
savage by this medi-
terrain & no winter

Lord, do you see our
promise, this cow for
yr horse, an ex-
change that will
sate both our
worlds – yes, it is

A bridge & we hope
to hear yr steps upon
it – this dying not
our thing, yr fantasy
still to be revered

by those with strength

to stand

But the creature fought on, and the god tried to stab it with his fork. The wife sat quietly upon the shore and watched the commotion that disturbed the calm of the ocean and, as the struggle neared its completion, waves began to tear into the both of them, so that the two bodies – god and beast – had to equally contend with the ravishings of the salty waters. This gave their struggle a further tint of madness in the wife's eyes (for she was the sole to see) – a chaos of movement of interlocking forms each becoming more brutal in strength as the tides set upon them, rabid as the cloudless night, and cold they became as they fought against the currents. Until the waves fought back and, beating against flesh and hide but unable to gain mastery, the all-out struggle between god, beast, and nature unleashed the first ripples of a tsunami.

Now sprinkles seem

to come our sacrifices

have wrought opulence

of a new season –

Let us finish the wine

Before we leave this patch

& head down to the shore

to offer our final thanks

Dear Neptune has arisen,

strengthened our valves

our fields shall give rise

to the richness that our

raped soil has forgotten

feeds

Breath of ambivalence

admitted but no

it must rain

One hears the

thundering

our god has

commanded the

gulls screech fair

warning the sky

blackens to seal

its fame

This night our cellars

to be full this night

we will watch from

our cellars and see

the waters

that life brings

and in our chests

we know which way

the winds we are

led, now Neptune

Is upon us, hear

the rumble up ahead

The tide slowly

disappears

We will sleep before it. But lo – the tide has not returned. And in its place, a horse comes galloping toward us – a fire burning in its yellow eye. The rumble continues, and now it comes seaforth not skyforth. A wave higher than a tower, and up on top, Neptune in his boat-chariot, spear raised triumphant.

Staple Cheese (A Race)

Dieter Roth

The cheese has a disease. It grows hair and also some fleas. The salt-water breeze gives Mr. Suitcase an erection. Maggots floating through the air. The rotting and its numinosity.

The cheese contained, and maybe the silence that the cheese contains as well. I am only a daffodil. Filled to the brim to fastly expire: a model of indigestibility. This art stinks, and fucks the void. When in doubt, throw it out. Meaning has a bad smell, also.

Thirty-seven scents are entered into a race. Which one are you betting on? It ends like most races: in the desert. The suitcase can't breed. Artificial deaths – invite me past my own depletion, my descent into the cold sated fabric. The lining is a rotter! Voices of mold sing out, run hairful. It being a gesture snot fumble. Oh, cheese is commanding.

These voices, they resonate throughout the encavement whenever the valises opened. Husband'll soon come and take it all away. Tornado of mold and open marriages. Bourgeois consecration takes place in white cube; some day soon an accumulation of tiny fears, boredom leads you to

fuck otherwise. Just think of the children whistling out there. Their inexperience makes sadness an okay story. This sorrow is the endless degree. What cannot be financed is nonetheless for sale.

Please buy me someone. Like life, I change colors on my own. If only I could better mimic the soil, I might have a chance at a soul.

The city's sadness, we gape. Cheese mysticism.

I wrote a letter to Los Angeles. All the symptoms of my madness were involved. There were scurrilous amounts on each plate. An interest in what was being done there. How I might autobiographicalize without being present.

I want the kind of god that can fart on me anytime I ask for it. Can this be arranged? It's an emotionless melting, time. Done away and shipped abroad, the rot commences on the non-peninsula. The smell is a burden, but look, there are all different types – gruyere and mold, cottage and mascarpone – this is our swiss legacy.

The development of disease is staved off in this hopeful pot. I don't know who's winning. Maggot knows. She has buried deepest. The safest landing spot for a piece of rot. Can you tell me what it will mean soon when the thing is done – completed – raw? Stake driven into the abbot's gold vampire heart – I don't know what it will then be made of.

Some cheeses don't want their own direction to emerge out of this that much is clear. The camembert razors whose suicidal penitence might be able to give up some glowless glowing answers I don't know. Parmesan penitence takes its town: this is what we might love it for, had all those cheddars not erupted with wills of their own – and now what are we supposed to do? This something that is altered in permanency. See, just like this writing that is being read right now, the jarlsberg has its own constancy – the writing must change according to the bleu, take on new features and begin to age once again. Cos these are only certain truths about the coagulation that is so troubling us.

One can smoke the cheese and hope new sounds might emerge from the smoking. But the important task at hand is to give the casein, not a taste or a flavor, but a language. Until chevre has a language through which it can communicate to us, the project will have been a failure.

I am the angel girl of not ready yet.

To tame the gorgonzola. Oaxaca demands an agency, as well. For what else can we as art objects do without agency – we cannot *be* without it.

The way the building vibrates around this ulloa, its container. These sculptures also paintings in that they are contained – contained by the frame.

Must come to know the properties of their rotting. This will have to be undertaken on my own. Once the cheeses begin undergoing their transformations, I will be able to talk to them.

Catalog the woodside wellington units included in the gesture. Why this Switzerland. The cheese of Switzerland lands in a puddle called California.

California then becomes context – the container – while the suitcases are the frame, the rotting cheese the paint that comprises the painting. Since the cheese changes every day, what we are left with is a kind of cinema. A cinema of rot: maggots crawl through the edibility of California and die there, their babies eat them and secrete a new kind of kenafa!

We have the puddle, the context; the frame; the contents. No concept is needed here. Halloumi Hollywood.

Laktosefrei wants to be a movie star. The edge of the West is right across the street. Context is nothing; it spreads delimited. His vehicle pushed forth by gouda wheels! C'mon, American, splay me across a cracker and be done with it – this orange hole is numb to the bud.

He put christmas lights inside the cheddar catheter in order to bring on a tender revelation. Baby swiss began to warble; suddenly, a choir. All the three dozen voices had their say in the distant knowing – I don't go, really. Ghastly sense of goading, that brie had. Its wings very!

Swiss Cheese checked into the American hotel and nearly died there. Some hydrated circumstance was in fact heeded. In order for the tillamook to be real, it had to rot a little. Fingers on the rooftop of that law. My almost the time to be dready. Entranced upon the glance lenses that then allowed the sun to enter.

Where are the cows in all this? In fact, it is all about the cows – the leather on the valises, their breast product is the contained. The moveless movie.

Blue cheese blue movie is red cheese is really like a lack. The sentiment is cloying, non-Asian. The color of that radiance as it prepares to propound the ungodly – my surefire array. Blasted into insignificance by burial, will the aliens unearth it? To be catalogue raisonné'd right off the action block? The race to be won one of thirty and seven is a feat too lambasted by retrospection to be daunted. A heaven awaits those objects that contain their own process, also. The process's contained, making of movement a container. And the teeth factor – that can't be left out, either. Raises hand to foreign forehead and that maybeance withers outward. Shipped in a cardboard box to the continental despair. We still vibrate at each hour exposed – this objectitude.

Some of them are soft, it must be said, and come from goats. Others an audience it is necessary to watch before come consumed. Ricotta is never easy. Nor should it ever be regarded as such. There is an entire ocean out there. Lost before as ever. Bodies melting – for us, the task to be jealous of. That satiated fungus. The race to be colluded under. The asiago is a force.

Horses run viral, all the while. A chestnut-flavored one named Ham Milkshake is favored to win. We have a lot of money going on him within this virus and we hope he don't rot on the playing field. A black beauty named Violin Thinner comes in second place. Her mane has been permed by proud owner Dixie Domenot. The archetype here being wrenched out of The Odyssey and put on display for the benefit of our lesser understanding. We cannot know history.

Beatific Bookshelf is third place horsie's name. He wants an object all to himself, but no rock star has ridden him quite yet – even though he is right now on the Hollywood Walk of Shame.

Forthright Cupcake could've almost been a winner – if only she hadn't fallen in a horse-sized ditch that nearly transformed her into a hound of satan.

One version of life in modern era is cheesemonger; our joyful ruins. But then the moon's microorganisms also.

If at all the young night. Smelled digitally, it is its own dishwasher. Dear L.A. – love me in my hereafter incarnate.

Don't be alive, the cheesecloth's religion quiver. That's if we want to endure the ornament. Rather, the anemic glow of the L.A. morning smog makes me feel all slinky and productified.

Why can't my substance be cut into (a candied version of me?) Smell me indirectly. Once the smoke has been cleared, then I'll really be worth tasting. The politician's lips have warts all over them. I don't want *that* tongue in *my* mouth. If we could crawl up into the hole of that particular valencay...hear a gong cry out, dong, resonate. A gong dong. L.A. has fabulous beaches, I've heard. We really do not know which way Malibu. Our backs are breaking. Pack yr suitcase, orange hat the yeah vacuum.

Dear Golden State, can you preserve this rot? My rot an art form, no novelty value. I call governor's house maid to the witness stand, show me a pretty picture the moon. City's sirens inside the void. We know no mystic expanse, it is sad really. Only the children who eat us know.

Programmed to indiffereniate, arms are in the city's tight boldness. The brave rapist glows. To digest me, one must invent a new term: distibulation. That will be a rat-tough concept. The

strings bang wideless through the engulfed night. The erotic form of a dairy product. It is necessary to have a dream, to expire also. Gallery wifemom was never the greedy type. We gibber until the mold grows into a mushroom shape. I am too orange to be sought-out, dignified through stereotype, and demised. The rot of my body in suitcase showcase. All the rest is pure theater.

Relief with the Liberation of a Besieged City

Artist Unknown

Here they come, oh, nail me to your wall. I am likely a true story. The ghosts were busy imagining things, they forgot where the event took place. That it did you don't have to even enquire, scatter your doubts across the dirt.

What it means to get invaded. Knights standing guard could hear the horses' clump in the near-far. Roosters started to smudge, clutter their wings and bawk abashed, sins intact. One strong magnet could've sucked all their armor right off their standing thrones, those warriors with their flesh all mottled and prepared. Deadline for the invasion is this Saturday; the city becoming ours with or without the roaring pulse of the historians' hour-glass.

That candied narrative a dream spleen. Horses trample over bodies of fallen warriors made of wood – the everything. Loss, the women stick their heads out of windows. Momentum is dying also, let us turn this city into an ocean, the bodies before us.

Nail it on the wall, to say: This is what we have done.

When the battle wages on, when it reaches its zenith, that peak that tells us it can no longer be controlled, will our rulers relent? Frenzied mass of corpses perennial in my eternal vision, what we have been reduced to – a citizenry of ashes.

That we never invited them, it becomes our fault – woven in to this legacy of our fade. It was a nighttime invasion, the babies awoken to the tavern mob's alarm cries. Up in the castle, the guards held fast to their spikes. Our Queen removed in her morning wear, tears for her subjects running down her cheeks – that is the thing we might hope for, her love long gone, already sent to battle the oncoming hordes.

Tender is the knife that is stuck inside your ribs. Skin is a wooden crucifix, no meaning, the sword inside you is steaming. The horses already know their chaos is time. Their falling sets the rhythm for a cadenced collaboration with airtide, their squeals' echo resonates in all the emptied fountains, flames licking the ceiling of the temple...

What does it mean to be invaded? It means a shattering of all familiarity. This history, written into our soil. These gods that have turned their backs on us, these gods we will never trust again... This thirst that will torment us in our freshly dug graves.

The men that fought for us, they had their vision. You could see it in their faces as they went in, with scythes raised, only to fall valiant – the dust rose with their souls. Stay clear of the embers, children – they are the particles that the invaders worship.

The mystery of how they were forced to eat it, their defeat. A new religion, for certain, and all the power that comes with it. For false ideals are the civilizing force. Allow yourself to become seduced by it in order to experience the pangs of failure – worse, perhaps, than death. Look at that circle, the twist – a carousel of corpses just holding on, striving to be a part of the greater ornament – bodies lost in spates of turning-round, yet sitting still – “along for the ride”?

As soon as the barricades fell, a young boy child came running, lungs afoul with warning sounds, to the gates, higher ground. With the ladies, we fled behind the silver of the shields. Maybe behind one stood your lover, you kissed him on the lips goodbye, knowing in your bones that he would be ash by nighttide.

What will the invaders look like? What language will they speak? Must we learn to act like them to react like them, to accept defeat and fight alongside them in battle, to take on the armor of a city as unguarded as ours has proven to be?

Those of our defeated generation must learn to live with this burden, this knowledge of the all that was lost. Our markets our temples our houses our castle, the re-branding and our inability to be but passive receptacles. Our never having known desire.

Wrath of the present and the blue of our veins. All looks the same except the color of our captors' eyes. Burdened by our failures, and worse, the awareness that these feelings will never be known by history.

Still, those gods that hover above us. The occupiers don't want our shadows no more, our mere forms were never enough for them. Old guard, we suffered under them for sure. But that suffering, at least it let us know who we were. Not to be trapped within this static resonance – what a fate. Mercy shines bright upon the accumulated corpses. A woman holds fast and firm to her fallen son. The soldier pulls her away, screaming. No replacement narrative can ever suffice. She will weave a fabric of her loss, hang it upon the wall so as to not let the suffering fade. This is what it means to be alive to our time.

Their one god can never be the solution to our fears. Nor our children's, that is certain. Perhaps their children. What is known. The sky folds in upon itself. New bodies born, born to be torn. They too in future battles to be found.

The souls were there to protect us. Their heads hung, framed, upon the city walls. The protecting became a haunting – as often happens. Shit for the hornets that stung their embraced features. The heads became detached from the bodies, hung from trees and attached to sticks that were made to sprout from the earth. Their spirits invaded our houses, made some of us womenfolk speak in our dead husbands' voices: knowledge of the sand.

The orthodoxy of the elite was thrust into our bodies. We could not be but receptacles. Sand's vision is the league-form that we acquired – mated to our deficiencies. The experience of being swallowed whole, none of us could anticipate. This is what defeat means on the widest level: being taken in and, not masticated, but refused. Refused and yet forced to remain...Inveterate uncertainty.

Risen, we were ahead of form. Being known an abjection is time also. Rats in the formulation. Only the weakened ones left, and so we were told to feel liberated. The siege upon our veins, the lives. My neighbor insisted on saving all that was carved away. The shards of wood, she did not use them for any purpose, rather they sat upon a shelf cleared of all stonery, shards of all shapes placed to be merely regarded, as they would impregnate your skin with splinters when felt.

There were those of us who felt a greater commitment, went into the sea. The forces could offer us no great protection. There was not yet writing to ensheath our confusion; madness was the infrequent result. A woman screaming her husband's name, through the night's empty streets.

Low-level invaders, bureaucrats of lust, they couldn't shut her up, and even though some – most, even – felt sympathetic, their only option was to dress her in chains, put her mouth into the sky. Violence is the pervert's escapism. I am not a choice. I am a singular being, a daughter-product of this havoc.

Down into the Red Sea she fell. A piece of wood, she floated, when all she really wanted was to drown. Her face was the skeletal discharge of a scream, only silent. Face, when found, had been detached from the rest of the body and scratched out – just like those men's features. Just like the wood that could have been used to make a cabinet, instead it caused a fever. When we other women saw it, the sorrow of that detachment, we all fell into a pile of pieces also. Our rags looked all the same, when we were discovered, no one could know which limb should be attached to. Such is the garden, when liberation occurs.

At night, dreams a waterfall. Yes, even water needs to other itself through dream. The disarrangement that fantasy promises. Defeat was encoded into our substance by the gods that wrote us. This we contend with in our trailings. Nomads, we attached ourselves to a city, inserted ourselves in order to perspectivalize our relations to this ground. The orders came from the outside empire. We were besieged. Yet we remain fixed to it. Our place, not someone else's.

The oracles of the old gods were slaughtered before us. The children had their natures presented to them by those men. It was a violation – the truth that asserts their place. The word *self* not yet

invented, who knows to define it. Rather, like animals, they are nurtured via the hunger and joy of pursuit.

Nurture is a word I have long sought out as a mother. We belong to this world. That is one of the few things I know. My husband with a stake running through his body. The old gods, certainly not dead. But they have abandoned us. A preserved glance at the highlands, I know his inner eye took it in even as life vacated his substance. The sky's peopling having given up its task-target. Dream of a central unity will occupy them for ages beyond my simple time. And then a light, cascading above the cover of night. Everywhere I look, there seems to be fabric in place of the emptiness everyone else wades through. I no longer ask how they manage to keep going, to keep propelling themselves through it. It is easy to move through what cannot be seen. If only my vision wasn't clouded with memory: carnage and ruin. People like me will do the others a grand favor when we perish. Then, the vision will be their won burden.

Light Reign

James Turrell

With the gray light cast on my stillness, I am permitted to wait. Clouds eat my angular agency, wooden is barren – oh, beware. Eyeball eats sky also – which I is ceiling to be and what for. There are no angles, world is something contained. Specks keep still the self. A forecast block. The me inside the inanimate's longing. Bird scissors through cutting line across eggeye. Blue gap's squeals through cloud machinery's blip of conscience. Day's weight the gift of sound. Not fog nor foregoance but rather vehicle's achy groans before the halt.

Please, evil airplane stuck in the cloud, allow this stillness to echo throughout the frame.

Vierge à l'Enfant

Artist Unknown

Mère:

My baby had its head chopped off, I'm sorry. These categories. Blame it on barbarian invaders. That thing that happened to me. Haptic, as though it were my vice. City torch lights lick night sky up ahead: nothing. And all that finishes fading – night also.

With my baby there was no pornographic truth. Something happened. The way the cloth folds above me. Mood is quiet. Headless baby cries. Found my baby's head in a garbage can. A day come to be called Easter. My baby went away it was barely breathing. All the other children arrived. I had decided on something else, something static. My child's charisma will be his absence. It has been decided. My child born without a head. Everything else was intact and beautifully so. My child's head belonged to god. We had never heard of a whale. Look at the way this cloth droops. Noble sentiment of lost causes. Like when the skies opened up because there was a big announcement to be made. We had narrowed it down to one god. But he kept changing the rules on us. Only my son could keep up, his head was elsewhere. All those little fantasies that bound us. What lost is. Baby's hand points at a word. He learned how to read much earlier than the other babies. There were no others. Birth process like a disease, only temporary. A deformation of life, coming from the center. Baby wants to say something; he points instead.

The very word that god said. No one else heard it. Not even me and I am his mother holding him here. Way into the sign, his finger. Expression comes from knowing god. The self that becomes aware – that gift of knowing. It is not about worship. Destroy all temples, that is what my son just said. I have been left, spared to interpret for him. The words. Giant headless thought, is matter. The quivering that happens when yr head comes off.

Enfant:

Headless really is no big deal. What's fucked me up most ever since I was a baby has been my stomach. Much more so than is oft reported. People confuse creation as a brain thing. In actuality, it all comes from the center. And mine is fucked. Digestion, dilution, salutation, salvation – you name it. Farting my ass off while they nailed my hands to the cross, I suddenly had a real reason to die. When I did things, magic things that impressed people, a knot in the center of my being the entire time, tied tight and with acid leaking out of it – doughnut sunshine. The state of being-stomach-in-all-its-perennial-constancy. Nothing that holds precarious. Or when I'd piss, an ache in my gall bladder so visceral the man standing next to me could even hear it. I didn't have to drink to get a bad liver. It didn't matter what I ate – even the mildest of foods would fuel the ulcer. God in my brain, Satan in my stomach. To me it was normal, though I soon came to realize that not everyone felt this way. There were those with problems far worse than mine. That's when they called on me. Christ does the manifestation dance, read the headlines. I was way ahead of things, my stomach still gave me trouble. Always. Maybe it's cos I sucked on mom's tit till I was eight. That's not normal for a lot of children. Maybe her milk was sour. Even when I was a baby, nothing solid ever came out of me. It would go in meat-tough and exit in

liquidy clumps, no matter what it was. Christ's magnificent soupiness. That's a secret I even kept from the whore with the same name as my mom – the only other woman I very nearly loved. Magdalena the world's first faghag – first famous one, I should qualify. Went straight from caring about everyone to *wanting* to die – so great was the suffering. I talked about my father a lot because I never had one; it was hard, you know? The times weren't so smooth, either. Era was a lot like my stomach. This havoc that got situational. This father I didn't have, he would broadcast things in my gut. This rumbly voice, got to where I'd have to puke and shit at the same time. I ran to my whore, asked her what to do about it. She didn't know who she was. And so we had to get away, before god got all pissed and splat – diarrhea in the sand.

One night a man on a camel came, said he had a message for me. He gave me a word that the world had yet to know: forgive. It took us a while, but we eventually came to formulate an understanding of its meaning. His name was John and he had a twinkle in his eye that Mary said seemed holy. He went up to the whore and said he'd also *forgive* her for not fucking me. But I've been trying for ages, she cried, before settling down into the dust. He threw some water on her, then got back on his camel and rode out of there. If you could have looked inside my stomach, I think you'd find my organs had formed a sort of curl. None of this has been part of my recorded legacy.

Mère:

Notice my ironic expression. Like most homos, he was concerned largely with himself from an early age. People who have a brain for a heart and all that. Eventually it enveloped the sky. I was

a good mother; I saw to that. The twinkle of an island. In the sea they call dead. We floated out, the fabric of my shawl. A variation of red. And then, one day, just as sudden as he was born, the sky divorced us. I looked down at the word he was pointing at as I held him in my arms. He did not want to fuck with the whore I set him up with – this is a minor fact. Instead he spent most of his adolescence chasing after shepherds. Sometimes he'd make a real spectacle of it, disgusting. Those words you don't write down. Now they've been lost.

But then they're all here, inside me. The essence distilled. My son, the headless wonder. The servant occupied, ready to dance and gloat. The people he healed were never sick to begin with. Still, a miracle. This thing pulled out of my body. Christ, I shouted. The world's evanescence. No father in sight to teach him how. And so he went looking. And that's how he finally disappeared.

Milon de Crotone

Pierre Puget

And so I give up the cause before the hour makes an ass of me. Oh wait. An erotics of neurotics?
Nix that, as well. This twisted lion, its fangs in my fesse, I struggle to pull myself out of the tree
and its mouth at once. All those who once followed me. Were they now allowed to see.

Don't worship the stars that cry out to you in night format. I once had the strength of a planet.
Here, in the wilds, the stirrings of the social. One of the risks is no rescue. Having spent a life
putting yrself out there, you never once stopped to think of that. In the end, the whole process
slows itself down. In the end. Life's work the becoming of every novel encounter. But as you
look behind, you suddenly see that each season was defined by a virus. To carry around a kit of
surgical knives...I would have loved to have saved yr life,

you never gave me a chance. Beast clings tenderly like a lover whose name you've already
forgotten. Vines snaking their way round yr ankles. Nature the thing you wanted most to become.
Roar in the arena to goad you onwards in the fight.

It is now the seventh day. Winter. Where has that crowd gone. Feeling yr way around, you suddenly came to be surrounded. The glory encased within those arms. Run the tip of yr index finger over the surface, feel the ivory of that fang sinking into you. The creature...All that longing, and did it really make a life? Alone in the wilderness, the substance being torn from yr body, bit by bit. Finally you are no longer afraid.

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