

## From *The Philosophy of Decomposition / Re-composition: A Poe and Stein Mash-up*

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Between the marble and the plumage is a capable difference, a Never-ending interval, within which is a long book — about a thousand pages — that is beginning again and again. It is an enormous poem quoting itself, a non-reasoning creature capable of speech. The fluttering of its pages made a monotone of sound, a sound so prolonged that it seemed like one long vacillating thought. It was a radiant discourse that began to emerge, step by step, from Night's beguiling academies — like a classic nineteenth-century midnight unexpectedly thought by some twentieth century mind.

It was an unmanageable but inevitable series interspersed with ancient pages — on which were written ninety-nine indefinite stanzas, one hundred and four lines in red and black paint, an outlawed history, pallid and ludicrous portraits of melancholy, a continuous dialogue between anybody and everybody, and an ecstatic geography of intuition.

From page to page, there was a groping for life as if the book — which had an intense frenzy not for identity but for repetition and variation — determined to have the self-consciousness of a catalectic window.

"I am also a magazine," it said, "a lyric colloquy, a sonorous novel, the painting of a narrative without a plot. As I said in the beginning, the most poetical topic in the world is, unquestionably, the death of a *dénouement*, of a troubling equilibration beginning again and again."

"I am preparing, in fact, to become a new composition — to retrace the generation of 1914 with a Plutonian difference. For this I made troublesome step-ladders that lead from a cautious future to its requisite pretext, or less pedantically, from a beautiful picture to its tempestuous frame. I determined to place a deepening impression on impossible paper — just as the amused world rendered the inarticulate difference between words and other words as a vigorous and ominous jest. It was then that I wrote *desire* while meaning

*desideratum*, that I prepared to seek — or should I say borrow — the *modus operandi* of radical combination. What I have termed subjects are really depressions, memories of a lonely idea beginning to rhyme. This inevitably led me to a long, groping analogy that allies spirit with sonorousness, you with another world, and the sensitive reader with the sad and placid variations of the day.

But shall we commence? A wandering vowel is now expecting the pages and is tapping continuous trochees upon my door.”

In this naturally elaborated beginning, what is seen depends upon the classical ratio of story and shadow — of dreaming and continually annoying the limits of the real — for what we term paradise is essentially a neglected echo happening ahead of time; in a word, it is going to be there and we are here.

As is supposed, the ordinary will continuously advance toward the first unusual instance but not find it — like the way life always seems to know but misrepresent the equilibrated design of the living. So one finds oneself, pen in hand, before the smiling casement of the paper, beginning an indolent stanza, seeking ungainly admission into its emblematical forest of oddity. And if one does not enter, the portraits of the dead will make an immediate and ghastly volte-face. Perhaps there is nothing to be done in this discarded atmosphere but irritating their dark, mathematical eyes — the very place, the confounded locale, where all works of art should begin.

For example, at one — in despair, in the dead center of my room — I was making a bust of a fantastic creature without a cast. Years later, after a succession of corresponding events, it started to have a positively striking similarity to you.

To sound a fiery consonant, to render the painful erasures manifest — that is the immediate proviso floating slowly above my chamber-window, like some melancholy graduate student poring over a grave and forgotten volume, far beyond the demeanor of the final thesis. Looking up from his scholarship, he stopped, startled by the thought of an unaccountable revolution (which did not fail) that he had just found within the grim, troubled crevices of history.

Whether writing or composing, nothing is more clear than the music that gleams from tears intended in the time-sense. It is there that the soul is permitted distinctly to be seen — but first, a certain hardness must alight on the mind of the author, constructing for him the means for a precision analysis, some distant and converse mode of accounting.

By this I mean demon-traps connectedly perched above the proper limit of the plausible. I mean dreaming of a parrot that is authentically speaking. I mean a series of unusual psychal phenomena, a sculptured utterance formulated by accident, a found poem that shall be found prophetic in thirty years. I mean prolonging the extremeness of a single sitting and, in the meantime, making the wheels of progress aim backwards by one half degree. In short, I mean a using everything:

everything different  
everything the same  
everything interesting  
everything prolonged  
everything more or less first rate  
everything confused  
everything clear to me — though having little  
relevancy  
everything positive before Romanticism

everything past 1905  
everything having become classified in the  
    continuous war between the angels of idea  
    and the angels of the things themselves  
everything that changes  
everything, for a moment, up to date  
everything having arisen pell-mell in a web of  
    difficulties.  
everything varied  
everything protracted  
everything read (and reread) by dead  
    transcendentalists  
everything added afterwards in excess of  
    proportion  
everything bringing together feathers of sense  
    and fields of shadow  
everything once regarded as superstition  
everything streaming  
everything begun in the first book, lost in the  
    second, and naturally repeated in the third  
everything but the mistress of consequence  
everything with grey wings and rhythmical  
    pinions  
everything Melanctha said to Caleb about the  
    evil mechanism of Lord Raven — and then  
    the very different thing that Caleb said to  
    Lenore  
everything shorn of totality  
everything too long to be shaven  
everything that brings me anything different  
everything naturally arising from aural  
    alliteration  
everything in the direction of the lamplight of  
    heaven  
everything rendering the flattest, most simple  
    climax fantastic  
everything innumerable  
everything Mr. Williams pronounced  
    admissible  
everything direct  
everything that ventures from accepted  
    decorum

everything living that invariably bends  
everything attempted in the first chamber of  
    facility  
everything there is to say in the second  
    chamber of brevity  
everything about everything in the third  
    chamber of monotony  
everything approaching preconsiderations  
    behind the fourth chamber of  
    consideration  
everything made alternating in the fifth  
    chamber of attention  
everything suggested in the sixth (and naturally  
    insulated) chamber of suggestiveness  
everything in search of a passionate corollary  
everything flitting while still constantly in view  
everything that has purposely overpassed the  
    province of the poem  
everything in need of reconstruction  
everything stimulating intolerable versification  
everything adhering to the force of the refrain  
everything that follows what follows by rote  
everything half real, half fancied in nature  
everything arising from phrenzied imagining  
everything conceivable in the present world of  
    Nevermore

Holding in view these considerations, I resolved to diversify the work and thought if the division of sound could be made into a hundred and eight appreciable parts, because, as you know, the most troubling thing about lists is the possibility of infinite rhythm, of time simply returning again and again. Indeed, I was aware of being seen from behind a stimulating word that had, in turn, just become aware of its existence within the sentence — a sentence, which is still beginning, still perceiving, that can see all of the other, anticipated words coming and recurring in poetical combination.

## Notes Toward an Interventionalist Conceptualism: On the Composition of *The Philosophy of Decomposition*:

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Montage does not reproduce the real, but constructs an object...or rather, mounts a process...in order to intervene in the world, not to reflect but to change reality.

—Gregory Ulmer, “The Object of Post-Criticism”

My long poem (or, as Poe would have it, my “succession of brief ones”), *The Philosophy of Decomposition / Re-composition as Explanation: A Poe and Stein Mash-up*, is a “mash-up” in the most basic sense of the word; it is, according to the *OED*’s definition, a “mixture or fusion of disparate elements,” a genetic splicing of two classic essays on composition. But if *The Philosophy of Decomposition* bears any relation to *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* (2009), or *Android Karenina* (2010) — three recent and popular volumes by Quirk Classics, a publisher that brashly claims to be “the home of the original literary mash-up” — it is because all of these texts are inspired by or partake in what new media theorist Lev Manovich calls our “culture of remixability.” In obvious ways that needn’t be recited here, this cultural condition has been aided, abetted, and accelerated by a massive proliferation of digital technologies; indeed, according to the *New York Times Magazine* (which is quoted in the *OED* entry I cited above), “[m]aking a mash-up is easy in the digital age. You take the vocals-only version of one pop song...and use a computer to splice it onto the instrumental track of another.” Yet in splicing together Poe’s “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846) and Stein’s “Composition as Explanation” (1926), I took a more difficult and painstaking route. Rather than transposing discrete and easily manipulable “tracks,” I lifted out individual words and phrases from the two source texts and used them to slowly accrete linked assemblages of verbal tesserae. In some cases, I left a few signature phrases intact (for example, Stein’s repetitive and memorable phrase “beginning again and again”), but, for the most part, I atomized and reordered the pieces to such an extent that I blurred the line between citation and composition, between montage and writing. To quote Marcus Boon’s recent and provocative

study *In Praise of Copying* (2010), I wanted to “reach a place where montage itself is cut into so many pieces that it no longer makes sense to call it montage” (163).

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This project, this work of “micro-montage,” might be considered through the lens of contemporary conceptual poetry, through what Marjorie Perloff calls in her latest book *Unoriginal Genius* (2010) a “poetry by other means.” For Perloff, “citationality, with its dialectic of removal and graft, disjunction and conjunction, its interpenetration of origin and destruction, is central to twenty-first-century poetics” (17). The writers that Perloff champions, such as Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place, take copying, the reframing of found text — we can call it “extended” or “pure” quotation — to be their sole artistic gesture: Goldsmith’s 836-paged *Day* (2003), for example, is a transcription of an entire issue of the *New York Times*, and Place’s 430-paged *Tragodia 1: Statement of Facts* (2010) is a re-presentation of appellate briefs that Place wrote as a practicing lawyer. This is, in short, a “non-interventionalist” conceptualism, which is described at some length in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (2011), co-edited by Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin.<sup>1</sup> In his introduction “The Fate of Echo,” Dworkin says,

With minimal intervention, the writers here are more likely to determine preestablished rules and parameters — to set up a system and step back as it runs its course — than to heavily edit or masterfully polish...to make just one choice that obviates a whole host of other choices. The one decision removes the temptation to tinker or edit or hone. (xliv)

While the anthology contains a wide range of conceptualist practices, the editorial

frame clearly and, to my mind, problematically privileges what Place and Rob Fitterman call, in *Notes on Conceptualisms* (2009), a “pure conceptualism” over an “impure” or “hybrid” or “post-” conceptualism, which relies on the heavy editing of appropriated or sampled material.<sup>2</sup> The “one choice” of a pure conceptualist work — and this is one of conceptualism’s most controversial claims — also obviates the need to actually read it. One is only required to appreciate the elegance, intelligence, or cleverness of its animating concept.<sup>3</sup> Thus, conceptualists often make recourse to the notion of a “thinkership” rather than a traditional “readership.”<sup>4</sup>

In the case of *Day*, Goldsmith’s text repels a conventional literary reading on a variety of levels: its sheer length (at over 800 pages), its dry style (the “informational style” derided by Andre Breton), and its uninteresting content (a repackaging of old news, which, depending on how you look at it, either flagrantly opposes or radically extends Pound’s famous definition of literature: “News that stays news”). Yet the mere existence of *Day*, according to Goldsmith, productively shifts our conceptual categories and surprisingly redefines what we consider to be a book or a novel: “[T]he daily newspaper — or in this case *Day* — is really a great novel, filled with stories of love, jealousy, murder, competition, sex, passion, and so forth...the daily newspaper, when translated, amounts to a 900-page book” (“Being Boring” 364). One simply needs to *think* about *Day* to get this ideational pay-off.

*The Philosophy of Decomposition*, too, can be appreciated on conceptual grounds alone — in the way that the sole *idea* of DJ Danger Mouse’s *The Grey Album* (2004), a fusion of The Beatles’ so-called *The White Album* (1968) and Jay-Z’s *The Black Album* (2003), sufficiently gives the project its *raison d’être*. Nevertheless, *The Grey Album*’s critical success should also be

attributed to traditional issues of “musicality” and “listenability.”<sup>5</sup> So too does *The Philosophy of Decomposition* — with its interventionist slant and its ethics of editing — propose a deep investment in reception and readability, in the sonorous musicality of discourse. It advances, in its own words, an alliance of “the sensitive reader with the sad and placid variations of the day.” In short, an interventionist conceptualism is unabashedly *arrière-garde* in that it asks one to think *and* read at the same time.

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If non-interventionist conceptualism operates under the sign of Robert Rauschenberg’s “This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so” (e.g., the newspaper is a book if I say so, this collection of legal documents is poetry if I say so), then interventionist conceptualism operates under the sign of Jasper Johns’s “Take an object, do something to it. Do something else to it.”<sup>6</sup> In the simplest sense, *The Philosophy of Decomposition* is a long series of doings, of minute actions performed on two pre-existing texts. It is an extended exploration of the *else*.

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Non-interventionist conceptualism repudiates traditional literary reading practices because it depends upon an extreme restriction, simplification, or purification of the term “writing.” The range of activities that Dworkin is so at pains to eschew — to “edit,” “polish,” “tinker,” or “hone” — are all, of course, part of the heterogeneous bundle of activities that most of us call “writing.” And such a restriction/simplification/purification is tied to a re-conceptualization of a key word that underwrites a conceptualist poetics: “critique.” In a comment posted on July 9, 2009, to an online version of his much-discussed *Poetry* article entitled “Flarf

is Dionysus, Conceptual Writing is Apollo,” Goldsmith eloquently defends what he calls “uncreative writing,” the simple reproduction and reframing of texts, as an alternate and superior form of critique:

Sometimes, by reproducing texts in a non-interventionist way, we can shed light on political issues in a more profound and illuminating way than we can by conventional critique. If we wished to critique globalism, for example, I can imagine that reproducing / framing the transcript as from yesterday’s G8 summit meeting where they refused to ratify climate control threats would reveal much more about the truth of the situation than I could possibly say. Often, I feel it’s better to let the text be what it is — generally, as in the case of the G8, they’ll incriminate and hang themselves with their own stupidity. I call this poetry.

Corroborating Goldsmith’s claim for a radical mimesis, Place and Fitterman explain that conceptual writing “does not aim to critique the culture industry from afar, but to mirror it directly. To do so, it uses the materials of the culture industry directly.... The critique is in the reframing. The critique of the critique is in the echoing” (20). Thus, non-interventionist conceptualism wagers its political efficacy on a meta-critique that “directly” mirrors or echoes what Walter Benjamin would call “documents of barbarism” rather than critiquing them “from afar.”

Yet, what do we mean exactly when we say “critique”? According to Rodolphe Gasché, “since the notion of critique derives from the Greek verb *krinein* (to separate, to distinguish, to choose, to decide), critique entails the assumption of the possibility of clear-cut, pure distinction and discrimination” (12). If critique is — at the

root — a choosing, then the dream of a non-interventionist conceptualism is of a single choice (cf. Dworkin's "one choice") that would constitute the ultimate discrimination. Goldsmith, not surprisingly, argues that Marcel Duchamp's readymades are "essentially Duchampian" because of "his great taste" (Sanders), and that now, in the twenty-first century, "what becomes important is what you — the author — decides to choose" (Goldsmith, "The Challenges"). Conceptual writing, then — and, here, it is important to remember that the word "script" (like "critique") can be traced to the Indo-European root *skeri-* ("to cut, separate, sift") — re-imagines writing as pure critique, as simple and elegant choice or distinction.<sup>7</sup>

Not only does this explain the conceptualists' fascination with a "pure conceptualism," but it also clarifies what the conceptualists mean by "thinking" (as in their privileging of a "thinkership" over a readership). Goldsmith actually collapses thinking, reading, and writing into one basic act of critique, as pure separation. He says, "Our reading habits seem to be imitating the way machines work: we could even say that online, by an inordinate amount of skimming in order to comprehend all the information passing before our eyes, we *parse* text — a binary process of sorting language — more than we *read* it. So this work demands a *thinkership*, not a readership" (Sanders). This *parsing/comprehending/thinking* — and surely Goldsmith here is also referencing Dworkin's 2008 conceptualist text *Parse* — is nothing more than a recasting of the *cutting*, *separating*, and *sifting* of a restricted sense of writing/critique discussed above.<sup>8</sup> But *thinking*, I argue, shouldn't be synonymous with *critique* — let alone the mechanical, binaristic critique that Goldsmith is advancing. Critique, by itself, is limited due to its "inherent dogmatism"; according to Gasché, "the critical idea is founded not only

on the assurance or *doxa* that binary severing is ultimately possible without also being rendered impossible from within, but also on the uncritical faith in the salutary nature of what critique tries to sever off in strokes of uncontaminated purity" (16). I hold that such "uncritical faith" fuels the conceptualist belief in the one severing choice that would render further intervention unnecessary. For example, the concept of Goldsmith's book *The Weather* (2005), a word-by-word transcription of weather reports over the course of a year, should obviate, because of its procedural mechanism, "a whole host of other choices." Yet, according to Perloff, "even though Goldsmith *invents* nothing and merely transcribes, there are constant «artistic» decisions to be made," such as the decision to omit the dates of the reports ("Moving Information"). It appears that the *thinkership* that Goldsmith has in mind would, ironically, exclude the close reading skills of his most high-profile champion. Gasché — who illuminatingly relates "thinking" to its crucial others ("critique," "theory," and "philosophy") — offers a more flexible and productive alternative to Goldsmithian thinking:

Thinking is not a unified and separate undertaking. Rather, thinking is multiple from the start and takes shape only by way of such differentiation and multiplication of its forms. But although it takes place in the shape of...[the] various undertakings that are critique, theory, and philosophy, it is also what ceaselessly questions these formations and expands on their inherent limits. (16-17)

*The Philosophy of Decomposition* is a work of such polymorphous thinking: As (among other things) a critique of the source texts — Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition" and Stein's "Composition as Explanation" — it is not a critique "from afar," as Place and Fitterman might

dismissively claim, but an internal or immanent critique that is determined by its objects of criticism while, at the same time, it conditions, unfolds, synthesizes, and transforms them.

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If the non-interventionalist is the sushi chef who requires only one cut to prepare the meal, then the interventionist conceptualist is the sous-chef who turns the main course, by sleight of hand, into a gigantic, edible garnish.

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A publisher of contemporary poetry books once wrote to me: "I don't like the term 'mash-up' as if this were a car accident or something to eat" (Glass).

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Goldsmith: "I'm interested in quantifying and concretizing the vast amount of 'nutritionless' language; I'm also interested in the process itself being equally nutritionless" ("Uncreativity").

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Another publisher of contemporary poetry, who published an excerpt of *The Philosophy of Decomposition* in his online journal, called the project "the GIRL TALK of poetry" (Tonelli). According to music and media blogger Brenna Ehrlich, the DJ "Gregg Gillis (a.k.a. Girl Talk) is known for taking popular jams and mashing them together to create one, delicious casserole of sound."

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Rather than restricting writing to a fundamental activity of critique as decision and separation, I am proposing a reinvigoration or intensification of writing by sliding *writing* in the direction of *collage* (or *montage*).<sup>9</sup> But what does it mean to practice literary collage in the twenty-first century? Arguably the most revolutionary artistic

technique of the twentieth century, collage has (also arguably) been the single most important commitment of Anglophone modernist poetry (Ulmer 94; Antin, "Modernism" 107). Eliotic/Poundian collage, for instance, operated on a principle of radical juxtaposition, of suppressing, according to David Antin, "the ordering signs that would specify the 'stronger logical relations' among the presented elements... relations of implication, entailment, negation, subordination and so on" ("Some Questions"). Yet with Eliot and Pound firmly entombed within the annals of literary history, isn't the anti-hypotactic impulse of collage now obsolete? Goldsmith, who surely had collage in mind without ever naming it directly, argues, "[There's] [n]o need to blast apart syntax.... How to proceed after the deconstruction and pulverization of language that is the 20th century's legacy. Should we continue to pound language into ever smaller bits or should we take some other approach?" ("Conceptual Poetics" 5). What is the end of *The Waste Land*, the most canonical of high modernist texts, if not the collaging of fragmented bits of language? Even Antin, back in 1974, dismissed the notion that "anyone can be very interested in doing collage work now, mainly because of the predictability of its effect" ("Some Questions"). Similarly, Perloff argues that

even as collage has entered the critical-theoretical domain, it is beginning to withdraw from the aesthetic realm. What was once a revolutionary technique is now the staple of advertising and greeting cards. At the same time, postmodern artworks tend to be at once less "cut up" and yet, paradoxically more equivocal than their modernist counterparts. In the poetry of John Ashbery, for example, the technique of juxtaposing citations or fragments of conversations has given way



to what looks like a more seamless and continuous discourse — often a narrative — but which, on inspection, cannot be decoded as yielding any sort of coherent meaning. It is as if the individual units are “always already” collaged to begin with. (“Collage and Poetry”)

While Perloff uses the term “post-collage” to describe Ashbery’s work, I am inclined to drop the “as if” in the sentence above and assert that writing *is* “always already” collaged to begin with. As Derrida succinctly says, “To write means to graft. It’s the same word” (355).

By literally and self-consciously incorporating the mechanism of collage into the process of writing, *The Philosophy of Decomposition* highlights and redoubles the “always already” collaged nature of writing. Furthermore, I argue that my practice of micro-montage, which is situated in the interval between collage (or montage) and writing, replenishes both. In the “Afterword” to *The Philosophy of Decomposition*, I wrote: “Whether or not it was actually achievable, I was shooting for a ‘seamless’-looking writing that was, in actuality, the product of numerous cuts, fractures, and sutures.” Such seamlessness or continuity — while it was impossible to sustain throughout the entirety of the project — nevertheless cuts across “the predictability” of collage’s dominant effect (the blasting apart of logical connections, which, as Perloff notes, has already been commodified by corporate interests). In other words, I wanted to brush *collage/montage*, as it was widely practiced in the twentieth century, against the grain (toward *writing*) — which amounts to the same thing as wanting to slide *writing* in the direction of *collage/montage*.

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Non-interventionalism is touted as the latest avant-garde gesture, as a firm departure from the

twentieth-century aesthetics of fragmentation and collage, as an evolutionary improvement upon prior documentary/conceptualist practice. In a blurb for Place’s *Statement of Facts*, Dworkin links the disavowal of editorial intervention with a desire for newness within a literary tradition of appropriation:

The only way to be more clever than Kathy Acker, it turns out, is to be less clever. Charles Reznikoff sampled the National Reporter System of appellate decisions for his verse in *Testimony*; Acker incorporated legal documents from *In re van Geldern* as part of her modified plagiarism; but Place recognizes that such documents are far more powerful left unedited. (“Vanessa Place”)

Dworkin’s bold claim is a twist on a seemingly “less is more” minimalism. It also subtly hinges upon competing definitions of the word “clever.” This is a definition of “clever” from the *OED*: “Of persons: Possessing skill or talent; able to use *hand or brain* readily and effectively; dexterous, skilful; adroit” (emphasis added). In this context, the distinction between the hand and the brain is paramount. Acker’s style of plagiarism is “more clever” in the sense that it is “modified” — she literally had a “hand” in the editing and manipulation of the appropriated documents. Place’s plagiarism; in contrast, is *less clever* in that she abstained from “handling” the source texts but it is *more clever* (and, for Dworkin, “more powerful”) since, by eclipsing the apparent radicality of twentieth-century appropriation, she is showcasing the conceptual ingenuity and talent of her brain.

Borrowing from the parlance of the visual arts (which, in turn, borrowed from the parlance of labor theory), one might call this a “deskilled” conceptualism.<sup>10</sup> Non-interventionalists, like Place

(at least in her most recent work) and Goldsmith (throughout most of his career), repudiate the traditional skill set of poetry (from revision to meter to the turning of a metaphor) as it considers such abilities to be unwanted vestiges of an ossified workshop system, which, according to this logic, has become so thoroughly “McDonaldized” (it’s better to have no nutrition or asceticism rather than poor nutrition) that the phrase “creative writing” is now effectively an oxymoron. Hence, a deskilled or uncreative writing is supposed to represent the latest stage in the modernization of literary production, a necessary negation of creative writing. “Deskilling,” a term first used in the context of the arts by Australian conceptual artist Ian Burn and subsequently mobilized by art historian Benjamin Buchloh, is the “persistent effort to eliminate artisanal competence and other forms of manual virtuosity from the horizon of both artistic production and aesthetic evaluation” (Foster et al 531). We can then understand “intervention,” as it is used by conceptualists like Dworkin and Goldsmith, to be synonymous with “the skilled manipulation of language” (honing a rhetorical figure, editing for diction, polishing the rhythmic structure of a phrase).

The Marxist critic John Roberts has taken the concept of deskilling even further in his articulation of “the re-positioning of the notion of skill within a deeper dialectic: the necessary *interrelationship* between (received) skill, deskilling and *re-skilling*” (“Art After Deskilling” 92). By this understanding — and I argue that Roberts’s labor theory of culture, despite its flaws, offers a more ambitious frame of analysis for the “unoriginal” writers treated by Perloff’s formalist approach (for example, her emphasis on the “«artistic»” in Goldsmith merely re-inscribes the category of received skill) — Goldsmith’s practice represents a deskilling *and* re-skilling of poetry insofar as it reflects “the conditions of social and

technological reproducibility”; thus, Roberts’s novel insight that Duchamp’s famous *objet trouvé* “Fountain” (1917) acts as a site of both alienated and unalienated labor (being an industrial-made object presented as an artifact of artistic labor) can be usefully adapted to accommodate Goldsmith’s various projects of toggling the productive labor done by journalists (in *Day*) and newscasters (in *The Weather*), whose work is transmitted en masse for collective consumption, into the unproductive labor of a poet (*Intangibilities*, 3).<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Roberts’s approach — to present “less a discussion about specific artworks (or their interpretation), than an analysis of the kinds of labor contained in artworks” — is extremely amenable to the belief that the artwork is epiphenomenal to the conceptual/contextual matrix in which it is embedded (1). Goldsmith, moreover, turns to the everyday world of work to create a strategic analogy that aligns re-skilled or uncreative writing with a generic, eminently flexible job description: “The simple act of moving information from one place to another today constitutes a significant cultural act in and of itself. I think it’s fair to say that most of us spend hours each day shifting content into different containers. Some of us call this writing” (“Being Boring” 361). Similarly, Place’s neo-Warholian chapbook project, *The Factory Series* — which consists of other writers’ appropriations that Place, in turn, stamps with her own “signature” — re-skills poetry to include an aesthetic of outsourcing and administration.<sup>12</sup> The fact that Dworkin is so reluctant to admit the process of “heavy editing” or intervention (the “micromanagement” of language) into the repertoire of conceptualism is because the conceptual writer is already re-skilled as a kind of executive editor whose critical discretion makes copyediting, as it were, along with conventional writing, obsolete or unnecessary. In short, just as Roberts considers Duchamp to be “a theorist of

artistic labour," who brought to the fore the stark division between industrial mass production and the immaterial labor of the nominating artist, I want to suggest that non-interventionist conceptualists are best understood as *theorists* of poetic labor vis-à-vis a bureaucratized, professional-managerial economy (*Intangibilities* 5).

Or are they really? The approach that I am tentatively advancing (via Roberts's line of argumentation) certainly begs the question, "What do we mean by the word 'theorist'?" To return, for a moment, to our thinking about thinking and thinking's others (critique, theory, and philosophy) — Gasché remarks that "[w]hat insists it is or gets read as 'theory' is, indeed, not very theoretical to the extent that it excludes epistemological concerns or conceptual reflection" (148). While Roberts certainly values a Marxist "aesthetic critique of the value-form" as well as the avant-garde's "critique of productive labour," it is uncertain how invested he is in the theoretical project of "epistemological concerns or conceptual reflection" (*Intangibilities* 4, 3). Perhaps the *theoretical* work that Roberts attributes to Duchamp's readymades is, in fact, *critical* work — that is, the readymades expose and critique, rather than theorize, the transforming effect of the commodity.<sup>13</sup> Roberts's revamped and modernized notion of artistic skill relies upon not manual virtuosity or artisanal craft but rather on an "immaterial definition of artistic labour"; the "conceptual acuity" of such labor is, importantly, not "reducible to a practice of speculative 'thinking' as if art was simply cognate with scientific and philosophical discourse or the Beauty of Spontaneous Ideas" (3-4). Stopping short of claiming that *The Philosophy of Decomposition*, by contrast, is a work resembling or aping authentic "philosophical discourse" or, alternately, that Roberts is unfairly privileging critical over speculative thinking, I want to assert

that curtailing *intervention* effectively curtails the limits of thinking (especially poetic thinking). In short, interventionist conceptualism also calls for a thinkership — but for thinkers within an expanded field.

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Roberts speaks of "an irreconcilable displacement of the link between handcraft and skill," of the "displacement or dispersal of the artist's hand into forms of heteronomous labour" — as in László Moholy-Nagy's re-skilled use of his hand to telephone an order to a sign factory (rather than handcrafting the objects himself) to create the so-called "Telephone Pictures" of 1923 (*Intangibilities* 2). I am, on the other hand, interested in the *re-*placement of received skills, what I called earlier *the skilled manipulation of language*, within digital conditions of technical reproducibility — how, for instance, do such received skills (rhetoric, figuration, musicality) evolve alongside newer skills of using a computer keyboard, a mouse, or a touchpad? How can we see what Goldsmith calls "[t]he simple act of moving information from one place to another" as not so simple but rather as taking place through the fruitful and relatively unexplored juncture where the body's perceptual-cognitive apparatus interfaces with the functionalities of computer-assisted technology?

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If Goldsmith's appropriative transcription projects (like *Day* and *The Weather*) represent "congeries of two kinds of labour (artistic labour and productive labour)," then *The Philosophy of Decomposition* is a congeries of several kinds of immaterial and affective labor: it is, to use Duchamp's suggestive term, a *rendezvous* between literature and criticism, between poetry and poetics (*Intangibilities* 41).

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On one level, I did indeed use Perloff's "other means" to produce *The Philosophy of Decomposition* in that I didn't technically "write" (or even type) a single word of it. I simply mutilated two digitized versions of the source texts through the click and drag function of my computer, highlighting phrases — oftentimes single words — with my cursor and grafting them into the accumulating and Frankensteinian body of my poem. However mediated or assisted this process was by technological means, it was dependent upon the micro-movements of my hand. In *In Praise of Copying*, Boon asks us to

think of the importance of tactility, the hand, as the DJ scratches records and manipulates turntables and mixers — or the collective handiwork of quilting bees. This is not just a matter of pragmatic hands-on fabrication techniques. The touch of the *monteur* (DJ or quilter) sends a shiver through matter, marks it temporarily as the *monteur's* own, asserts a kind of freedom with it and a claim to the right to transform it. Just as the touch of a lover asserts that right. (147)

Like Boon, I'm interested in a haptics of composition that exceeds "pragmatic hands-on fabrication techniques," that, moreover, might not be accountable within a dialectic of skill-de-skilling-re-skilling. Perhaps the word "skill" is not the right semantic domain. I understand the looping and swerving movements of my finger on the touch pad as a contemporary extension of the poetic activity that Stein famously described in her lecture "Poetry and Grammar": "Poetry is doing nothing but using losing refusing pleasing and betraying and caressing nouns" (136). I propose that the simple highlighting and dragging of a

word with my cursor is tantamount to a virtual and digital caress. While Dworkin is so keen on removing "the temptation to tinker or edit or hone," I argue that giving in to such temptation opens up an intimate knowledge of the sensuous physicalities of language through the gestural movements and choreographic manipulation associated with computer use.<sup>14</sup> If one can understand such activity as *labor* (following Roberts), then it is surely a *labor of love*.

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As can be imagined, I've spent countless hours poring over both the Poe and the Stein texts — scrutinizing the words, scanning the sentences, seeing how I could constellate and cross-pollinate the two very different vocabularies and idioms. I've probably spent more time sitting in front of these two texts than any other (including texts that I've taught and texts that I've studied and written about), despite the overwhelming fact that I've never really *read* "The Philosophy of Composition" or "Composition as Explanation" in any normative sense. Yet, I wouldn't say, either, that I engaged them through what new media theorists call "low cognitive reading" — in the way one might casually browse and skim through a website (which might be akin to what Goldsmith calls "parsing"). Rather, I entered the texts in a state of relaxed distraction, letting the perceptual apparatus of my hand-mind and cursor-eye select the words and phrases in an act of what Benjamin, in reference to architecture, referred to as "tactile appropriation" (241). I entered the texts as if they were labyrinths — through the virtual *flânerie* of a finger-driven cursor — to see if I could pick up some Ariadnean thread that was never mine to begin with.

## NOTES

Thanks to Catherine Zobel Dent and Carolina Díaz for their helpful comments and suggestions on this piece.

- <sup>1</sup> The term “non-interventionalist,” which is analogous to Duchamp’s term “unassisted” (as in his “unassisted readymades”), comes from the talk “Conceptual Poetics” that Goldsmith gave at the “Conceptual Poetry and Its Others” conference at the University of Arizona Poetry Center in May 2008.
- <sup>2</sup> See Vanessa Place and Rob Fitterman’s *Notes on Conceptualisms*. To be clear: I don’t want to suggest that Place and Fitterman, as do Dworkin and Goldsmith, prioritize pure conceptualism over impure conceptualism; Place and Fitterman present both pure and impure conceptualisms non-hierarchically in their established typology. Nevertheless, Place’s work has moved, as of late, in a purist direction. In an interview with Ken L. Walker, Fitterman has said, “The editing of appropriated materials is not ‘impure’ as I see it, but the term ‘impure’ was what we used to describe a conceptual project that chooses to trip up its own making — more sampling and less readymade. In terms of LeWitt’s idea of conceptual art making — where the artist must not interfere with the preset idea — one might see this sort of editing as a rupture or impurity of that more rigid form of conceptualism. My own work tends to be more on the ‘impure’ side of the equation, so I’m certainly not suggesting a hierarchy here, and I think that might be a problem with the term ‘impure’ for some readers.”
- <sup>3</sup> Perloff, one of Goldsmith’s most powerful critical advocates, actually suggests that “we put aside” his own claim that his books are “unreadable.” See *Unoriginal Genius* 151.
- <sup>4</sup> See, for example, Dworkin and Goldsmith xxix; Place and Fitterman 9-10; and Goldsmith, “Conceptual Poetics” 5.
- <sup>5</sup> See evaluations of the album in the *Rolling Stone*’s “Best Albums of the ’00s” and Rollie Pemberton’s *Pitchfork* review.
- <sup>6</sup> In *Against Expression*, Dworkin recounts the circumstances of Rauschenberg’s famous 1961 portrait of Clert: “In response to the invitation to produce a portrait of Clert for an exhibition at the Galerie Iris Clert in Paris, Rauschenberg sent a telegram, substituting a line of text in place of the expected drawing or painting, however abstract or unlike Clert an image might have been. It read simply: ‘THIS IS A PORTRAIT OF IRIS CLERT IF I SAY SO’” (xxv).
- <sup>7</sup> On the etymology of the word “script,” see J. Hillis Miller 6.
- <sup>8</sup> Dworkin’s *Parse* quite literally parses Edwin A. Abbott’s nineteenth-century text *How to Parse: An Attempt to Apply the Principles of Scholarship to English Grammar*, according to its own system of analysis.
- <sup>9</sup> Though I am using “collage” and “montage” interchangeably, I lean toward the term “montage” to highlight, in Matt Miller’s words, “a work in which the fragments have been worked over by the artist to form a more seamless and continuous whole” (95).
- <sup>10</sup> On deskilling and Marxist labor theory, see Braverman.
- <sup>11</sup> For Roberts, “the technologies of copying, simulacra and surrogacy are the material basis of art’s modern semiosis and not mere stylistic options.” What I’ve been calling “extended quotation,” then, shouldn’t be seen as merely one strategy amongst “a benign pluralism of forms,” but rather as a critical engagement with “the effects of cultural and social division that precede and shape the labour of signification” (14). A caveat on the use of Roberts’s argument in my discussion of poetry: Roberts is adamant that “[t]he readymade in literature is a very different matter from the readymade in art,” since “[t]he repleteness of the readymade in art derives from the fact that the presentation of the readymade is an act of repetition without copying” (51). Yet in the case of conceptual poetry, Goldsmith takes this very act of copying as an opportunity to forge new affiliations across divisions of labor by aligning his work with the work of administrators and managers. In this way, a book like *Day* triangulates the labor of a journalist, the labor of a secretary or copyist, and the labor of a poet.

- <sup>12</sup> The Factory Series chapbooks, which Place markets as “vivid portrayal(s) of contemporary poetics,” are available from Place’s storefront at the print-on-demand service Lulu (<<http://stores.lulu.com/store.php?fAcctID=4215175>>). If we were to develop an investigation of labor within contemporary conceptual poetry, we would surely have to engage with Place’s *The Guilt Project*, which details her experiences working as an appellate attorney: “I work as a combination street sweeper and factory worker. I follow what’s gone before, mopping up after the bloody mess, squaring the legal corners, assembling the lives disassembled by tragedy, and reducing reams of paper to brief-sized pellets” (2).
- <sup>13</sup> Roberts, however, makes clear that Duchamp did not have “a fully elaborated theory of labour and art” (*Intangibilities* 26). Yet, this qualification still begs the question whether unelaborated (or quasi-elaborated) theory is merely an unacknowledged synonym for critique.
- <sup>14</sup> I agree with Lawrence Giffin that writing should be seen as “physical instead of just conceptual.” According to Giffin, we should construct “a physics of language” in which language is not “inert matter activated by the pure agency of concept.” Rather, we should “begin with the agency of language as well as the resistance of language to the concept, so that the word, the *logos* itself, is broken into the irreducible duality of agent and object. This would reverse the demotion of the subject inherited from language writing, and instead demote consciousness to one object among an infinity of other subject-objects, each with an equivalent ontological priority.” Such a conception would allow for a multiplicity of opportunities for lexical caressing, for sending shivers through linguistic matter, for an attuned and sensuous responsiveness to the resistances of language.

Giffin’s comments respond to Noah Eli Gordon’s book-length poem *The Source*, another work that I consider to be an example of “interventionalist conceptualism.” In Roberts’ model of modern art, by contrast, “the sensuousness of artistic labour is transmuted and deflected into immaterial forms of labour” (*Intangibilities* 89).

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