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CAA Paper, February 2014.

- Well, it's really lovely to be here, so my thanks to Professor Lerm Hayes for convening this panel.

INTRO

- What I want to begin to point to this evening is the constitutive relationship between publishing and Conceptual Writing proper, as the latter has begun to form as a specific field of writing practice.

- In turn, I want to qualify one of the ways in which this field of practice has already affected how we collectively understand literature as a cultural category -- its institutional, critical and discursive conditions.

- What I'm proposing is that the tension between what Conceptual Writing *is* and how we understand the horizons of literature might be best thought through the question most central to the epistemology of literature: the question of authoriality. But rather than ask the question of authoriality in terms of the textual qualities of 'the work' -- i.e. as a interpretation of an exemplar composition -- I want instead to approach it by trying to locate the subject-position of any writer who would chose to be an author of Conceptual Writing in the flow of such writing's production and reproduction -- in the processes by which it gets made public.

- The problematic of this paper, then, is a speculation on how the practice of Conceptual Writing, which has emerged after the event of the textualisation of everything and in the adolescent age of 'the Network', has brought to surface, in a newly intense way, some long repressed issues

pertaining how we think critically about what a writer does and does not do.

- To frame my proposition, and precisely because these issues have been identified as repressed before and beyond Conceptual Writing, I want to start by pairing up two otherwise separate ideas: the first, a famous gesture in continental philosophy; the second, a more recent intervention in literary studies. Together, I think, they can help us figure out where and why Conceptual Writers have taken up a different position (a different subject-position) in the complicated network of processes and institutions that make writing public as literature.

Author function

- What I'm talking about generally is how authorship functions in the production and reception of our contemporary literature. And in February 1969 Michel Foucault famously approached the same question in a lecture for the French Philosophical Society entitled "What is an Author?" As ever, Foucault nuanced the problematic put at stake by his question rather than answering it. In doing so he proposed the concept of the 'author function'.

- For our purposes this evening I'm going to quickly, and only, reconstruct the theoretical dimensions of his concept:

- Foucault's contemporary literature was a sort we still refer to through its French name, *écriture*, which for him had shown up the philosophical insufficiency of the traditional idea that an author is "an indefinite source of significations that fill the work". This traditional idea positions an author as the person who is the creator of a work's significations -- the "originator" of its meaning. Foucault says that *écriture* has two themes that

have together compromised this traditional idea: Firstly, that writing of this new sort is not expressive. And secondly, that the supposed disappearance (or death) of the Author completed by this new writing has attributed a new "immortality" to the 'the work'.

- However, the unexpected consequence of these themes is that the disappearance of *an* author in particular creates a vacuum in which reappears the general and transcendental non-presence of *the* author. *The* author is a representation of an absent author, and as a representation it is always already "present in his/her absence". Therefore, the disappeared author is "an empty affirmation", and its placeholder, 'the author', is a subject-status that can be constructed in different ways by different occupants, that will always operate differently in different discourses, but is non the less a functional principle that always has to identify a unity (most often attributed to a person).

- This is the author function. The author function is a principle that functions to regulate the disunity of real subjectivity. And because it misrepresents that disunity in the false unity of 'the author', and disguises the fact that it is a false or mis-representation, Foucault calls it "an ideological product", by which I take him to mean, in an Althusserian sense, something that mediates a false understanding of what is actually happening.

- Conceptual Writing inherits from Foucault the idea that the regulatory value of the author function is necessary to "the juridical and institutional system that encompasses, determines, and articulates the universe of discourses". It also takes up his challenge: "it is a matter of depriving the subject (or its substitute) of its role as originator, and of analyzing the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse."

Horizons of the publishable

- My point here is that rather than subverting or negating the author function Conceptual Writing has moved it into an opening uncovered partly by the empty affirmation of 'the author' and partly by the emergence of digital life in global high capitalism -- this coupling has created what Foucault would call a new "breach" or gap in which writers are writing differently. Simply put, Conceptual Writing has changed the subject-position of the author within the complex processual network of practices that produce literature, such that writing Conceptual Writing is a different job from other kinds of writing.

- I see this as a hyper-extension of the author function. To help me show where in the process of production this hyper-extension relocates writing I'm going to borrow, as a conceptual lever, an idea first proposed by the English literary theorist Rachel Malik in 2004; one that she later formally addressed to literary studies in her 2007 article "Horizons of the Publishable: Publishing in/as Literary Studies".

- Malik's innovation is based on working backwards: Within any process of publishing, she begins, writing is only one stage or practice. Therefore all that can be experienced as written culture at a certain moment is determined *not* by the horizons of what can be *written* at that time but rather by the horizons of what is *publishable* at that time. This flips the species-genus relation we normally assume between writing and publishing, such that publishing can be seen as preceding writing and therefore also governing the possibilities of reading.

- Malik formulates "the publishable" as a set of discursive relations. This deconstructs the conventional idea of publishing as publication -- the idea that publishing is just a mediating phase between the significations determined by composition and the later re-production of that transferable manuscript or product by the industry's manufacturing processes.

- Instead she defines publishing as a set of historically-specific and inter-related practices, which include composition, and also editing, design, retail, etc. To become public, every act of publishing has to establish a set of relations between these practices and various other institutions like those of the legal, commercial or educational fields for example

- Different combinations of relationships are particular to what she calls different "categories of publishing"; and most publishing categories will tend to have "a dominant or privileged" process that "subordinates and transforms the others". In any particular historical moment the sum potentialities of all of the categories of publishing define what it is thinkable to publish. This sum is what Malik calls "the horizons of the publishable". The "conditions of production and reception", or horizons, are always multiple or plural because every category of publishing has its own specific horizon. Each horizon "promotes and distinguishes particular reading practices" that in turn effect literacy and reproduce its parent category.

- If every process of publishing is an intersection of historically-specific practices plus their relations with institutions then the evidence of each intersection is registered in the edition, which is a particular material object that gives historical and material textuality to the process. The thing we read as a text -- our evidence for interpretation -- is the outcome of an

intersection of practices and institutions within which composition -- that conventional idea of writing -- is only one process.

Conceptual Writing as a Practice of Publishing

- Inserting Foucault's concept of the author function in to the inverted explanation of literary production put forward by Malik, I want to stake a sequence of six claims:

1. Firstly, that composition is only one way of understanding the act of writing, and a narrow one at that.
2. Secondly, that, more broadly, writing is an act by which we put forward or propose a text in particular as something to be read.
3. Thirdly, that it is the function of authorial identity to represent some subjective unity that can take responsibility for that text in specific discourses and their overlaps.
4. Fourthly, that publishing is the intersection of mutually-affecting practices and institutions that make a specific text public.
5. Fifthly, therefore, that it seems reasonable to conceptualise of one mode of writing by which *writing is a process of publishing* -- a kind of writing *through* publishing -- an approach to writing by which someone composes or choreographs how the practices and institutions at the intersection Malik calls "publishing" will affectively inter-relate. This would involve nominating the resultant text plus its contexts of production, distribution and reception as altogether 'the stuff to be read'.

6. And lastly, that by this model, authorial identity would be constructed at that intersection and would function to identify the person(s) who are *taking responsibility* for the specificities of that text and its contexts as and when they become public matters within specific discourses.

- There isn't time this evening to expand on any of the sociological questions about how and why Conceptual Writing as a field of practice has emerged now, as opposed to, say, in the late-1960s alongside Conceptual Art proper. But, in short, I'm of the opinion that the intensity and pervasiveness of both global high capitalism and the digitisation of sociality -- which combine, for example, in the purposefully indistinct clouds of 'the Network' -- have created what Foucault would have called "a breach". The sequence of six claims I just made will help me map Conceptual Writing's relationship to that breach or gap...

- Acts of Conceptual Writing are always a performance done for some public; and "to make public" is all that 'publish' really means, deriving as it does from the Latin *publicare*. Conceptual Writing is an approach to making language public that is performed by choreographing a specific intersection of the practices and institutions of publishing. None of these practices or institutions are entirely controllable, and from amongst them some one or other might be privileged or even determinate over the others. Like all modes of conceptualist cultural production, Conceptual Writing privileges the conceptual qualities of its outputs over all other qualities. Therefore, each text made public as Conceptual Writing is both a material representation of the textual and contextual processes that were choreographed to intersect *and* is evidence for the conceptual value of their specific intersection.

- What I'm describing is the doing of Conceptual Writing as a praxis of publishing within which authorial identity is differently reconstructed every time a writer takes public responsibility for a specific text and its contexts of production and reproduction. This is a praxis defined by performing specific gestures of 'taking responsibility' which get registered in specific editions, at specific times, each projected into a specific historico-socio-cultural milieu. Constructing authorial identity through these contingent, *site-specific* gestures hyper-extends the author function into the breach of our contemporary moment, which, as the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has said, is defined by its accelerated and complicated liquidity.

- This kind of authorial identity can be constantly reconstructed *at* the intersection. Once dragged as such into the contingency of the present tense, authorial identity is identified as an unstable representation. This identification puts conceptual pressure on the authority of conventional authoriality to function as the regulative principle of provenance, ownership, meaning and re-usability in "the juridical and institutional system that encompasses, determines, and articulates the universe of discourses".

Conclusion

- According to my model, the concept of authorship developed by Conceptual Writing decentres conventional composition and newly centres 'taking responsibility'. To conclude, I want to speculatively describe what the minimum conceptual value of this change in emphasis has for the epistemology of literature.

- The modern literary industry depends on a concept of publishing as publication and a corresponding version of the author function, by which the significations, or stuff that we're supposed read as "the work" or text, are determined during composition then forwarded as a diagram or transferable manuscript to which any further changes are of secondary significance. That product is then replicated in packaged units following a clear sequence of production-then-reproduction. In such processes, writing is constrained to the practice of composition. The manuscript is the only presence of the writer's act, of '*the text*', and the publication is a second-order representation. In turn, the author function is no more or less than a brand identity.

- In Conceptual Writing, the process of producing the text as *a* material thing and the process of representing that text as *a reproduced* material thing collapse on to one another: The text is only ever a representation -- a representation of an intersection, the choreographing of which *was* the act or performance of writing, and the taking responsibility for which *is* the new author function.

- Consequently, every edition of a work of Conceptual Writing braces together an *undermined* textuality with an *over-identified* contextuality, as a material representative of a performance of writing that is complicated and fragmented and always already continuing beyond it via the flows that intersected momentarily to produce it through reproduction.

- The stuff to be read is always explicitly more than what the text says -- more than what the text presents as content: *Conceptual Writing proposes insufficient representations that depend on being public for their insufficiency to become conceptually productive.* Conceptual Writers rank the specificities of reproduction above or before the conventionally

assumed priority of conventional composition because works of Conceptual Writing become productive when they're engaged with as reproductions of a specific intersection in the form of an insufficient representation.

- How, then, can we describe the way that this newly functioning principle of authorship, put to work in the writing of Conceptual Writing, modifies the epistemology of literature? My answer: we do so by re-phrasing the question most central to that epistemology. The question of authoriality was conceptualised before Conceptual Writing as, 'who wrote that text?' Now the 'wrote' seems insufficient to describe the act and the past tense of the whole phrase seems untimely. Instead, I think we need to ask again and again, 'who is taking responsibility for that text?' and be ready to deal with answers that are as liquid as contemporary life.

- *Thank you.*