

Artist Texts

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Abstract

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A new literary genre that I call the *artist text* has emerged on the cultural landscape. Specific to contemporary art, it adapts the strategies used by institutions to historicize artworks. Rather than take up the materiality of language as did writing by earlier conceptual artists, the *artist text* follows a backwards route into the status of art by adapting genealogical method and disallowing the objective distance necessary for historicization. The four artists that epitomize this genre are Seth Price, Bernadette Corporation, Tan Lin, and Sturtevant. Each chapter is an analysis of texts by these artists. The artist text illustrates that artists are not only interested in producing art for distribution within institutions and markets, but also in actively intervening in—and even controlling—their audience’s engagement with art history.

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For Mom

Introduction

Artist Texts

“The method which consists in surprising you by night,
forcing you into a strait jacket or capturing you in any other
way, is no better than that of the policeman who slips a
revolver into your pocket.”

— André Breton, *Nadja*¹

Part 1

- a. Theory of the Artist Text
- b. Genealogical Method

Part 2

- a. Midcentury precursors Leading to the Artist Text
- b. Institutional Critique: Between Historical Past and Narrative Present
- c. Genealogical Method Turns Perverse: The Writings of Mike Kelley
- d. The Situation Today

¹ André Breton, *Nadja*, 16. Evergreen ed, An Evergreen Book 580 (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 141.

Part 3

Chapter Summaries

Part 1a: Theory of the Artist Text

This dissertation is an effort to read, understand, and make claims about some innovative new texts produced in the field of contemporary art. I call this genre of text *artist texts*. Similar to “literature,” “contemporary art,” “critique,” and terms that refer to genres such as “poetry,” “fiction,” “memoir,” and others in the humanities, the term *artist text* is open to interpretation. I define an artist text not as a text written by an artist, but a text that carries out a particular function in contemporary art, the field in which artworks are produced by artists and sold, bought, marketed, and analyzed within a network of private and public institutions. This function is to allow the artist to covertly cross the threshold into the forbidden territory of art history and critical method, where control can be gained over the disciplines that govern discussions *about* art. In controlling a discussion about art in these so-called “secondary” fields, one can, through a strange logic, reclaim a freedom lost in the consolidation of all artistic activities into modern disciplines. Already, my framework might sound as if I am addressing issues well beyond the analysis of some new works of literature by contemporary artists. But this reach into forbidden territory is exactly what I am trying to investigate in these texts.

Using text, the artist seeks to at least momentarily supersede history and the order of relationships that constitute the network of contemporary art. Why? Because in this network, set roles in the way an artwork is produced, bought, sold, analyzed, criticized, canonized, and

discarded are of crucial importance. An artist has steps and stages for different points in their career. With an artist text, the artist anticipates and transcends this circuit, by positioning their art within the historicization of art and artists. The influence a network of critical thinking has on the actual realities of artworks is often ill understood. Still, the publicity of entrance into history generates an artwork's value, while simultaneously creating a veneer of predictability and status quo that mitigates provocative artworks and aesthetic positions. The goal for the writer of an artist text is to generate an entirely new relationship for politics and form that involves counter-intuitive thinking against this network. In this effort, an artist text achieves an avant-garde gesture at a time when avant-garde gestures have been assimilated into the forces they once sought to overthrow.

Rather than address a history primarily made up of earlier artworks, an artist text enters through the discourses that exert an unseen influence that shape the idea of art history. In this respect they respond to the condition articulated by the influential aesthetic philosopher Jacques Rancière. Rancière argued that art movements only appear to be the source of the politics of aesthetics at any given time. Actually, the politics of aesthetics is generated by “protocols of legibility,” interpretive paradigms operating outside art movements that can be classified across history according to *regimes*, meaning “a specific type of connection between ways of producing works of art or developing practices, forms of visibility that disclose them, and ways of conceptualizing the former and the latter.”² The pre-enlightenment era had a *representative regime* organized according to a hierarchical order of genres and the concept of *mimesis*. That was followed by the *aesthetic regime* of the enlightenment era, in which the hierarchy of genres and the concept of *mimesis* was discarded. During this regime, art was understood both as a form

² Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, ed. Gabriel Rockhill, 2021, 18.

of social labor like any other and, simultaneously, as uncanny and unique, as if “inhabited by...the power of a form of thought that has become foreign to itself: a product identical with something not produced, knowledge transformed into non-knowledge, logos identical with pathos, the intention of the unintentional, etc.”³ Rancière insists that the aesthetic regime was a broad development across many disciplines, including criticism, philosophy and other writings. It “did not begin with decisions to initiate an artistic rupture. It began with decisions to reinterpret what makes art or what art makes.” Crucially, Rancière concludes: “The aesthetic regime of the arts is first of all a new regime for relating to the past.”⁴ Examining recent aesthetic history through this lens, Rancière rethinks the avant-garde as “the type of subject suitable to the modernist vision and appropriate, according to this vision, for connecting the aesthetic to the political,” but that makes this connection only by conflating advances by artists in artistic form with the political party that charts a path forward in history.⁵

With regard to artist texts, a few key points in Rancière’s aesthetic theory are important. First, Rancière crystallizes the contradiction that continues to this day: art is considered both a social activity like any other, and as something uncanny and unique. Second, the avant-garde operated by conflating artistic party and political party.⁶ In other words, the avant-garde—meaning the historical avant-garde and this approach continuing today—views art as only a social activity like any other, while ignoring the non-instrumental other side of art, or the aforementioned remainder. Finally, and most important of all for my discussion, Rancière feels that we have assigned too much importance to art movements and artworks in history. He wants

³ Rancière, 18.

⁴ Rancière, 20.

⁵ Rancière, 24.

⁶ This conflation becomes especially relevant to Bernadette Corporation, the subject of my second chapter.

us to see that what we mistakenly think is a change deriving from a new artwork or artist actually derives from interpretive paradigms or certain regimes across many disciplines. In this radically reconfigured field, the relationship to the past decides an artwork's relation to politics.

This condition, in which the relevance of artworks and artists recedes while the broader change expands is what the artist text takes up.

This is the complicated new situation that artist texts address. No longer is there a series of historical precursors to which the artist adds their own work. If the "regime" controls the relationship of politics and artistic form that is mistakenly attributed to artworks, then it is the selection process of choosing for history that is the true source of meaning for the artist and the artwork. Today's artist texts see history in this fashion. They attempt to break into this regime not only by innovating atop earlier artistic practices, but also by placing their art inside the methodology governing the secondary fields that decide art's social role. This methodology is *genealogical method*: the telling of the past in the service of the present in such a way that maintains an objective distance from artworks while fixing their social project. Furthermore, this social project involves serving as the object of analysis that exposes violence buried within some aspect of social life that appears to be, on the surface, nonviolent. Genealogical method is broadly responsible for the idea that art serves a critical purpose beyond itself, that it is useful rather than pleasing and useless.

1b: Genealogical Method

The term *genealogical* raises many questions: What does it mean in this context? What is genealogical method's relationship to art? What conditions have led artists to appropriate genealogical method? Why does it matter that artists are appropriating genealogical method?

I open my discussion of genealogical method with a caveat: genealogical method is a broad concept with many connotations across disciplines. In using the term, I am stepping into a discussion beyond my field of literary studies. In various ways, genealogical method has filtered across many different disciplines. It was a major topic in mid-20th century poststructuralism with Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and others developing new methods for analyzing power. Interestingly, the artist texts discussed here oftentimes bring readers back to a more primitive genealogical situation, where broader questions about institutional power and biopower that occupied the later theorists return to Nietzsche's earlier framework. In this older context, historical developments are filtered through an abstract interpersonal interaction, as in two people engaging or confronting one another. Nietzsche set up this archetypical abstract interpersonal interaction as existing between Christianity and the rest of the world.

The central exposure carried out by Nietzsche's genealogical method was to reveal that morality was not a transhistorical value, but rather the product of Christianity vanquishing its opponents through peaceful discourse.⁷ This struggle, Nietzsche argued, cleverly buried by the victors, involved weaker Christian beings convincing their stronger counterparts to enter into a "peace treaty" to settle all disputes nonviolently with discourse rather than combat.⁸ Discourse, Nietzsche argued, was their weapon. The reign of rational, modern society in which Christian values were generally dispersed, Nietzsche argued, did not result in a more peaceful world. Instead, those promoting morality used their authority to consolidate power and make it

⁷ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," in *The Nietzsche Reader*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson and Duncan Large, Blackwell Readers (Malden, MA ; Oxford: Blackwell Pub, 2006), 115.

⁸ Nietzsche, 115.

invisible, relying on the same old coercive physical tactics of the past, was now concealed within a false benevolence.

The method that Nietzsche used to expose the formation of Christian morality, along with other theories such as the deception of the commodity by Karl Marx, and the workings of the subconscious by Sigmund Freud became the foundation for a general methodology to reveal hidden warfare beneath the surface of life.⁹ Because Nietzsche's genealogical method took benevolence as evil, all positive value could be viewed nefariously. This underlying maneuver (good as bad, benevolence as violence), applicable to any social form, object, discourse, and institution became *the* mode of thinking about the arts in higher education. In the 1960s, genealogical method was further abstracted by Michel Foucault to explore how processes of classification and categorization ostensibly used to improve life created new forms of exclusion, oppression, and punishment.¹⁰ Foucault exposed coercive power hiding in concepts such as sexuality, madness, and punishment. An important difference between Nietzsche and Foucault is that, as Colin Koopman notes, "whereas...Nietzsche used genealogy to cast judgments on certain concepts (truthfulness and morality, for example) and the practices instantiating them, Foucault used genealogy to critically investigate the conditions of the possibility of the practical exercise of such concepts."¹¹ Foucault's idiosyncratic version of genealogical method evolved into a generalized attack allied with civil rights, revolutionary politics, and student activism following

⁹ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, Keith Ansell-Pearson, and Carol Diethe, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812026>.

¹⁰ I discuss Foucault's genealogy in my chapter on the writings of the artist Sturtevant.

¹¹ Colin Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity*, American Philosophy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 18.

the legacy of protests of May '68. In the decades that followed, whether from the perspective of Foucaultian theory, Marxism or other ideologies, genealogical method became the dominant way that the humanities exposed social antagonism hiding not only in stable concepts of social life, but also in cultural media such as artwork, language use, advertising images, televisual culture, digital formats, and more.

Today's approach to the history of artwork, literary works, and other cultural objects has collectively abstracted this method as a general social project of art and art history. And what's wrong that? One problem is that, total exposure brings us to a stage of redundancy. Power and oppressive tendencies evolve but their structure remains the same. There is always an oppressed group that demands rights or a hidden force exerting coercive tendencies over a domain of social life. The project of the 20th century was to reveal the structure of these forces. Today, however, we already know the correct ethical position before the problem arises: all parties should gain equality *avant la lettre*. All power should be resisted in the service of common good. With respect to art, the 20th century genealogical method that always aligns artistic form with politics in the method of the avant-garde has turned into routine repetition. Using genealogical method, twentieth century criticism showed that the alleged autonomy of artworks was a symptom of social class hierarchy, bound to the conquering force of bourgeois values. Criticism revealed a hidden cause-and-effect in art's autonomy, but in doing so constrained the battlefield to a predictable set of enemies, falsities, and truths. Research, argument, and evidence asks all to accept the historical veracity of the fact that the autonomy of art is the result of the consolidation of the bourgeoisie. No matter how convincing the evidence is, the problematic extra part in which artworks appear never fully connected to politics—or only connected by a hidden analogy—persists.

As attempts to erase the remainder in art have failed, genealogical method has begun to perversely turn upon itself. The artist texts of today perform genealogies of genealogical method, as they place artistic form inside the relationship governed by the “regime.” They do not do this for the sake of trolling or irony, but for breaking new conceptual ground. Artists working in this new medium do not want to be preserved in histories that are oriented towards the productive side of the institutions that they resist. Following Rancière, these texts evoke an awareness of the social and temporal disjunction of art movements being governed by other disciplines. Though resisting the legibility and stability of artworks and identities is an aspect of recognizing the power of regimes, the texts that in this study exhibit a more slippery resistance, a covert bad faith and mischievous disposition towards the genealogical method. They resist the naiveté of artist and object towards the archive. They show how this naiveté is compromised. They fake innocence to history unfolding as it is brought out by genealogical method. Having grasped the maneuvers behind the politicization of aesthetics, they corrupt them, in turn outpacing the necessary markers of historicization to generate a new bawdy artform that allows freedom of movement and escape from administrative surveillance.

Part 2a: Midcentury Precursors Leading to the Artist Text

In the first section, I theorized some of the conditions that have led to the artist text. Its emergence can be narrated through the recent history of artists taking up writing. In telling this side of the story, however, a contradiction looms. If the artist text is defined by an effort to escape genealogical method and historicization, then its characteristics would evade the work I seek to do here. Keeping this contradiction in mind, I will focus on texts by artists that adapt the

methods of scholarship, criticism, and theory. In a broad sense, this turn is a product of the conceptual legacy in western art, as art practices moved from specific mediums to a “post-medium” phase in which art becomes an attitude across many aesthetic activities.¹² With this shift, artists began to blend many types of media, including visual images, sculpture and installation, sound and video, and various kinds of writing. The unifying factor of this new artistic practice has become less image than *concept*. Within concept, the most general medium used to connect different parts and disciplines, and to substantiate ideas that cannot be seen, is language. That being said, the artist text is not simply a product of artists taking up a variety of activities. The particular characteristic of the artist text is that it appropriates the methods used within critical institutions that surround artworks. Therefore, this next section will focus on instances where an artist’s text begins cross into the objective distance of historicization.

In the midcentury period of conceptual art, it became difficult to distinguish visual artworks from literary texts. The confusion arose as art’s substance was seen to be in ideas and in the medium that ideas must be expressed: language. As Liz Kotz has shown, American artists of the time, such as Robert Smithson, Carl Andre, and Vito Acconci showed a great interest in language, treating it as sculptural material, “rather than relating to the world through symbol, representation, or the reduced and distorted mediums of ‘information.’”¹³ This interest in the material of language, Kotz emphasizes, did not erase language’s metaphorical ambiguity, but revealed new “underlying structures,” “temporal models,” and the formal possibilities of

¹² Rosalind E. Krauss and Marcel Broodthaers, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, 31st of the Walter Neurath Memorial Lectures (New York, N.Y: Thames & Hudson, 2000).

¹³ Liz Kotz, *Words to Be Looked at : Language in 1960s Art* / (Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, c2007.), 2, <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip073/2006034767.html>.

recording technologies.¹⁴ As Robert Smithson put it in “Language to be Looked At and/or Things to be Read” (1967), “discursive literalness is apt to be a container for a radical metaphor.”¹⁵ In “A Heap of Language,” an innovative text that resembles concrete poetry, Smithson layered a pyramid of synonyms for the word “language” as if they were stones. Language, the piece suggested, was a structure made up of material and immaterial properties that connote both presence and absence.

Carl Andre, Kotz explains, explored discursive quantity by writing poetry in monotype cuts that emphasized weight and uniformity. He sometimes reduced texts down to a bare emotional core, as when he transformed E. W. Pierce’s 1878 text *Indian History and Genealogy* to columns of words that capture the truth of war hiding within “the suppressed or unconscious core of a poem.”¹⁶ Dan Graham and Vito Acconci broke new ground by creating works inside the structural organization of magazines. Acconci’s poem “ON,” dispersed across the layout of the magazine *0-9*, interrupted the contributions of other authors to create a poem over and above their works.¹⁷ Dan Graham’s infamous poem *Schema (March 1966)*, as Kotz explains, asked the editor to “catalogue information about its presentation, compiling the number of adjectives, adverbs, columns, and so forth, according to the form given by each editor in each printed

¹⁴ Kotz, 4–5.

¹⁵ Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack D. Flam, The Documents of Twentieth-Century Art (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 61. This idea would resurface as a compass for conceptual writing, a movement that arose in the early 2000s, as the networked digital databases of Web 2.0 created anew the possibilities for manipulating language and conceptualizing poetry.

¹⁶ Kotz, *Words to Be Looked at : Language in 1960s Art* /, 151.

¹⁷ Kotz, 160.

instance.”¹⁸ The poem took a shape based on how the editor executed a manual counting procedure. In both instances, artists transformed the organizing structural support of the magazine into a poetic environment.

It was Robert Smithson who was most prolific and ambitious in transforming the art-historical essay into a poetic text. His goal was to resist rationalism and recover the lost fictionality central to the arts. “Rationalism,” he wrote, “confines fiction to literary categories in order to protect its own interests or systems of knowledge.” And “realism...has prevented esthetics from coming to terms with the place of fiction in all the arts.”¹⁹ Smithson organized his texts in a manner that did not privilege content over arrangement. His text “Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space” (Arts Magazine November 1966), for example, was arranged in a gyre-like manner that allowed the footnotes to appear as primary rather than supplemental information. Rather than sit tidily on the bottom of the page or at the end of the essay, the footnotes—which include images of labyrinthian structures, artworks, and quotes—encircle the four central blocks of text. In this inversion, the historicity of the past bleeds into the present act of reading, creating the sense that “time vanishes into a perpetual sameness.”²⁰ The historicity of the content becomes heavily inflected by textuality and reading. Thus the content never appears separate from the medium at hand, and “the mind will pass through in an instant” the image of a labyrinth, and “the pages of time are paper thin, even when it comes to a pyramid.”²¹

¹⁸ Kotz, 135.

¹⁹ Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, 83–84.

²⁰ Smithson, 34.

²¹ Smithson, 34.

Often dismissing art history as a “changing same” or “eternal return,” Smithson argued that both bourgeois progress and avant-garde resistance were, as he put it, “ideological concepts of time” in “a race that would follow Zeno’s second paradox of infinite regress,” an endless game of catch-up in which “movement is impossible.”²² Within this changing same, he wrote about his peers such as Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Robert Morris, Sol Lewitt, and Ed Ruscha as if they were elements in a physical process of accumulation, erosion, destruction, and re-formation. If Judd’s prose was viewed by many as sterile, in Smithson’s gaze, “Judd’s syntax is abyssal—it is a language that ebbs from the mind into an ocean of words.”²³ It was less that Smithson was narrating his and his peers’ place within art history, than he was attempting to present them as beyond its reach. In his exhibitions and texts, art-historical institutions such as galleries, museums, and shows were undermined by fictional institutional alternatives crossing beyond standardized time. Instead of “sites” or “site-specific” work, Smithson created “nonsites,” architectural and presentational voids. The museum too was cast by Smithson as a void that misrepresented history and time. “History is representational,” he mused, “while time is abstract; both of these artifices may be found in museums, where they span everybody’s own vacancy.”²⁴ He was, unsurprisingly, fairly resistant to the idea of progress. For him, history was a simulacrum of “fabulous lies that reveal nothing but copies of copies.”²⁵ The structure of language was a type of organization that might offer a way to reimagine institutions in the face

²² Smithson, 37.

²³ Smithson, 80.

²⁴ Smithson, 41.

²⁵ Smithson, 88.

of eternal sameness. “Language,” Smithson wrote in a repackaging of a phrase of Pascal’s, “becomes an infinite museum, whose center is everywhere and whose limits are nowhere.”²⁶

By 1973, Smithson’s lecture “Hotel Palenque” (1973) at the University of Utah pushed his irrational art history to the border of fraud.²⁷ For the talk, Smithson improvised over a slideshow of images of “the Hotel Palenque,” images taken during a trip Smithson, his wife Nancy Holt, and curator Virginia Dwan took to a half-finished hotel in the Yucatan while on a break from installing his “mirror displacements” around the region. In the presentation, Smithson cast the unfinished tropical construction site of the hotel as a meeting point between primitivist myth and neo avant-garde aesthetics. One room with two adjacent red hotel room doors separated by bars, Smithson remarked, had a “Jasper Johnsian simplicity about it” and “also suggests something impenetrable, something unattainable.” Playing up the interest in blunt materiality of minimalist art, Smithson said “there is nothing like a pile of cement just as cement. It’s not going anywhere, it’s just there, just think of it and dig it for its cementness.” If the audience didn’t get the irony then, they likely did when he gave the hotel’s unfinished swimming pool a touch of primitive exoticism by describing it as “one of the more ingenious aspects of this place...really bluntly made and it calls up all the fears and dreads of the ancient Mayan Aztec culture, human sacrifice and mass slaughter.”²⁸ If “Hotel Palenque” was part hoax, it also consolidated the collision between a rational and irrational history of modernism into a single point: “Here you can see the modern part of the building. It should be starting to take shape in

²⁶ Smithson, 78. “Nature is an infinite sphere, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.”

²⁷ Video footage of the lecture and an unpaginated transcription (possibly published by John Weber Gallery) can be found in the Robert Smithson section of ubuweb: https://www.ubu.com/film/smithson_hotel.html

²⁸ See previous citation.

your mind at this point. You should be getting the point that I am trying to make, which is no point actually.” Being so involved with its discursive practices, Smithson could see that modernism was crystalizing not as the formal reduction of a specific medium in contradiction with industrial production, as Clement Greenberg saw it, but in a rhetorical statement unacceptable to a liberal educational mandate: *In making no point, I make my point*. The lecture thus becomes a rhetorical “nonsite,” Smithson’s term for the dialectical inversion of inside and outside, visibility and concept. The door towards artist texts in the “Hotel Palenque” lecture opened as Smithson suggested that art in the conceptual field could never again be seen as an activity outside of the institution of art history. In this situation, artists began to look for a way to break into that space in which historical past and narrative present collided.

Part 2b. Institutional Critique: Between Historical Past and Narrative Present

Strangely enough, with the “institutional critique” of the 1970s, the temporal confusions of past and present that Smithson envisioned would start to become a reality. This confusion arose because as institutional critique became the norm, we, in the present, could no longer be certain that it was an actual historical event or something cultivated by a keen group of artists and critics. It became difficult to distinguish actual practices by artists from the interpretations, theorizations, and genealogies written about those practices by critics later on. In this respect, two timelines were created. In one timeline, institutional critique actually existed and referred to a new crop of artists in the seventies and eighties who exposed economic, political, and corporate interests operating behind art’s institutions. Artists such as Hans Haacke, Adrian Piper, Daniel Buren, Martha Rosler, and later Andrea Fraser exposed the funding system of the museum, the uniform demographics of art-world audiences, the sociological presuppositions of the content

therein, the important ways that art was bound to problematic national values and pursuits, and much more. These artists also expanded the formal range of the readymade, or a consumer product used as art. Perhaps the single greatest contribution of the movement was to expose how, within the rapidly expanding global phenomenon of art's economy, the "autonomy" of art was preserved through a problematic circuit reaching all the way to highest levels of geopolitical power. Some of the art in this institutional-critical mode discarded conventional ideas of beauty for sobering sociological presentation of facts. For example, Haacke's artwork *Gallery-Goers' Birthplace and Residence Profile*, 1969 was a poll carried out at the museum that, as Alexander Alberro notes, "revealed that the vast majority of the public for commercial art galleries lived in easily identifiable and restricted parts of the city."²⁹ Haacke's show *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real- Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*, which was cancelled by the Guggenheim due to its inflammatory revelations about a key donor, exposed the numerous shell companies that the Shapolsky group used to conceal their ownership of 142 properties in the Lower East Side and Harlem.³⁰ In a style that pushed the discourse of the readymade into new places, the French artist Daniel Buren situated nondescript striped canvases in various locations in and out of the museum, thereby highlighting what was visible and invisible to art's system. The poet-turned-artist Marcel Broodthaers constructed his own "Museum of Modern Art, Eagles Department." Broodthaers, Rosalind Krauss argued, "predicted both the eventual complicity between theory and the culture industry and the ultimate absorption of 'institutional

²⁹ Hans Haacke, *Working Conditions: The Writings of Hans Haacke*, Writing Art (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2016), 28.

³⁰ Haacke, 30.

critique’ by exactly the institutions of global marketing on which such ‘critique’ depends for its success and its support.”³¹

As they wrote about institutional critique, the overwhelming power of the critics to shape how the period of art was seen raised new issues with periodization and canonization. With this movement, the question of whether institutional critique was primarily an art movement or primarily an effort to reshape the past—carried out in criticism in the 1990s and 2000s by the group of critics affiliated with the journal *October*—is crucial. As I explore in my chapter on Seth Price, the artist Joseph Kosuth, a first-wave conceptual artist who was often held up as a whipping horse by these critics, strongly refuted those critics’ claim that institutional critique presented a superior, more politically-engaged form of conceptual art. My goal is not to decide whether one party was right or wrong, but to highlight the questioning of the historical past of events that made up institutional critique. Wading into the debate of institutional critique makes it impossible to distinguish artists of the 1970s from critics working in the 1990s. This confusion reveals the influence that critical method carries for determining how even the recent past is viewed. For the artist texts discussed here, it is the idioms and critical methods of the art-historical and broader humanities establishments that shows the way to a new conception of artistic form, and a new organization of powerful and powerless.

Showcasing the power of critical gatekeepers, institutional critique raised a question about what constituted the gate. Was it a quality of artworks, critique, the vocabulary of sociology, or something else? Take, for example, another claim by art historian Benjamin Buchloh about the artist Marcel Broodthaers. This claim is very similar to that made by Rosalind Krauss. “Broodthaers,” Buchloh states, “anticipated, as early as the mid-1960s, the complete

³¹ Krauss and Broodthaers, *A Voyage on the North Sea*, 33.

transformation of artistic production into a branch of the culture industry, a phenomenon which we only now recognize.”³² The image of Broodthaers that Buchloh and Krauss cultivate is not the one we might get upon analyzing Broodthaers’ art, or especially his texts. Broodthaers was much less cogent as a critical artist than they seem to believe, and more eccentric and impenetrable. As these two critics comment on Broodthaers practice, they also somewhat covertly slide into a critical idiom that interprets Broodthaers’ practice as if this idiom were part and parcel of Broodthaers’ art. Even a term so seemingly benign as *culture industry* presents a covert argument prior to the work of art itself.³³

The uncertainty over the reality of institutional critique creates a new instability in the substance of art. Once we see this issue, it is hard to unsee it, and art history—or more broadly cultural history—starts to include its organizing discourses. Take, for example, two divergent interpretations of Marcel Duchamp’s artwork, *Fountain* (1917), one of which is institutional-critical, and one of which is not. In *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984), Peter Bürger, from the institutional-critical position, argued that *Fountain* represents the “endgame” of art, the moment after which all attempts to be avant-garde would merely be imitations.³⁴ In the introduction to *Radical Artifice* (2005), Marjorie Perloff proposed that Bürger’s interpretation only seemed to be

³² Krauss and Broodthaers, 9.

³³ Artists also used this vocabulary. Admiring the term “industry,” Hans Haacke noted how “with one stroke that term cuts through the romantic clouds that envelop the often misleading and mythical notions widely held about the production, distribution, and consumption of art.” See, Haacke, *Working Conditions*, 111.

³⁴ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Theory and History of Literature, v. 4 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

about the artwork *Fountain*; actually it replaced *Fountain* with a critical reading of *Fountain*.³⁵ She saw no “endgame,” only another artwork with qualities that could be interpreted like any other. While this seems to be two different interpretations of one artwork, it actually was a conflict over a polemical vocabulary. Using the terms of sociology, Bürger views the readymade as a consumer object resituated into the context of art, within an interpretive lens that views culture as an industry. Situating art this way meant it was a subgenre of industrial production, and future artworks could appear only as imitations of the initial avant-garde gesture. In treating *Fountain* as an artwork with formal qualities just like any other, Perloff rejects the subordinate force derived from the concept *culture industry* and preserves the qualities that distinguish artworks as categories distinct from commodities. The weird irony is that in defending *Fountain*’s material specificity, Perloff’s interpretation *is* Marxist within the field of the humanities, but *not* Marxist if taken in relation to a vision of *culture industry*. In preserving the category of art, she maintains the distinction between art and criticism. In implying that art is a subcategory of industry, Bürger implies that we should discard the disciplinary distinction of criticism. Together, these interpretations leave *Fountain* either hovering indeterminately as both an index to industry and *not* an artwork to be interpreted (Bürger), or as an artwork to be interpreted like any other and *not* a subset of industry (Perloff). Criticism either operates within its disciplinary boundary (Perloff) or operates above and over its boundary according to a higher-order logic (Bürger).

The polemical qualities found or produced in artworks by institutional critique were also an outside theoretical terminology that would suffer rapid exposure and erosion against the lofty

³⁵ Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

proclamations and resolute conviction of its main participants. Later, and perhaps inevitably, in purporting to augur the overthrow of the system, there came a point when the institutional critics, having found themselves deeply embedded in powerful positions, switched gears and began to view themselves as operating in a symbiotic relationship with the institution that they once sought to overthrow. As Andrea Fraser put it,

It is artists—as much as museums or the market—who, in their very efforts to escape the institution of art, have driven its expansion. With each attempt to evade the limits of institutional determination, to embrace an outside, to redefine art or reintegrate it into everyday life, to reach “everyday” people and work in the “real” world, we expand our frame and bring more of the world into it. But we never escape it.³⁶

The problem with institutional critique was that the institution simply assimilated the critique, and continued onward as normal, since artists could not replace these institutions. Institutional critique thus seemed to resolve itself, like a self-functioning system. This resolution suggests that art is not an open system sharing the presuppositions of some broader social structure, but rather a closed system with its own representation of reality. For the evolution of the artist text, the issues raised by institutional critique are interesting for how they reshaped the landscape of past and present, artwork and the texts that swirl around them. If formerly, we recognized that artworks had to be created prior to criticism, today the critical analysis can appear *prior* to the

³⁶ Andrea Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,” *Artforum International* 44, no. 1 (September 1, 2005): 37.

artwork. Institutional critique created a tear in the veracity of history, one that has grown into a productive formal space for art's new forms of writing.³⁷

Part 2c Genealogical Method Turns Perverse: The Writings of Mike Kelley

Even as *escape* was dismissed as a strategy, it seemed to be exactly what many later artists continued to attempt, whether by outright fleeing or, as in Mike Kelley's case, burrowing deeper into the methodological strata underlying art history's foundation. By the mid-1980s, prior even to institutional critique becoming a critical force, Kelley was perverting art's critical vocabulary. His works took advantage of our interpretive impulses and sent our desire for drawing critical meanings from formal qualities chasing false leads. He laid traps for critics by creating an entire practice of pseudo signifying structures that capitalized on the current interest in trauma and abuse. His work "Towards a Utopian Arts Complex," (Metro Pictures, 10/21-11-25, 1995), which included a cavernous, eerie reconstruction of the California Institute of the Arts complex entirely from memory, strongly implied repressed trauma. But there is a veneer of farce, as this trauma, it is implied, came from Kelley's aesthetic education. But it is his 1986 book *Plato's Cave, Rothko's Chapel, Lincoln's Profile* (based on a performance of the same name) that deeply antagonized the institutional-critical idiom. If the evocative title conjures idealism, spirituality of abstract expressionism, and currency (as well as the classic philosophical situation, the Rothko chapel in Texas, and the penny), meanings are short-circuited by the phrase being a

³⁷ In my first chapter, I argue that we can see Seth Price's texts through the prism of this issue. Price mounts a covert defense of Kosuth by writing a text that generates a practice that cannot be archived through genealogical method, and that creates an antagonistic relationship with its audience.

random configuration. Echoing Smithson's travel essays, Kelley traverses the weird subcultures of Americana through collaged appropriated images of cultural oddities, such as a man covered in bees and images of stalactites in caves. Through an accompanying written commentary, the country is seen through the eyes of a narrator giving us a view of America. Focusing equally on artistic forms and the sprawling environment, these moments of interpretation devolve into uncomfortable interpersonal situations subject to the whims, fancies and perversions of the authorial voice that seeks to impose its view. For example, an image depicts the backside of a person in a cave with their head in a hole and lower torso and legs exposed.³⁸ The text encourages this spelunker down "the path of the troglodyte," to experience "the pain, the pleasure of exploration; when spelunking sometimes you have to stoop, sometimes go on all fours, sometimes even crawl. CRAWL WORM!"³⁹ The image and text could refer to Plato's Cave, but it is hard not to see the commandeering tone as a twisted version of the excavation ethos of scholarship, the romantic idealism of May 68', and critique more generally. In this voice, the revolutionary post- 68' sentiment was already being seen as its own form of perverse and oppressive power. Assuming a position of authority behind the spelunker, historicizing is drunk with power, and forces the victimized spelunker into its bondage game. Those who believe that genealogical method evades its own power dynamics face a cruel reality.

³⁸ Mike Kelley, *Plato's Cave, Rothko's Chapel, Lincoln's Profile* (New City Editions in Association with Artists Space, 1986), 71.

³⁹ Kelley, 72.



Kelley's spelunker transposed into the space of installation.⁴⁰

Part 2d The Situation Today

I have not presented a fully fleshed out genealogy of writing and visual art leading up to the artist text. Instead, I chose a few instances that illustrate an effort by artists to break into the methods that situate art into a historical archive. Smithson's texts restored fiction to art history and bordered hoax. With institutional critique, art history fell into an uncertain zone in which past events and movements were no longer distinct from critical revision in the present. In Mike Kelley's perversely antagonistic critical idiom, audiences face the unfortunate consequences of the authority of historical excavation. In both of these instances, the artists use text to bring their artworks closer to critical method.

Mike Kelley's text for *Plato's Cave*, *Rothko's Chapel*, *Lincoln's Profile* was published in 1986. Since then, there have been numerous developments that have led to towards what I call

⁴⁰ Eva Meyer-Hermann, Lisa Gabrielle Mark, and Amsterdam (Netherlands), eds., *Mike Kelley* (Amsterdam : Munich ; New York: Stedelijk Museum ; Delmonico Books/Prestel, 2013), 74.

the artist text. Almost all of the texts analyzed in my study are from the 2000s and 2010s, with a few from the late 1990s. Partly thanks to conceptual artists' interest in the material of language, contemporary art has since grown increasingly proximal to experimental writing. Looking from the other direction, the early 2000s movement known as Conceptual Writing drew on the influence not only of poets but of the visual artists (some already discussed here) working with language.⁴¹ Conceptual Writing also was not conventionally periodized, as the anthology showcased instances from the traditions across the 20th century and from the new movement occurring at the time of publication. The central principle behind Conceptual Writing was to expand the potential of authorship by thinking of literature as material quantity. This mode of authorship became increasingly important as online databases appeared and the general public gained the tools to rapidly manipulate large sections of text. Such appropriative strategies had long been used in visual art, though changes initiated by digital technology had an equally profound effect on visual art's use of images. Strategies such as appropriation and procedural writing (the outsourcing of creative process to a procedure), standard to Conceptual Writing, are central to the artist text as well. The "conceptuality" of these texts, however, is more of a given than something shocking, and each text has different reasons for using the conceptual strategy that it does.

A large purpose of my study involves identifying the reasons behind the conceptual writing gestures being used. The four artists that I treat as foundational to the artist text are Seth

⁴¹ See Craig Dworkin's introduction to the conceptual writing anthology *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*. Craig Douglas Dworkin, "The Fate of Echo," in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, ed. Kenneth Goldsmith, Avant-Garde and Modernism Collection (Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 23–54.

Price (1973—), Bernadette Corporation (collective, 1992—), Tan Lin (1957—), and Sturtevant (Elaine Sturtevant, 1924-2014). The choice of these four does not reflect a conventional historical movement. Aside from Tan Lin, the other three in my grouping are recognized primarily as visual artists. All could be said to be part of a conceptual or post-conceptual style in which writing is central but often just one element in a larger exhibition. Price and Bernadette Corporation are considered two of the more influential authors in contemporary art. Price's texts are usually published in conjunction with works in other mediums (as I delve into in my first chapter) and are often part of an exploration into the meaning and purpose in contemporary art. Bernadette Corporation publish books in different genres—calculated to upend said genre's capacity to further a capitalist cultural logic (as I argue in my second chapter). In Sturtevant's case, writing is more of an ancillary activity developed late in her career, long after she had cultivated a reputation as a conceptual painter. Focusing on her texts, however, I argue, reveals a different logic for her conceptual practice, one that creates a formal structure akin to an artwork for the context surrounding an artwork. Tan Lin is better known as a conceptual poet and a central figure in the Conceptual Writing movement, but he engages the shared discourses of contemporary poetry and contemporary art. Lin is innovative in exploring the linguistic intersections of visual art and poetry through the concept of control vocabularies. Though I hardly mention it, one important point of connection across all of these authors is their location in New York City. In this respect, their pairing could reflect the city's influence over the narratives that drive contemporary art.

Because these artists adapt methods from avant-garde literary traditions, they should appeal to literary studies and literary method. While art history canonizes avant-garde attacks on its institutions, literary studies has been more resistant. Dada and Surrealism were only recently

canonized via modernist studies. Conceptual writing is still dismissed as unserious. Other important movements such as the French procedural writing group Oulipo, the L.A.N.G.U.A.G.E group, and the various figures that constitute black radical poetry are supported by small readerships, at least in the United States. And yet, as exemplified here, Seth Price adapts methods of appropriation pioneered by the conceptual writers, and Bernadette Corporation uses Oulipean poetic procedures to generate a completely new form for the epic poem. That those artists—both of whom are exhibited at renowned art institutions—adapt such methods is a testament to the value of the literary avant-garde for addressing the changing shape of the arts more broadly in the 21st century. As the art form centered on the most general medium—*language*—literature has long been and continues to be one of the most flexible ways to shape identity.

Regarding identity and specifically artistic identity, today, the principles that defined art and its institutions in the 20th century are being turned on their head to test values, determine what should change and what should continue, and cultivate a new identity for the artist. Throughout the 19th and 20th century, modern art challenged institutional standards. Such challenges are expected of artists today, making transgression more difficult. Some might argue that if at one point, the historical avant-garde did in fact exist, today we are left only with the discussion about it. Pathways to the kind of change and revolution through culture that earlier generations thought possible have been closed off for a long time. The artists here respond to the fact that it is quite difficult to figure out new untouched areas to attack. In the wake of the many failures to repeat the avant-garde gesture, a counterintuitive move into secondary fields controlling critical method might again regenerate the avant-garde gesture anew. The artist text

continues to affirm that literature offers one of the best methods for generating new acts following the collective fatigue with transgression.

Since the historical avant-garde is now a status quo, what an avant-garde artist is and does must appear in the most unexpected place and involve unlikely activity. In order to find a gesture for which the institution of art lacks the tools to analyze it, a new avant-garde would have to undermine the interconnected logic of culture. To return to Rancière, if the politics of aesthetics is decided by regimes, artists and authors can regain agency by gaining control of the tools that shape the regime. To do that involves interrupting the relationship of art to history and finding ‘a different way of relating to the past.’ In positioning an art gesture inside the relationship art has with its past, an artist text becomes momentarily autonomous: a text that situates itself in the relationship between an artwork and the critical method used to analyze it.

The goal of such writing may be to reshape the relationship between form and politics. If political conviction drove the prior model, political apathy does not drive this approach. Just the opposite. The goal is to find a form that does not fit into the historical archive in terms of how it relates to politics and aesthetics and in doing so, gains sovereignty. A phrase from a recent discussion between Jürgen Fohrmann, Erhard Schüttpelz and the artist Stephan Dilleuth captured this attitude, which accepts that 20th century method might need reinvention: “I love and hate to smoke.”⁴² Advertisers cannot really market to someone with this position. They hide from the market. Imagine this kind of attitude not in terms of advertising but in terms of an artist’s critical identity. This is the kind of statement that many feel is necessary for artistic sovereignty today. To use another phrase uttered by Seth Price, this form might take the

⁴² Stephan Dilleuth, “Corporate Rokoko and the End of the Civic Project - The Making of the Public Sphere and Political Clubs,” n.d., http://www.societyofcontrol.com/research/e_fohr_a.htm.

contradictory shape of a “belief in not believing.”⁴³ A ‘belief in not believing’ still presupposes that said person is participating—and that’s what really matters.

Before moving on to discuss specific chapters, I would like to address the question of what these texts are in relation to the institutions in which they circulate. This is exactly the question that highlights their maneuver. A text such as Seth Price’s *Dispersion* has been taken as a supplementary text. I would prefer to call it an artwork, but what would doing so mean? It is a discursive work in a literary genre (contemporary essay or art historical essay), that, at the same time, uses that display or genre identity as a sleight-of-hand to put pressure on such distinctions. *Dispersion*’s identity as an object is not what makes it an artist text; rather it is the pressure the text puts on being an object and the way it serves a critical project that gives it this moniker. Bernadette Corporation’s *The Complete Poem* operates much differently, while addressing a similar audience. It is at once readable by an insider audience and also illegible and aiming to deceive. While such texts register differently depending on where they are distributed and perceived, the point for me is that they attack the institutional standards that drive art and culture’s critical social project. That is what all of the texts in my study do in different ways and in some cases, with different ends. A quote from Seth Price captures the ethos of the artist text. An artist text is a text that is “critical of reading.”⁴⁴

Part 3: Chapter Summaries

⁴³ Seth Price, *Fuck Seth Price* (New York: Leopard, 2015), 21.

⁴⁴ Seth Price, “Was Ist Los,” in *Postscript: Writing after Conceptual Art*, ed. Andrea Andersson and Museum of Contemporary Art/Denver (Toronto ; Buffalo : Denver: University of Toronto Press ; Museum of Contemporary Art, 2018), 59.

Chapter 1. Seth Price's *Dispersion*: A Text that is Critical of Reading

My opening chapter presents a counterintuitive argument about the writings of Seth Price (1973-). Critics have argued that Price fits the larger social project of genealogical method, of attacking hidden enemies. I argue that his texts demonstrate a devious effort to escape from this method and from its source in the “administration.” To escape, Price exploits the space between artwork and text. My chapter focuses on his practice of “dispersion,” for which Price has become notorious.⁴⁵ The text *Dispersion* outlined this practice, which involved creating forms of “distributed media” (mass culture) that simultaneously read as gestures of conceptual art. In making a work that reads in two ways at once, Price proposes in the text, the artist finally succeeds at escaping the administration of art for everyday life, the goal that had preoccupied the 20th century avant-gardes. The practice of dispersion and has usually been read as a covert attack on the bourgeoisie. The problem with this reading is the status of the text *Dispersion*. When seen to be itself an act of dispersion rather than a statement about the artistic practice, the text becomes antagonistic to its insider art audience. Rather than attacking the bourgeoisie, I argue that Price targets art-historical gate-keepers. I position Price’s text as a covert defense of first wave conceptual artists excoriated in Benjamin’s Buchloh’s influential notion of the aesthetics of administration. I analyze Price’s other texts through this lens, focusing on how his guide for escaping invasive contemporary surveillance technologies, *How to Disappear in America*, also carries out an escape from the forms of conviction central to so much contemporary art.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ The difficulty with citing this text is all to the point, as “Dispersion” hovers between artwork and supplementary text. It can be read here: Seth Price, “Dispersion,” in *Seth Price: Social Synthetic* (Köln: Walther König, 2002), 67–82.

⁴⁶ Seth Price, *How to Disappear in America* (New York: The Leopard Press, 2008).

Chapter 2. The Art of the Tongs and the Hook: Bernadette Corporation's Epic in Jargon

My second chapter focuses on Bernadette Corporation's exhibit and book *The Complete Poem*, which combines a photo shoot made to look like a Levi's Jeans ad with a various stanzas of verse poetry.⁴⁷ I argue that *The Complete Poem* is situationist attempt to generate a linguistic and visual equivalent to the physical act of sabotage carried out on a railway network in France by the French radical group *Tiqqun*. The images reflect the type of disguise needed to escape expropriation by popular culture. Bending source texts written by the group, the verse reflects a process *Tiqqun* used in their sabotage: of bending a metal bar and lobbing it onto networking cable to scramble railway scheduling information. My chapter then analyzes the conditions that make this an *epic* poem. I propose that this genre designation should be understood less in the literary-historical sense than in Guy Debord's definition of spectacle as "the epic poem of [commodity] struggle, a struggle that no fall of Troy can bring to an end."⁴⁸ Rather than ideological critique, or being organized as a false surface concealing a true depth, their epic is driven by argot constructed from material manipulation. Out of this process they generate a multitude of lifestyle obsessed youth. I link this process to *Tiqqun*'s negation of political party known as *The Imaginary Party*. Ultimately, Bernadette Corporation imagine the party as a fatalistic, evacuated product of language's conscription by Spectacle: a lifestyle that is at the same time a revolutionary form-of-life.

⁴⁷ Bernadette Corporation, *The Complete Poem / Bernadette Corporation: First Exhibited at Greene Naftali, New York: September 17 - October 17, 2009* (London: Koenig, 2010).

⁴⁸ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press, 2005), 32–33.

I argue that the project presents a falsely interpretable poem in the form of a tantalizing surface that leads only to the impenetrable wall of an insider argot, only understandable to those with the key. Interpretation, the project implies, contributes to art's commodification of the artist. An impenetrable argot is the artist's only defense. Argot resists the dominant mode of production by taking words as material objects and through distortion, transforming them into a secret weaponized language.

Chapter 3. Tan Lin's Poetry of Mechanical Lies

My third chapter turns to the writing of poet and professor Tan Lin (1957-). One central issue of Lin's poetry is that it appears to support ahistorical values: lies, boredom, and forgetting —“poetry [that] would make all our feelings disappear the moment we were having them.”⁴⁹ I argue that this quality comes from overlaying a systems-centered thinking onto a humanities context. Lin, I argue uses a pun on the system-centered concept of *autopoiesis* or a self-making system that produces its own components.⁵⁰ Using the principles of autopoiesis, Lin writes a self-

⁴⁹ Tan Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004, the Joy of Cooking: Airport Novel Musical Poem Painting Film Photo Landscape*, Wesleyan Poetry (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 24.

⁵⁰ Following Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, Niklas Luhmann defines *autopoietic systems* as

systems that are defined as unities as networks of productions of components that recursively, through their interactions, generate and realize the network that produces them and constitute, in the space in which they exist, the boundaries of the network as components that participate in the realization of the network.”

Autopoietic systems, then, are not only self-organizing systems, they not only produce and eventually change their own *structures*; their self-reference applies to the production of other *components* as well.

making poetry. In a humanities context, Lin's poetry appears as a structure of "lies," but to a system-centered way of thinking *lying* is a referential procedure bound to forgetting and memory, part of a self-making system. What is read in Lin's texts as metaphorical is merely a technical language placed in the wrong context. As one gains awareness of the different systems, a total media system of reflections takes shape. This "autopoietic" structure advances the conceptual writing strategy of recontextualization. As different observing systems comes in contact with one another in Lin's texts, they expand to encompass a total field of possible systems and their accompanying cultural formats. Lin's mode illustrates that confronting the core values of the genealogical project do not necessarily make one an amoral artist. Instead, such "bad" values are at the core of the mechanics of cultural formats and the more we approximate them, the more honest we become about the conditions of our media formats.

Chapter 4. The Writing Below Sturtevant's Remakes

My fourth and final chapter turns to the writing of the artist Sturtevant (Elaine Sturtevant, 1924-2014). From the 1960s until her death in 2014, Sturtevant practiced an art premised on remaking the artworks of well-known artists of the 20th century, including Andy Warhol, Joseph Beuys, Claes Oldenburg, Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and many others. For years, the discussion around her art centered on issues of appropriation. Focusing on the subtle differences that disqualified her remakes from being appropriations, a new generation of historicizing critics argued that Sturtevant was engaging in a broader critique of culture's politics

Luhmann, Niklas, "The Autopoiesis of Social Systems," in *Essays on Self-Reference* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 3.

and aesthetics.⁵¹ Analyzing Sturtevant's texts reveals a bridge between these two dominant readings of her practice. In her texts, Sturtevant casts both art-historical discourse and broader cultural conditions as part of a long *durée* battle for control of representation. By carrying out core moves on the governing properties of representation, Sturtevant recovers art's ability to function as the *exterior* limit to transgression, the role that God held before secular modernity. Through various reversals on the structure of representation, Sturtevant imagines that the exterior lost with the so-called death of God can once again be restored. These texts reveal Sturtevant refusing to discard the concept of origins, even as she carries out a practice that appears devoid of essence. Crucially, this process of manipulating representation occurs in art's understructure, which includes all of the contextual elements that surround artworks. For Sturtevant, text is a bridge across visual and conceptual domains, but always in the service of a non-articulable or *silent* core.

With the exception of those written by Tan Lin, these artist texts remain mostly ignored by literary critics. In making the argument that they carry out a controversial program of appropriating genealogical method, a final implicit claim of my project is that art history and literary studies must adapt methods across their disciplinary borders in order to keep pace with aesthetic revolutions that might put their work directly in the crosshairs of artists, authors, poets, and others. This study is one step in that direction.

⁵¹ In particular Bruce Hainley, Michael Lobel, and Peter Eleey.

Chapter 1

Seth Price's *Dispersion*: A Text that is Critical of Reading

“Art as that which escapes those with the power to define what it is.”

—Seth Price, *Notes on This Show*⁵²

In this chapter, I argue that the artist Seth Price (1973-) uses literature to escape the “administrative tendency of the avant-garde.” Price escapes this tendency by undermining critical method, or the capacity for audiences to historicize his work within a social project for art. In Price’s texts, art history becomes a formal element of his art.

To begin, consider the definition of art that Price provides in the epigraph to this chapter: “Art as that which escapes those with the power to define what it is.” This definition is close to oxymoron. Art is defined not as an escape from definition but an escape from *those with the power* to define it. This definition implies that definitions of art are harmless until they are uttered by those in a position of power. It also implies the idea that art is a social relationship more than a physical object, something of a shared discourse formed through insider consensus. Were Price to frame the relationship with power as one of productive attack rather than contradictory escape, the implied conception of what art is would fall more in line with the conventional politics of artistic form. Instead, power shapes the environment and Price’s art

⁵² Seth Price, *Notes on This Show* (Electronic Arts Intermix/Friedrich Petzel Gallery/ Reena Spaulings Fine Art, 2006), 99.

enters that environment as a contradiction.⁵³ Resisting those with the power to define provides definition, but as that definition attains currency, the artist inevitably must resist their self. This condition means that Price's attack on power involves attacking his own defenders, and more specifically the critical method used to historicize his artworks. With that in mind, I will try to understand the consensus method used to analyze Price's art, then show how Price's texts turn against that method.

The Critical Conversation

The critical consensus views Price's art much in the ways he presents it himself: as an attack on the violent, dehumanizing characteristics of digital media technology. The boundary, however, between the reality addressed by his artworks and the fiction constructed by them is hazy. His novel *Fuck Seth Price*, for example, is all about the alienation of the digital. The narrator, an artist like Price, carries out a practice of reformatting that embodies the digital promise of abstract equivalence of all things in an exchange of materials, products, objects, and people in a global economy driven by binary digits and networked databases. In his actual art practice, Price echoes this restless reformatting style: turning essay into sculpture, fabric envelopes into clothing, beheading video into Mylar, bomber jackets, fists and knots into plastic, and more.⁵⁴ In the novel, the cost of this equivalence is that the narrator loses touch with humanity: The seamless exchange in which "anything can be transformed into anything else,"

⁵³ That would mean, finally, that were this very definition of Price's art to ascend to a position of power, he might consequently turn around and resist it. Such is the risk and reward in being part of the formal project of writing about Price. The critical establishment becomes an evolving opponent used to break new ground in fascinating, nonconforming fashion.

⁵⁴ Price, *Fuck Seth Price*, 108.

can only be achieved by “displacing...society’s bodies into the realm of images,” ignoring materials, bodies, and labor.⁵⁵ The narrator embodies this dehumanization when he carries out two random acts of killing with no explanation.⁵⁶ The artist Tobias Madison interprets this narrator’s derangement as a reflection of the “proximity and distance” of social media.⁵⁷ Discussing Price’s actual real-life practice, Beatrix Ruf furthers this line of thinking focusing on how Price’s use of Jihadist beheading videos call attention to “authorless, ‘headless,’ internet-transmitted communications.”⁵⁸ Analyzing Price’s multimodal artwork “Title Variable,” which includes a mixtape, its packaging, and an accompanying essay on the history of MIDI technology, Branden Joseph finds an analogy between MIDI, authoritarianism, and S&M. “Industrial synth’s flirtations with fascist chic,” Joseph notes, find “their media-technical counterparts in near-despotic lines of control, a situation complemented by the suggestively sadomasochistic language of MIDI ‘masters’ and MIDI ‘slaves’.”⁵⁹ Following the analogy in other works, Joseph views Price’s practice of “dispersing” artworks into other distribution channels such as mixtape, playlist, essay, fiction and art criticism as “counterproductions,” or

⁵⁵ Price, 121.

⁵⁶ In the first scene, the narrator sneaks into an apartment building and strangles a porter (28). The scene takes two sentences and there is no further explanation. In the second equally brief scene, the narrator murders a child and stuffs him into the trunk of his car.

⁵⁷ Tobias Madison, “Tobias Madison on Seth Price’s novel ‘Fuck Seth Price’ Hey, Motherfuckers – Here is Your Generational Novel,” trans. Mathew Scown, *Texte Zur Kunst* Polarities, no. 101 (April 2016): 155.

⁵⁸ Beatrix Ruf, “Introduction,” in *Seth Price: Social Synthetic*, ed. Achim Hochdörfer (Köln: Walther König, 2017), 11.

⁵⁹ Branden Joseph W, “Torture Tech: Seth Price’s Weapons,” in *Seth Price: Social Synthetic*, (Köln: Walther König, 2017), 52–53.

attacks on the bourgeois sphere of mass culture.⁶⁰ John Kelsey (of Bernadette Corporation) highlights the “encroaching materialities of communication” in Price’s work, “media acting on and against other media [to] displace control from the human imagination to the programs, black boxes, and slippery bodies underlying all communication.”⁶¹

All of these instances depict Price akin to a media researcher working in line with critical and academic values. There is, however, another side to Price’s practice. John Kelsey likens this side to a “teen image,” “a perverse body that slips from the disciplinary grid of art-historical discourse in order to wander and fuck around in its own mutant time zone, online and in social media.”⁶² This teen image’s goal, Kelsey continues, “is to disorient art history,” to troll it and destroy its chronologies, the object-status of its artifacts, and the distinction between art and its information.⁶³ This side too can be found in *Fuck Seth Price* directed at Price’s own pretensions:

Perhaps the work might play with the medium’s material conventions, a “painting” that was in fact composed of vacuum-formed polystyrene: stretcher bars, canvas, markings, and all.

Or it might be apparently abstract but actually full of charged referents that became clear only when you inspected the list of materials, e.g., “Coca-Cola spills on Nigerian mud cloth.” It might also be computer-generated, e.g., it might consist of Photoshop

⁶⁰ Joseph, 54.

⁶¹ John Kelsey, “Steh Pirce,” in *Seth Price: Social Synthetic* (Köln: Walther König, n.d.), 267–68.

⁶² Kelsey, 265.

⁶³ Kelsey, 272.

manipulations printed out on canvas. Or you could hit all four possibilities at once:

“Foxconn worker’s accidental Coke spills on Nigerian mud cloth, scanned and randomly manipulated in Photoshop, printed on Belgian linen stretched over a vacuum-formed frame.”

In truth, the production method hardly mattered, because whichever she chose, the results would look more or less the same: tepid compositions, hesitant and minimal in appearance, kind of pretty and kind of whatever, loaded with backstory.⁶⁴

In one quick paragraph, Price undercuts the art that critics and scholars take as meaningful, serious, and filled with lessons about contemporary culture. So where does that leave audiences? Rather than just “trolling” sarcasm, this type of writing attacks critical method. It forces audiences to accept that they cannot distinguish “being” from “seeming” or fraud from truth because they cannot distinguish the truth from the fiction. It serves to reinforce that this distinction is a social line between those inside the art world and those outside of it.⁶⁵ The ‘tepid composition’ with ‘loaded backstory’ is what a lot of contemporary art looks like to anyone outside of its social circle. The trick is that in ventriloquizing the imagined outsider, Price gives them no set of beliefs except that which stands in opposition to the definitional power of art. The passage is so appealing because it socially negates its own insider coterie, to, in effect demonstrate “that which escapes the power to define what it is.” Ultimately, Price’s texts

⁶⁴ Price, *Fuck Seth Price*, 15.

⁶⁵ Johanna Burton, “Seth Price: A Human Interest Story,” in *Guyton, Price, Smith, Walker*, ed. Bettina Funcke (Zürich: JRP Ringier, 2007), 75.

encourage his readers to refuse the idea that text is discursive information in support of art. Rather than expressing a direct content, these texts challenge audiences to think about what is said in *and meant by* the text: how it functions both as a text that outlines a practice and as an instance of a higher order of art practice whose tricks remain concealed from view.

Price's magician-like effort to escape those with the power to define what art is can be traced back to one of his earliest texts: *Dispersion*. I will analyze that text now.

***Dispersion* (2002—)**

Dispersion (2002—) has been taken as Price's artistic statement explaining his then-new practice of creating forms of mass media, such as popular fiction, mixtapes, playlists, criticism, and more—all that double as “dispersed” and covert works of art. These works could be appreciated by audiences of whatever media they happened to pose as and recognized by the art world as conceptual artworks. Price made a number of these objects across various fields. Because a dispersed artwork only pretends to be a work of mass media, it can actually be a counterproduction (as Branden Joseph says) that attacks the bourgeoisie. A dispersion is a fake, a covert intellectual exercise seeding chaos from within the distribution channels of mass culture for a knowing art-world audience.

If that is a version fits the art practice of dispersion within contemporary critical method, it also conflicts with the stated aim of the text, which is to escape the administrative tendency of the avant-garde. No prior avant-garde artist, Price explains, has succeeded in escaping because all efforts to hide were recuperated via documentation and a place in art history. The simple point is,

if Price's stated goal is in fact to escape the administration, he could not do so if *Dispersion* is an art practice legible to the administration and that slots perfectly into the administration's methods. To achieve his aim, Price would have to use dispersion to carry out an even greater deceit that makes those insiders that recognize a work of mass media as a work of conceptual art into the dupes previously occupied by the "bourgeoisie."

What evidence is there for this odd inversion? The possibility appears the moment one considers that *Dispersion* could be characterized as an instance of itself. If that is the case, then to *know Dispersion* would mean to not know it, or to only know it in its "distributed media" form, whose legibility exists on the condition that it remains unrecognized in its other identity as a work of conceptual art. There are other signs too. As a work of historicizing scholarship, *Dispersion* masterfully executes the New Historicist strategy of overdramatizing events and embellishing details to generate intrigue about the past. Without getting into the whole discussion, New Historicism often tells a tidy fiction attributing a critique of power back on the past that wasn't really there at the time. Whether or not it matters is a different debate. But that's also what *Dispersion* does. The narrative that Price tells dramatizes a struggle by artists attempting and failing to escape the "administrative tendency" of avant-garde culture.⁶⁶ The evidence—Duchamp's rotoreliefs, Fluxus happenings, Dan Graham's magazine art and more—are presented as efforts to escape when they were not, and this is done to set up the Price's own strategy of dispersing works. They failed, again, because they were recuperated via documentation. Therefore, the only means that would succeed would be an art that hides in those very documentary forms. The only way to escape from "the administrative tendency" of the avant-garde is to create an undocumentable text, a text that criticizes itself. Dan Graham, one of

⁶⁶ Price, "Dispersion," 70.

the artists discussed in *Dispersion*, once noted that an artwork only existed if it was written about in magazines. Consequently, Graham sought to place his work in the structural arrangement of the magazine. *Dispersion*, Price intuited a further layer, which is not only that an artwork only existed if it was written about in scholarship, but that a supreme form of artwork would be scholarship on an artwork before an artwork even existed and so effectively marshalling scholarship's strategies as to be more effective and brilliant than any possible future scholarship on said work.

Other signs that Price has created such a work are the ways that the text sabotages the historical record. Price revises and republishes the text without citing or telling readers of his changes. A slightly revised version will just appear. Furthermore, the practice of citation is haphazard. One offset citation in particular stands out:

“To recognize...the relative immutability of historically formed discursive artistic genres, institutional structures, and distribution forms as obstacles that are ultimately persistent (if not insurmountable) marks the most profound crisis for the artist identified with a model of avant-garde practice.”⁶⁷

The quotation comes from the essay Buchloh's "Structure, Sign, and Reference in the Work of David Lamelas" by Benjamin Buchloh.⁶⁸ The quotation stages the challenge: how to break into those 'immutable discursive artistic genres, institutional structures and distribution forms.' The

⁶⁷ Price, 80.

⁶⁸ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*, 1. paperback ed, An October Book (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 305–43.

slight offsetting of the statement in its own graphic away from the main essay hints at the double vision by which *Dispersion* means to be taken: as one of those genres, structures, or forms, and mistaken as one of them, an aestheticization that intertwines Buchloh himself.

As many know, in his influential essay “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions.” Buchloh famously codified the term “administration” to characterize the formative period of conceptual art.⁶⁹ That essay was controversial for how it, in ways later echoed by *Dispersion*, told a highly appealing new historicist and Marxist-influenced narrative about the evolution from early to later conceptual artists. In particular, the controversy stemmed from how Buchloh presented the essay as a history but in doing so, somewhat covertly codified certain artists as less critical than others. Specifically, he framed the earlier American conceptual artists of the period 1962-1969 as head-in-the-clouds aesthetes, oblivious to the world’s problems as they mused on ontological questions about the definition of art. Though he speaks admiringly about a number of American artists, he is disdainful of the art of Joseph Kosuth, which was influenced by analytic philosophy.⁷⁰ Kosuth, Buchloh wrote, claimed that art was a self-reflexive “analytic proposition,” meaning that “a work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist’s intention, that is, he is saying that that work of art *is* art, which means, is a *definition* of art.”⁷¹ Buchloh felt that this emphasis on definition reinforced the dated discourse of the readymade that

⁶⁹ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October* 55 (1990): 105–43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778941>. Buchloh was Branden Joseph’s advisor at Harvard

⁷⁰ See, for example, on pp 108, 117, 124, and 125.

⁷¹ Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969,” 126–27.

questioned the constituency of an art object and its relation to language, which mitigates art's capacity for inspiring social change. Even more egregious, Kosuth claimed that the analytic propositionality of art made art autonomous, and that "works of art that try to tell us something about the world are bound to fail."⁷² In response, Buchloh pointed out that Kosuth's own genealogy of the conceptual art movement, the essay "Art after Philosophy" illustrated just the opposite, and did 'tell us something about the world': mainly that art "operates like a synthetic proposition...and therefore denies both the purity and the possibility of an autonomous artistic production that would function, within art's own language system, as a mere analytic proposition."⁷³ Buchloh ended by fixing Kosuth as a symptom of the historical consolidation of the bourgeoisie in the 1960s American middle class, who "could assume their own aesthetic identity in the very model of the tautology and its accompanying aesthetic of administration." Such artists were merely part of the class's effort to administer labor, production, distribute commodities, and "arrange itself more efficiently within the existing political conditions."⁷⁴ In short, Kosuth was not merely a bourgeois artist, he was a counter-revolutionary one.

Buchloh contrasted Kosuth with the socially-engaged conceptual art of French artist Daniel Buren (1938-). Known for placing striped canvasses both inside and outside of the museum, Buren, Buchloh stated, "singularly succeeded in displacing both the paradigms of painting and that of the readymade," and "transformed the pictorial into yet another model of opacity and objecthood."⁷⁵ Buren's works, Buchloh continued, only seemed like readymades, but

⁷² Buchloh, 128.

⁷³ Buchloh, 128.

⁷⁴ Buchloh, 128.

⁷⁵ Buchloh, 138.

were replete with idiosyncrasies. Instead of stretched canvas on the wall, for example, Buren used physical cloth objects, and placed the stretched canvas “leaning as an object against support wall and floor.” He also displaced “traditional sites of artistic intervention and of reading” by distributing his stripes on sheets of paper mailed anonymously, as pages in books, and billboards.⁷⁶ These displacements, reinforced “Buren’s central thesis...that the fallacy of Duchamp’s readymade was to obscure the very institutional and discursive framing conditions that allowed the readymade to generate its shifts in the assignment of meaning and the experience of the object in the first place.”⁷⁷

Buren’s and Kosuth’s approaches to art can be found in *Dispersion*. As a practice centered on concealing artworks in the distribution channels of mass culture, to disperse art echoes Buren’s efforts to covertly embed his stripes in environments outside of art’s usual reach. *Dispersion* the text, however, sets out to *define* the art practice, but in doing so creates an artwork out of that very text. Rather than choose between an idea of art as a question of definition or an idea of art as a question of institutional framing, Price frames a new shape. If focusing on art’s definition (Kosuth) once meant a less socially engaged art, *Dispersion* proposes that the selection of artists for history—or setting up the conditions whereby the artists enter the historical archive—is what defines art. If exposing the institutional conditions behind artworks once meant bringing art closer to broader social reform, *Dispersion* reveals “that the fallacy of [Buchloh’s essay] was to obscure the very institutional and framing conditions” that allowed one artist to seem to have been more socially relevant than another in history. The fallacy conceals

⁷⁶ Buchloh, 139.

⁷⁷ Buchloh, 139.

that it neither artist holds the definitional power of art; the representative of the administration, here Buchloh, is the one who holds this power.

The administrative tendency of culture toward a program is, for Price, the defining position of power, because it recuperates all ephemeral events and other attempts to evade and grants them a place in the history of art. It is not that he wants to deceive the masses; he wants to *be* the masses, to push power back to those ‘without the power to define what art is.’ While this goal is impossible to achieve by creating works of mass culture that go in and wreak havoc on the bourgeoisie, it is possible by creating a condition that is irrecoverable by the administrative tendency: an artwork that sets its formal terrain exactly in the methodology of the administration. Because *Dispersion* (2002—) can be considered an instance of itself, a dispersion in the distribution channels of art history—it becomes a fake piece of art criticism that operates in the manner of Price’s other dispersions, where its value is recognized only by a utopian outsider. Those are the conditions for escaping the administrative tendency. As an essay-artwork, *Dispersion* creates that strange situation whereby we oscillate between learning about an artwork carried out in various media formats and being caught within an even larger artwork that includes such a discussion.

The summer following the publication of Buchloh’s essay, Kosuth and Seth Siegelaub wrote ripostes decrying Buchloh’s narrative as self-interested.⁷⁸ “The blatant cronyism hiding below [Buchloh’s] ‘history’ of conceptual art,” Kosuth said, made a straw man of Kosuth to codify Buchloh’s friend Daniel Buren as the pre-eminent artist and Buchloh as Conceptual Art’s

⁷⁸ Joseph Kosuth and Seth Siegelaub, “Joseph Kosuth and Seth Siegelaub Reply to Benjamin Buchloh on Conceptual Art,” *October* 57 (1991): 152–57, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778876>.

primary scholar.⁷⁹ Five years later, Kosuth went even further, saying that “the art historical process is a kind of conspiracy, even if unwittingly so, to politically disenfranchise my activity as an artist.”⁸⁰ To keep art and movements from becoming merely styles for discourse, Kosuth continued, the artist’s intention must be addressed.⁸¹ Implicating Buchloh, Kosuth vented on how “the world” accessed through artistic discourse was mediated by the hidden agenda of the “administration” and its biopolitical form of surveillance:

Artists working within such a practice have a particular responsibility not to permit their work at its inception to be defined ‘by the world.’ What the work *is* (that is, what distinguishes it from what preceded it) must be established by the artist before ‘the world’ includes it within all that is given. ‘The world’ begins as a process of institutionalization, and the art historical and critical establishment is its first moment: without it there would be no ‘professional’ artists. Here is where one finds the true ‘aesthetics of administration,’ and it is a structural, and apparently inescapable, feature of the process of a work coming into the world.⁸²

Buchloh said Kosuth represented the middle class’s desire to administer labor; throwing the term “administration” back at him, Kosuth casted Buchloh as the gatekeeper of the administration’s surveillance system. In framing the administration as a ‘structural and apparently inescapable,

⁷⁹ Kosuth and Siegelaub, 152.

⁸⁰ Joseph Kosuth, “Intention(s),” *The Art Bulletin* 78, no. No. 3 (September 1996): 408.

⁸¹ Around the same time, the artist Mike Kelley claimed that he had started writing for a similar reason, and even began to create false biographical leads for diligent critics.

⁸² Kosuth, “Intention(s),” 408.

feature of the process of a work coming into the world,’ Kosuth articulated the metaphor—the administration as an inescapable pursuing force—that Price would adopt in *Dispersion* and other texts.

Published only six years after the debate, *Dispersion* (2002—) uses the format of an art historical essay as the self-reflexive analytical proposition that Buchloh so despised in Kosuth’s art. Used as a statement of intention for a practice carried out elsewhere, *Dispersion* (2002—) creates a trap: it is always also an instance of that which it theorizes, a dispersion in the distribution channels of art history. In framing the entire practice within the statement; that is, within a dispersion within art history, Price encloses “the world” so desired by Buchloh within artwork. In doing so, *Dispersion* (2002—) generates the condition of tautology that Buchloh finds deadening (see his discussion of Barthes) and Kosuth finds emancipatory. The analytic proposition that bothered Buchloh comes back around in a new form in *Dispersion* (2002—): “Art as that which escapes those with the power to define what it is.”⁸³

The choice, as framed by *Dispersion*, is no longer between a Kosuth approach or a Buren approach. Buchloh, the administration’s representative, is now implicated in the definition of art. The historicizing genealogy is no longer considered distanced, but within the evolved conception of art. Or rather, art’s definition comes to swallow this debate, leading to a new condition in which the era of art made by artists is over. That era could not escape the fact that “Whatever concepts you signal through your making of things, you end up sanctifying the current state of affairs.”⁸⁴ That problem can be resolved *Dispersion* illustrates, by redefining art’s relationship to its outside. So just as Price furthers Buren’s method of embedding stripes in distribution

⁸³ Price, *Notes on This Show*, 99.

⁸⁴ Price, *How to Disappear in America*, 6.

channels outside of the museum, he does so through the epoch-defining art history essay. Such a format means that art history's earlier purpose recedes into fiction. If the essay itself could be considered a dispersion, then Price already knew *avant la lettre* that the logic of creating counter-productions to deceive the bourgeoisie would change nothing. *Dispersion* turns towards a new type of covert activity, with a familiar method—the guerilla, anarchist or revolutionary—but a target that might break through the logic whereby “whatever concepts you signal through your making of things, you end up sanctifying the current state of affairs.” No longer distinct from methods of analysis, the enemy recedes within.

The Occult Cameo

Price has used an “occult cameo” graphic to symbolize simultaneity. In one rendition, the image of a nobleman rotated becomes a grinning skull. Imagining a conventional reading of *Dispersion* as a deception on the bourgeoisie represented by the occult cameo, the skull represents the artist and the nobleman represents the bourgeoisie.⁸⁵ The relationship between the two sides is scrambled when thought in cultural terms. It is equally plausible to imagine mass culture or “distributed media” as the skull, and the nobleman represented by the administration. Or given how both are contained in one cranium, mass culture could be the decay and death within the administration's own body. The point with such allegorical reading is that mass culture represents the decline of these types of categories as separate from the administration—or administrative tendency of the avant-garde. Mass culture can only be conceived negatively, in an

⁸⁵ There are many other dichotomies we could slot in these images as well.

antagonistic relationship with the life of the administration. This is the way we should think about *Dispersion* and Price's practice in general.⁸⁶



Occult Cameo 2, 2001, marker on paper, 12 × 13 inches, Courtesy of the artist and Petzel Gallery, New York. Photography: Ron Amstutz.

How to Disappear in America

Thinking of *Dispersion* as a devious form of escape from the administration sheds light on Price's book *How to Disappear in America*, which is almost entirely appropriated from Fredric L. Rice's *Vanishing Point: How to Disappear in America Without a Trace*.⁸⁷ In

⁸⁶ Some might say that I am celebrating Price's cynicism. Cynicism, however, presupposes an obvious orientation between art and the world. If art is defined negatively "as that which escapes those with the power to define what art is," then cynicism recognizes that the organization of relationships that define art has created an untenable situation. If someone is cynical, they are still involved. Cynicism is in fact highly productive for the simple fact that the person hasn't left the space. Cynicism might recognize that art must stand against the administrative tendency to recover mobility and resistant energy in a new organization.

⁸⁷ Price, *How to Disappear in America*; Fredric L. Rice, "Vanishing Point: How to Disappear in America without a Trace," accessed February 5, 2019, <http://www.skeptictank.org/hs/vanish.htm>.

appropriating Rice, Price provides the same detailed instructions on how to erase one's identity, escape pursuers, and survive on the lam. When considered in terms of escaping a 'structural and apparently inescapable' administration, the text becomes a clever allegory about art. The administration becomes the force of the law that pursues the escapee, who represents the artist himself. Depicting the landscapes, jobs, and people of America through the dualities of danger and safety, capture and escape, the book helps us think paranoically about art and encourages us to view the administration akin to the forms of surveillance that operate around the globe. The book inverts America from a territory that could be conceived as "open"—as in a landscape to be explored—to one that is "closed"—seen only through a sequence of situations that either abet capture or provide shelter. For example, a car is only a vehicle if one knows how to dispose of it.⁸⁸ This form of paranoid thinking folds over easily to art because everyone is constantly trying to figure out (through their own surveillance) an artist's meaning. Just as there are no places to visit, only places to hide or be found, for the artist, there is no open environment, only sight premised on various dualities of judgement. Following the route of the escapee, for the artist, thinking becomes the art of anticipating: "They [your opposition] will expect you to: seek high ground...[or] take the easiest route to escape capture. You may want to do things which are totally unexpected by doing things the hard way."⁸⁹ In terms of art, 'high ground' could mean overtly shocking or revolutionary strategies, or anything that might resemble a new avant-garde—exactly what the administration hunts for. The artist must "cool off their body heat" or "throw off their scent" and sometimes even completely reverse habits to keep their pursuers

⁸⁸ Price, *How to Disappear in America*, 7.

⁸⁹ Price, 39.

guessing: “If you’re a smoker,” Rice writes, “stop. If you don’t smoke, start.”⁹⁰ Continually refashioning themselves against their own self-image is the only way to deceive an internalized administration.

Price’s book also beautifully illustrates the Borgesian principle of conceptual writing: an identical text placed in a new context brings an almost infinite new richness. Read through an art context, *How to Disappear in America* shows the complexity of the relationship between avant-garde artists as outsiders. As the escapee passes through small-town America, he hides in the quotidian anonymity of menial labor such as dishwashing, data entry, telephone solicitation, warehouse work, farm work, and manufacturing. Thinking analogically back to *Dispersion* one could view this as Price’s affiliation with, rather than dismissal of, “the bourgeoisie” and those consumers of mass culture. Read differently, however, one might say that anonymity is the choice of the artist but forced on the undocumented worker, who take what they can get for work and often fear “roadblocks, police checkpoints, sobriety checks, immigration checkpoints, [and] agricultural checkpoints.”⁹¹ The anonymity-seeking artist that knows they will eventually be caught by the elite world of art gestures only slums it in hiding. Such disappearance is never the real thing. Perhaps that is one reason why Branden Joseph argues that Price’s attempts at escape are actually efforts to explore the context and content of different distributed media. While that seems plausible, it does not account for how Price attempts to bring the possibility of a distanced statement exploring content and context into the artwork.

The preamble to the book suggests that Price desires to disappear because he has lost conviction in his practice and perhaps in art more generally:

⁹⁰ Price, 39.

⁹¹ Price, 50.

After awhile, there arises a question similar to this one: might it be possible that a person of, say, forty, has seen just about all that has been and will be? Well, catch yourself. That would be an argument against progress. Let's skip that argument. This is where we are! The bottom line is in fact *use*. You're a person who uses things. Use demonstrates an attitude, and attitude is all. Period. 'Nuff said.⁹²

"Use," gets around the problem of progress because it is so universal. If art is seen through the lens of being a general social activity, as a tool to carry out a task rather than solve other issues, then it does not need to deal with its failed critiques. 'Use demonstrates attitude,' which in turn reveals its purpose as simply one kind of activity. It is, however, hard not to think about it as an activity defined by other disciplines, and seeing it from the perspective of a jaded audience:

whatever concepts you signal through your making of things, you end up sanctifying the current state of affairs. Anyone who gazes upon your products might well wonder: "*Must I consult some picture or trinket to learn that power corrupts, desires are commodified, control is paramount, subjectivity is administered?*"⁹³

The idea of critique is that these truisms are continually refashioned anew. This statement is the flipside of the contradiction of escaping the administration that celebrates Price's art. In stating these truisms in the voice of a dismissive outsider, sick of art's putative nuance, Price codifies

⁹² Price, 5.

⁹³ Price, 6.

them not as timeless terms as they are often treated, but as historical terms of the 20th century that are subject to decay. If conviction has been subsumed by the administration, then, like the escapee running from the law, the only way to escape is to *flee conviction*.

The Shape of the Outside

In 2005, as skepticism was rampant about the results institutional critique, Andrea Fraser proposed that the artists of “institutional critique” never sought to dismantle the institution, but rather sought to transform it into an “institution of critique.”⁹⁴ That meant unifying art’s institutions ethically alongside the artists and others that comprised it, by reforming its financial structure, social hierarchies, and core values. Organized through a coherent program, the “institution of critique” could drive broader social change by working from the idea that art’s relationship with other cultural fields is one of an interconnected surface. This conception of an institution of critique comes down to the idea that *there is no outside* to art, that it is part of the outside.

Obviously, this issue of inside and outside is complex because it falls on how one perceives the world (as a single network, as antagonistic formations, as closed systems that occasionally come in contact, etc.). By giving the art insider a negative self-image, a vision of themselves as *being the target of the joke rather than its audience*, Price’s texts present a negative image of the outside. The outside is that which rejects the inside, whatever it may be. In this way, it is a more realistic alternative to an “institution of critique” because it doesn’t assume that this gap between insider and outsider can be bridged.

⁹⁴ Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,” 103.

In the one who dismisses contemporary art as rehashing the same four truisms ad nauseam (“power corrupts, desires are commodified, control is paramount, subjectivity is administered”), we feel that the outside is not constituted by a shared social project but by what antagonizes the institution’s belief. Relatedly, the institution of critique has no way to assimilate the position of a “belief in not believing” as proposed in *Fuck Seth Price*. In the end, Price exposes a new formal line for pursuit. If genealogical criticism requires artworks to do its bidding, what happens when the artwork turns art into a non-instrumental repackaging of genealogical criticism? In doing so, Price’s art becomes that which escapes genealogical method.

The Art of the Tongs and the Hook: Bernadette Corporation's Epic in Jargon

In 2009, *The Complete Poem*, an enigmatic work by the New York art collective Bernadette Corporation, first took shape as an installation at Artist Space in New York City. The materials in that installation—verses printed on sheets along with images of models posing as if in an advertisement—were then published by Koenig Books.⁹⁵ Although *The Complete Poem* was celebrated for capturing the chaotic creative energy in New York following the financial crash of 2008, little attention was paid to the radical concept behind the project. I argue that this radical concept involved modernizing the thieves' jargon that has been a creative staple for poets since *Les Ballades en jargon* by Francois Villon and the band of thieves known as *Les Coquillards*. Bernadette Corporation adapts the jargon's core principles and filters them through a Situationist political ideology to create an epic fit for today's political landscape. This jargon is defined by having no interpretable depth below its surface. Instead, depth is replaced by an affiliation with the logic that would view all depth—and all culture—as the material distortion of prior-formed material. In this approach, the project presents an immense challenge to critical method to either identify as a friend or be cast as an enemy.

Theoretical Overview

⁹⁵ Bernadette Corporation, *The Complete Poem* / Bernadette Corporation.

I begin by addressing some core principles behind the group's works that are applied to *The Complete Poem*. Counting the short-run fashion magazine *Made in the USA* (1999-2001), the essay-movie *Get Rid of Yourself* (2001), the novel *Reena Spaulings* (semiotext(e) 2004,) and the screenplay *Eine Pinot Grigio, Bitte* (Sternberg Press, 2007), *The Complete Poem* (2009) was the group's fifth work in a literary or filmic genre. The group tends to take on one genre at a time in a fashion akin to a militaristic avant-garde. To work within a genre, for them, involves laying waste to the productive impulses that allow the novel, poetry, screenplays, or films to coopt collective sentiment and further the cultural domination of individuality. Thus, rather than write within a tradition, Bernadette Corporation attempts to overthrow traditions with clever methods of collective writing, and procedures that resist coercive forces.

They draw this aesthetic program from Situationist and post-situationist thought, which posits that cultural genres perpetuate *spectacle*. Although Guy Debord (1931-1994), the founder of Situationism, defined spectacle in many different ways, for the purposes of this discussion one definition resonates most: "The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving."⁹⁶ Debord wanted to capture how under capitalism, all neutral forms of life become the opposite of life, or the life of zombie ('nonliving') individuals isolated ('autonomous') from any true communal possibility. Today's post-situationist thought builds on Debord's statement by positing that spectacle hides in any notion of a unified human social project. For example, the radical group *Tiqqun* (which may be co-extensive with the authorship group known as *The Invisible Committee*) argue that "the elementary human unity is not the

⁹⁶ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb, Paperbound edition (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2013), 2.

body—the individual—but the form-of-life.”⁹⁷ Establishing the form-of-life construct as prior to the body and the individual allows *Tiqqun* to propose that there is no such thing as a neutral individual or humanity. The neutrality of these concepts merely serves a single (bourgeois) ‘form-of-life’ that has already won the historical conflict that allow such neutral concepts to appear. As a general rule, the ‘form-of-life’ construct implies that neutral forms are the result of apriori conflict, and that nothing is neutral: everything is the result of an ongoing “civil war” that occurs below the surface of the neutral world.⁹⁸ In this way, post-situationism adapts Nietzsche’s genealogical method to carry out the ceaseless exposure of a past conflict hidden within present concepts, objects, or ideas.⁹⁹ Resisting spectacle in cultural genres such as fiction or poetry means fighting those aspects in a genre that subsume resistance within their medium. For example, a novel’s single viewpoint, which appears to capture the diversity of the collective world, but is largely that world through one mind, would need to be fought through collective authorship.

The Autonomous Movement of the Unliving

Bernadette Corporation’s books engage in this combat through extreme, even paradoxical forms of thinking, creation, and action. Before discussing their methods, I will discuss what

⁹⁷ Tiqqun (Collective) and Jason E. Smith, eds., *Introduction to Civil War*, trans. Alexander R. Galloway, Semiotext(e) Intervention Series 4 (Los Angeles : Cambridge, Mass: Semiotext(e) ; Distrubuted by MIT Press, 2010), 16.

⁹⁸ Tiqqun (Collective) and Smith, 11.

⁹⁹ Because it implies that conflict—and specifically working-class conflict and a Marxist worldview—is the foundational position of any debate, it is often considered too extreme and reductive for the academy.

readers find directly on the surface of their texts. Images of ‘the autonomous movement of the unliving’ are a consistent characteristic of Bernadette Corporation books. These zombies are not images of flesh-eating undead, but rather eccentric beings, “forms-of-life” in random concatenations of excess in contemporary life’s smorgasborg of capitalism gone wild. For example, in their novel *Reena Spaulings*, the protagonist Reena encounters a panoply of zombies in the nightclub *Waste*: “After dodging a Paris Hilton look-alike with no arms to pick up a few free drinks at the bar, Reena sat down on a low bench in one of the narrow hallways, next to a group of French guys wearing home-customized jeans of the kind girls in dancehall videos used to wear, facing a video about a rowdy group of fashion models on a camping trip.”¹⁰⁰ In their screenplay *Eine Pinot Grigio, Bitte*, zombies populate the “Love Parade”: “A turnip-head drunk sleeps face down on the ground, chewing on a branch. The bald-headed lady with her jeans down at the ankles has her arms held fast by two friends. She swings infantile joy at her bare ass smeared with shit. Everyone is laughing until crying.”¹⁰¹ *The Complete Poem* is replete with similar images, delivered in off-beat, bouncy verse: “Jane is saying ‘Cops must fuck off’ as her shit-stained Shar-pei follows her down the endless / and unpainted hall. / Dog-filled squats are stink. Jane ping-pongs to a dead-end, a trapped rat in her maze-like commune.”¹⁰² The attentive reader might notice a contradiction. In all of these instances, the ‘autonomous movement of the unliving’ are not subjects stultified under capital’s rule; they are subjects filled with *life* in all its variety. In the line of verse from *The Complete Poem*, the rhymes, alliteration and ping-ponging

¹⁰⁰ Bernadette Corporation (Collective), ed., *Reena Spaulings*, Semiotext(e) Native Agents Series (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 22.

¹⁰¹ Bernadette Corporation, ed., *Eine Pinot Grigio, Bitte* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2007), 41.

¹⁰² Bernadette Corporation, *The Complete Poem / Bernadette Corporation*, 18.

consonance of “shit-stained sharpei” and ‘dog-filled squats are stink’ serve to reinforce this joie de vivre. In this observation lies a central principle of BC books: the ‘autonomous movement of the unliving’ is the source not only of the deathliness of spectacle but of great possibility. This principle is reinforced in a review by BC member John Kelsey of Serge Bard’s film *Detruisez-vous* (Destroy Yourself) found in BC’s journal, *Made in the USA* (#3). Kelsey admires how in the film “the use of fashion models in combination with militant slogans, as well as the unblinking deadpan faces of the kids, start to suggest a beautiful and dangerous population forming somewhere between Marx and *Vogue*....A crowd ready to destroy everything and themselves in order that the world can be as beautiful, blank, and young as they are.”¹⁰³ A similar sentiment is repeated in *The Complete Poem* in a line that describes a new population “shortening the distance from Marx to Mel Karch.”¹⁰⁴ The Godardian romanticism on the page is deceptive, however, as it is generated through a production method calculated to evacuate the qualities at the core of youth and fashion culture.

Production Method

Readers may assume that what is seen on the page is the product of conventional authorship, but often the final text is the result of procedures calculated and executed to undermine the individualizing aspects of a specific cultural genre. For example, *Reena Spaulings*, as explained in the introduction, was generated by assigning sections or styles to a collection of different writers who could not see what others had already written. This collective “exquisite corpse” method ends up generating the conditions of a zombified voice or identity that

¹⁰³ Bernadette Corporation, “Made in the USA #3,” *Badlands Unlimited*, 2001 2012.

¹⁰⁴ Bernadette Corporation, *The Complete Poem* / Bernadette Corporation, 16.

cuts deeper than anything written by a single author—or rather that cuts to the core of the deception of novelistic writing, which presents a world through the eyes of a single figure. The implication of BC’s novel is that such a form of production always inevitably ends up furthering rather than resisting spectacle, whose resistance must begin from communality in contradiction with the tenets of novelistic writing. For them, the mode of production—a symptom of forms-of-life already in conflict—governs artistic expression, and to work in a genre means directly resisting that mode of production in method.

Put straightforwardly: *how* the group writes or processes language reflects an ideology. This approach to the arts is common in contemporary radical art theory. The artist Hito Steyerl, to take another example, has expressed a similar approach regarding “The articulation of protest.” Working through effective strategies for presenting protest in film, Steyerl claims that “the question of articulation concerns the organization of its expression—but also the expression of its organization.”¹⁰⁵ A film that truly supports revolutionary struggle, she implies, must not only show events, but must also express its revolutionary ideology in *how* it depicts what it depicts, i.e. in its technical use of a medium.¹⁰⁶ That modernist principle carries over to

¹⁰⁵ Hito Steyerl and Franco Berardi, *The Wretched of the Screen*, E-Flux Journal 6 (Berlin: Sternberg Pr, 2012), 78.

¹⁰⁶ Steyerl’s aesthetic ideology carries both modernist Marxist overtones in assuming that no story can be effective if it fails to resist the mode of production of film itself. As she explains in her examples, to truly articulate protest, a film must formally resist the factory-style process that constitutes the status quo of a particular type of formal practice of *montage*. Steyerl argues that the film *Showdown in Seattle* which centers on the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle, uses conventional montage and “in this way...is completely analogous to the form used by the corporate media, only the content is different.” By contrast, the film *Ici et ailleurs* by Jean-Luc Godard and Anne Marie Miéville shows montage’s strategy to be “far from innocent and unproblematic,” and therefore the argument goes, is a more properly revolutionary strategy for film. This logic, however, assumes that increasing an audiences exposure

Bernadette Corporation texts, though they reverse the hierarchy that would subordinate fiction to the truth of politics. A perfectly revolutionary method can produce hyper-capitalist subjects, as shown in their many instances of the ‘autonomous movement of the non-living.’

The Complete Poem

We can now turn to *The Complete Poem* with these basic tenets in place: like all of their books in specific genres, *The Complete Poem* is constructed via a collective procedure that reflects forms-of-life in conflict. Second, the group treats poetry as a form of language ideologically geared either towards furthering or resisting *spectacle*, the name that the Situationists give to the omnipotent power of capital (more on this later). Third, the group does not subordinate their works to exposing truth in a hierarchical manner. Instead, they are geared towards exploring the bizarre possibilities and dangerous potential of the autonomous movement of the unliving.

I argue that *The Complete Poem* takes up the principles of jargon, the secret language of beggars and thieves, a coded communication used by the world’s dangerous classes.¹⁰⁷ There are many ways into exploring this facet of the book, which is a complex document that crosses multiple mediums and deals with a number of esoteric art-historical and theoretical sources. I

to production strategies and metaphorically resisting various methods of industrial production in film is a more “honest” method. This would seem to run counter to socialist realism and these strategies could easily be seen to increase rather than fight entertainment value.

¹⁰⁷ Hadumod Bussmann and Gregory Trauth, *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*, [Online-ausg.] (London: Routledge, 1996), 85.

begin by discussing what we know about the book from its appearance and from statements by critics and the members of the group. Then, I close-read select passages to support my argument.

As mentioned, *The Complete Poem* began as an art exhibition at the New York City gallery Artist Space, comprised of two parts: advertisement-style photographs of models posing in denim, and pages of verse. Now published as a book, the organization of verses appear to add meaning. The outer layer of stanzas are the most difficult form to decipher. These are the clearest instance of stanzas written in jargon, a riddle or code that cannot be fully cracked by outsiders lacking the key. This enclosing armor of stanzas surrounds the inner forms, which grow increasingly dumb as readers move closer to the center binding. Within the enclosure, there are different unique verse forms. Long sections of the book are written in a Bernadette Corporation “blank” verse. These lines are not exactly unrhymed iambic pentameter, but rather lines that apply a corporate “BC” brand to a 2-5 syllable iambic line in the form of a simple constraint: Each line contains a word that begins with the letter “b” and the letter “c.” For example, “Take one Bosnian Colonel / put him in a Bulgarian Capital / with a pound of Bolivian cocaine, and ignore the buzzards circling / overhead.”¹⁰⁸ There are sixty-four sonnet-like stanzas written in a fifteen-line form in sequences of eight, a prose form, and a single line that cuts across the middle of 40 or so pages. In the center of the book, readers find simplest form, “the small mug,” a quatrain with little ambiguity (though plenty of irony). Some were even printed on coffee mugs. Here’s one of them:

MUGS

¹⁰⁸ Bernadette Corporation, *The Complete Poem / Bernadette Corporation*, 28.

NYC is very safe.

You don't need a gun.

Grab a to go coffee.

NYC is for you!¹⁰⁹

The small mug demonstrates a blunted version of the topic that concern all the forms in the book: the hedonistic and chaotic story of a “New York in shreds”—reeling from the 2008 financial crisis, neighborhoods facing gentrification by a new creative class, the changes of fashion culture, an increasingly corporate art world, a growing class divide, and discontent building from the working class. As in *Reena Spaulings*, New York's collapse and rebirth is not merely expressed in content but constructed through a particular production method. The group has divulged that basic source material was contributed by various members of the group and then put through procedures. BC member Jim Fletcher has added that the rhythm and meter of some lines in the sonnet-like stanzas were created by copying the meter from ad copy on different products. For example, line 6 in each of the 64 stanzas, he tells us, copies the meter of the ad copy on a bottle of Hellman's Easy Squeeze Mayonnaise.¹¹⁰ So, that earlier line from the poem:

¹⁰⁹ Bernadette Corporation, 77.

¹¹⁰ Jim Fletcher et al., eds., *2000 Wasted Years: In Relation to the Exhibition Bernadette Corporation: 2000 Wasted Years, Artists Space, New York, September - December 2012 ; Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, March - June 2013* (London: Koenig Books, 2014), 324. Lines six and seven are the two long lines that run over. In the above stanza, line 6 begins, “Can't we let a poem grind down wills...”

“Jane is saying ‘Cops must fuck off’ as her shit-stained Shar-pei follows her down the endless and unpainted hall,” was supposed to metrically reflect this one from a bottle of mayonnaise: “Hellman’s Easy Out non-stick package allows you to use more of your favorite mayonnaise and leave less behind.”¹¹¹ It is a loose quantitative transcription, but the choice of mayonnaise copy as the source of meter makes a clear statement: the bohemian spontaneity of bodies in motion in this verse form is governed or arranged by the whitewashing of true diversity into a bland mush (mayonnaise). Fletcher also tells us that certain sections were created by loosely transcribing the meter and word relationships of the ad copy from a bit of DV recorder instruction copy. These lines:

Notice darling asses in line ordering a tea.

Or darling thought processes of a shot afternoon.

Shirts. I asked him whether or not he’d like us to take our
shirts off.¹¹²

reflect these instructions:

Set the TIMER switch on the front panel to REPEAT.

The Timer indicator on the front panel lights.

Press REWIND to rewind the tape to its beginning.

¹¹¹ Bernadette Corporation, *The Complete Poem / Bernadette Corporation*, 18.

¹¹² Bernadette Corporation, 18.

Press PLAY¹¹³

As with the mayonnaise meter, we can infer that what appears to be the unfolding eccentricity of variety and flavor is an assembly-line product made by executing a mechanical procedure over and over again. The 64 sonnet-like stanzas mimic the erasing, rewinding, and replaying of moving images, to produce the fun, dumb quality of the autonomous nonliving. Commodities, these verses tell us, exert pressure in unseen ways, leading to the repeated replay of the images of youth culture and the artist's life.

Fletcher's hints are only the first layer, and by no means resolve the many ambiguities of the book. I will now close read sections of *The Complete Poem* to answer two key questions and come to an understanding of how the poem puts jargon to work. The questions are these: 1) why call it *The Complete Poem*, and 2), why choose the genre of *epic poetry*? To begin, consider this passage:

Here's a model posed in the great hammock of your words.

The model helicopters in your cracked open mouth.

What a lark to extract a poem from the disaster.

Felled larch.

Barely I am able to start something and it's hard.

¹¹³ Fletcher et al., *2000 Wasted Years*, 329. In the final four lines of each stanza, the third word in the eighth line (*model*, in this case) is repeated as the second word in the ninth line. The first word in the penultimate line matches the first word in the final line.

My eyes are filled with lenses. Regardless, I can't see
What's in front of me. I dream opulently, blindly.
What's there?¹¹⁴

The stanza, a section from one of the 15-line forms, self-referentially describes the writing process, which begins not from free expression but from constraint: a model poses in the hammock of your words and helicopters in your cracked open mouth. 'The model' is a conduit for spectacle, and refers to the way that an advertised lifestyle inhibits our ability to express ourselves freely. If the model has already infiltrated us prior to language, then the only way to escape is to somehow anticipate this cooptation by carrying out its strategy on ourselves, to self-sabotage, so to speak, in order to evade detection. The model's procedure explains how the application of commodity meter acts as a disguise that mimics the underlying commodification represented by the model: helicoptering words and 'extracting a poem from the disaster.'

I will save my close reading of the second half of that stanza until after I have established more context. First, this basic idea of the model helps us read the visual images of models that accompany the verse. These images replicate the look and style of a Levi's Jeans advertisement campaign, with Bernadette Corporation going so far as to use the same photographer as Levi's did. I have paired an image from the original campaign alongside a Bernadette Corporation remake to show their proximity:

¹¹⁴ Bernadette Corporation, *The Complete Poem / Bernadette Corporation*, 16.



Fig 1. Levi's Jeans



Fig. 2. Bernadette Corporation

As in the verse, in which the rhythm of consumer language imposes the ruling measure of commodities over the free, hedonistic expression on the surface, these images are ruled by the stylistic properties of advertising. The pinpoint accurate copy suggests a thin disguise that is stylistically identical to advertisements but born of a revolutionary purpose. A press release from the original Levi's campaign states that the company's aim was to capture "global youth culture" and "the essence of contemporary cool" by forgoing brand names and highlighting the model's "intricate tattoo work—the name of his band on a wrist, a pair of eyes on the neck, and three stars on the forearm—on his naked skin."¹¹⁵ Writing about *The Complete Poem*, Chris Kraus cut to the point of Bernadette Corporation's attempt to remake the ad: "Like all models in ad

¹¹⁵ <https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/BU0808/S00106.htm?from-mobile=bottom-link-01>

campaigns, the product is really themselves—and by extension a life in jeans.”¹¹⁶ “[Bernadette Corporation’s] images, Kraus continues, “matter-of-factly expose fashion photography’s potent but limited bag of tricks for conflating youth and lifestyle.”¹¹⁷ However, *exposure* seems to be less the point of BC’s gesture. As with their poetic strategies, the goal seems more likely perfect evacuated mimicry as a disguise. They want to use the autonomous movement of the nonliving to generate an almost indistinguishable disguise. But to do what? In the Bernadette Corporation’s copy image above, twenty-dollar bills float away in the wind, or are blown off camera by a studio fan. The detail hints at something that will be taken up later in the verses: how to stop the flow of exchange.

One section of verse outlines the same condition displayed in the images. Like the model’s body, the verse conceals its branding strategies:

We’re busy. Conceptualism
was both an attention to the contingent
by which communitarian impulses
stole the beauty that’s channeled
in biennials, and the social contagion
of discourse. Before it was captioned
its boat was carefully documented:
black-and-white culture.
We prefer the blithe charm
of the beach, its open character.
At bottom, what constitutes
and brings home the canon
is not beautiful. Committed
to what becomes us, compulsively

¹¹⁶ Chris Kraus, “The Complete Poem/Bernadette Corporation,” in *Where Art Belongs*, Semiotext(e) Intervention Series 8 (Los Angeles, Calif. : Cambridge, Mass: Semiotext(e) ; Distributed by the MIT Press, 2011), 47.

¹¹⁷ Kraus, 46.

wiping our behind, we convey
a burgeoning desire for a car!¹¹⁸

As with the tattoos on the Levi's model, the Bernadette Corporation brand is "tattooed" on the verse's "naked skin" by way of recurring words beginning with "b" and "c" in each line. The verse outlines the historical tension of revolutionary strategies being subsumed back into the systems they attack, thus necessitating ever new disguises. Conceptualism, the verse tells us, enacted two communistic actions: attention to the 'contingent,' or to the supplemental factors in art's production, which destroyed the conventional notion of objects sellable at biennials, and 'the social contagion of discourse,' or the viral spread of consumerism that crosses all subjects. Conceptualism's 'boat,' however, 'was carefully documented: black and white culture.' In other words, its mobility was given the label 'black and white culture,' possibly a reference to print media, and the documenting and captioning of its impermanent gestures in images and words allowed this market-resistant energy to be co-opted by the biennial forces it resisted. The word 'beach' carries a number of resonances. It could refer to the situationist slogan, "sous les pavés, la plage," which could be translated as "beneath the streets, the beach" (a translation that preserves some of the rhyme) or as "beneath the cobblestones, the beach" to emphasize the act of picking up the stones and throwing them at police. *Beach* also relates back to the original Levi's ad. 'The blithe charm' sounds like it refers to a person. Coincidentally, the model in the ad's name is Josh *Beech*, so the word could refer to the group's interest not in attacking but in hiding within the aesthetic that makes 'Beech' an appealing model for advertising agencies.

¹¹⁸ Bernadette Corporation, *The Complete Poem / Bernadette Corporation*, 55–56.

Most notably, *beach* suggests the political statement behind the project and its poetic strategies. The opening stanzas of jargon in *The Complete Poem* are signed with the name THE ARMED BATHERS. The ‘bather’ is a French term for beachgoing tourist, relevant to certain activities that the group carried out with the Tiquun/The Invisible Committee group. Prior to this project, the groups allegedly collaborated on the incendiary Debord-style essay film *Get Rid of Yourself*, which documented the groups’ participation in the protests at the G8 convention in Genoa in 2001.¹¹⁹ As the scholar and activist Jeffrey Juris explains, insurgent activities at the protest involved devious forms of deceiving authorities. As it happened, the headquarters for the various protest groups, the Genoa Social Forum (GSF), was located on the beach. When stopped and questioned by police, protestors would pretend to be tourists on a seaside vacation.¹²⁰ In the movie, subtle references are made to this disguise, with shots of a seaside landscape and forms of disguise. The signature THE ARMED BATHERS is telling us that it is this same group of radical seaside tourists are behind *The Complete Poem*.

While *Get Rid of Yourself* focused on the groups’ activities in Genoa, *The Complete Poem* hints at their activities in the notorious Tarnac sabotage of 2008, when a twisted metal bar was found slung on a railway information cable so as to scramble the scheduling information across stations in France’s national railway network. Tips led authorities to the small mountain town of Tarnac, France, where the members of *Tiquun*/The Invisible Committee were living and running the town’s general store. President Sarkozy sent in a terrorist response team to arrest the

¹¹⁹ Simpson, Bennett, “Techniques of Today: Bennett Simpson on Bernadette Corporation.,” *Artforum International*, September 2004.

¹²⁰ Jeffrey S. Juris, *Networking Futures: The Movements against Corporate Globalization*, Experimental Futures (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2008), 163.

group, who were eventually charged with “association of wrongdoers in relation to a terrorist undertaking,” and barred from convening.¹²¹ Toscano called the case the “metastasis of a transnational politics of securitization,” and argued that the extreme charges failed to distinguish between terrorism and sabotage, amounting to the prosecution of preterrorism, an ominous precursor to totalitarianism.¹²²



Alleged photograph of the torqued metal bar
from a French newspaper.

There are covert references to the sabotage at different points in *The Complete Poem*. For example: “Jam the railway lines, tie up transports. A bent bar is lobbed high in electric conduits and high speeds are slowed. / Tarnac commies own no weapons. They take things to break things while unplugging empire’s abstract ATMs.”¹²³ Bernadette Corporation’s participation in this activity would explain why they are resorting to jargon in the first place. The stanzas in jargon that open and close the book describe the close connection between the group’s poetic strategies and the sabotage enacted in Tarnac. One set of stanzas stands out:

¹²¹ Comité invisible, *The Coming Insurrection*, trans. Robert Hurley, Semiotext(e) Intervention Series 1 (Los Angeles, CA : Cambridge, Mass: Semiotext(e) ; Distributed by The MIT Press, 2009).

¹²² Alberto Toscano, “The War against Pre-Terrorism,” *Radical Philosophy* 154, no. March/April 2009 (2009), <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/the-war-against-pre-terrorism>.

¹²³ Bernadette Corporation, *The Complete Poem / Bernadette Corporation*, 106.

What kind of plug is it?

Specifically universal, basically
it fits.

If you can hear something
it means you're in some kind of shape

Bearing some resemblance to an upside
down plant. Either transplantation
shapes you or you're shaped for
it, doesn't matter that much
that matters don't count.

L, there's a joint and a hinge,
has a bolt that swings rely on,
and this is how it comes to pass
that a thing you never saw
is now in your lap.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Bernadette Corporation, 10–11.

Just as the metal bar was bent to stop the transit of scheduling information in the Tarnac sabotage, so words are bent to plug the transit of meaning. The ‘plug’—something that stops the flow of things—is something ‘specifically universal, basically it ‘fits.’ What is ‘specifically universal’ could refer to that which crosses all languages: the material distortions on language carried out for revolutionary struggle. The phrase ‘If you can hear something / it means you’re in some kind of shape’ plays on the two meanings of *shape*. On one hand, those who can hear this message are “physically fit”—they’ve trained themselves to hear it. On the other hand, this reader recognizes that they are within something that has ‘shaped’(determined) them; they recognize that all free expression is *shaped by* or ‘made fit’ by something else. This class war ‘shapes you or you’re shaped for it’—whether you know it or not, it organizes the world. Such an idea aligns with the use of commodity ad copy to *shape* the verses in hidden ways. Finally, to be ‘in some kind of shape / Bearing some resemblance to an upside / down plant’ plays on different meanings of *plant*. Fitness comes from communist revolution: you must be ready to ‘turn upside down’ (overthrow) ‘the plant’ (factory). That final line (‘it doesn’t matter that matters don’t count’) also could be another covert reference to the ad copy of commodities, which exert governance even though they don’t mean much or don’t ‘count’.

Next, note that the ‘upside down plant’ is enacted upon the letter “L,” transforming it into a ‘thing you never *saw*.’ Words in jargon are not *sawed* but bent and twisted. As Alice Becker-Ho explains, jargon involves bending words by using phonetic, graphic, and figurative materials of language such as “aphaeresis, apocope, paronymic attraction, catachresis, doublet, epenthesis, epithesis, metaphor, metathesis, metonym, synonymic or homonymic substitution, synecdoche, etc.” Through these strategies, the deceptive activities of the dangerous classes become deceptive

poetic maneuvers with words.¹²⁵ “Loan words,” in the jargon, Becker-Ho continues, “are above all borrowing of one dangerous class from another...The more acute the sense and the consciousness of class...the more this language is regarded by those who speak it as emblematic.”¹²⁶ In two seminal studies from the 1990s—*Les Princes du Jargon* (*The Princes of Jargon*) and *L’Essence du Jargon* (*The Essence of Jargon*)—Becker-Ho theorized the radical potential of this secret language used by the world’s revolutionary classes to communicate freely amidst surveillance.¹²⁷ Becker-Ho traced the practice to traveling bands of Romani people and thieves from medieval France, such as the band of thieves known as *Les Coquillards*.¹²⁸ Though jargon has long been studied by linguists, the main idea added to the discussion by Becker-Ho was that the distortion of words reflected the revolutionary action of fighting wage labor.

For example, take Becker-Ho’s explanation for the use of the words *an ace*, (“un as” in the French pronounced AHH,) and *a bone* (“un os,” in the French pronounced OSE):

“AS, OS: despite the misleading homophones [*viz.* Fr. *un as*: an ace/*un os*: a bone], carry the meaning in argot of both arse and chance (always associated).”¹²⁹

What do *ace* and *bone* have to do with *arse* and *chance*? With ‘un as’, it is obvious: an ace is lucky, and, spoken in English but perhaps with a French accent, ‘*an ace*’ sounds like “an *ass*.”

¹²⁵ Alice Becker-Ho, *An English Translation of Les Princes Du Jargon: Un Facteur Négligé Aux Origines de l’argot Des Classes Dangereuses* = *The Princes of Jargon: A Neglected Factor at the Origins of Dangerous-Class Slang*, trans. John McHale, Expanded ed, Studies in French Literature, v. 75 (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), 57.

¹²⁶ Becker-Ho, *The Essence of Jargon*, 94, 65.

¹²⁷ Becker-Ho, *An English Translation of Les Princes Du Jargon*; Becker-Ho, *The Essence of Jargon*.

¹²⁸ Becker-Ho, *The Essence of Jargon*, 19.

¹²⁹ Becker-Ho, 101.

‘Un os’ (a bone) could connect to the French word *bon* (meaning *good*) and refer to a good or a lucky card, such as an ace. More vulgarly, giving someone “the bone or “boning” someone also could be in play, as it refers to taking advantage of a “mug” or mark. Becker-Ho argues that the intonation of ‘AS’ in the English saying “*my Grandmother’s EYES*” (which in my pronunciation doesn’t sound anything like *ace*) and which means “to have both red aces in one’s hand” connects with the French term “aller à l’ARCHE,” which in “swindler’s slang” means “to recover the money lost by a mug on parole,” as well as referring to an “arsehole: fool, idiot.”¹³⁰ As this example illustrates, jargon is “specifically universal”—it operates across specific languages by using a homophonic translation, in this case between French and English. The improvisation involved in making this leap is the distinguishing factor that disqualifies it for some scholars and makes it illegible to some readers. Accepting and seeing the language of the dangerous classes requires a willingness to create connections rather than just find them, and for readers to forgo what Becker-Ho considers the bourgeois foundation of linguistic analysis. To see jargon, readers must, on some level, identify with the ideology of the dangerous classes and accept that class war can act as a governing measure across specific languages. Once that belief is accepted, the active language of the dangerous classes is less something to be cracked than improvised upon. In jargon there may never have been a code; or rather the code is less a science than an improvisatory art of using one’s knowledge of the history of working-class survival to tease out language’s communion with revolutionary activity.

One more resource can help us parse the “L” you never *saw*. The phonetic property of “ell” inside “L,” leads us to an essay by BC member John Kelsey in which he laments the cooptation of the artist into a career of endless production, through all waking hours and

¹³⁰ Becker-Ho, 101–2.

activities. Kelsey dreams of a way to first measure then interrupt this labor via an what is known as the *Tagwerk*, an ancient way to measure labor. In the contemporary artist's life a *Tagwerk*, he remarks, would have to include "the total nowhere of our never-ending immersion in a de-localizing production time that includes both work and non-work. It would measure our full self-employment in a spreading non-place, which is beyond measure."¹³¹ A stanza of the jargon seems to refer directly to Kelsey's desire: "Self-unemployment / Like a travel adapter, / adapting the material of yourself / to the tray table / in the best looking way possible."¹³² Pairing Kelsey's essay with the poem, we can infer that a contemporary *Tagwerk* is an effort to interrupt or sabotage the artist's self-employment in the very same fashion as the metal bar was meant to interrupt the routine of the workday in France. Kelsey's words echo the tone of Alberto Toscano's discussing the infamous sabotage at Tarnac that was attributed to The Tiquun/The Invisible Committee group in France in 2008: "To sabotage the social machine with some consequence today means re-conquering and reinventing the means of interrupting its networks. How could a TGV line or an electrical network be rendered useless?"¹³³ Kelsey's goal for the *Tagwerk* is quite similar: to measure and disrupt the totality of time that an artist devotes to their work. To do that would require creating a work of art that required *no* work, or as one line in the

¹³¹ John Kelsey, *Rich Texts: Selected Writing for Art*, ed. Daniel Birnbaum and Isabelle Graw (Berlin New York, NY: Sternberg Press, 2010), 180.

¹³² Bernadette Corporation, *The Complete Poem / Bernadette Corporation*, 10.

¹³³ Alberto Toscano, "The War against Pre-Terrorism," *Radical Philosophy* 154, no. March/April 2009 (2009), <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/the-war-against-pre-terrorism>.

poem goes: “This line has 0 percent thought and effort to it.”¹³⁴ Such a strategy allows the group to conceal themselves within the mechanics of the repeated, replayed image of youth culture.

The group’s *Tagwerk* is a ‘lark,’ a joke and hoax that hints at the more serious notion of *gag*—a key term in Giorgio Agamben’s post-situationist philosophy of language. “Every great philosophical text is the *gag* exhibiting language itself,” Agamben notes, “being-language itself as a gigantic loss of memory, as an incurable speech defect.”¹³⁵ Or as a line in the verse puts it, ‘Barely I am able to start something and it’s hard.’ The ‘gag’ ridicules the idea of free expression in a capitalist world, where the ‘model’ always ‘helicopters’ in your open mouth. I now return to an earlier verse to draw out answer to our key questions regarding the choice of the title *The Complete Poem*, and the choice of the genre of epic.

Here’s a model posed in the great hammock of your words.

The model helicopters in your cracked open mouth.

What a lark to extract a poem from the disaster.

Felled larch.

Barely I am able to start something and it’s hard.

My eyes are filled with lenses. Regardless, I can’t see

What’s in front of me. I dream opulently, blindly.

What’s there?¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Bernadette Corporation, *The Complete Poem / Bernadette Corporation*, 19.

¹³⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, Theory out of Bounds, v. 20 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 60.

¹³⁶ Bernadette Corporation, *The Complete Poem / Bernadette Corporation*, 16.

In the final three lines, the speaker can't see 'what's there,' as the line says, because their 'eyes are filled with *lenses*.' Put differently, a person whose sight is blocked by 'lenses' is engaged in a "blind struggle" with *spectacles* (a synonym for lenses). This is the "blind struggle" that Guy Debord once described as "an epic poem...that no fall of Troy can bring to an end," the struggle of commodities in battle:

Each Individual commodity fights for itself. It avoids acknowledging the others and strives to impose itself every where as if it were the only one in existence. The spectacle is the epic poem of this struggle, a struggle that no fall of Troy can bring to an end.

The spectacle does not sing of men and their arms, but of commodities and their passions.

In this blind struggle each commodity, by pursuing its own passion, unconsciously generates something beyond itself: the globalisation of the commodity (which also amounts to the commodification of the globe). Thus, as a result of the cunning of the commodity, while each particular manifestation of the commodity eventually falls in battle, the general commodity-form continues onward toward its absolute realization.¹³⁷

Depicting the interaction of commodities as a war, Debord adds rhetorical flourish and violent antagonism to Marx's statements on value formation:

The body of each other commodity becomes the mirror of the value of the linen.

So the body of each member is reflected off the linen.

¹³⁷ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 2013, 27.

First the relative expression of value of linen is incomplete (unfertig) because the series which represents it never concludes.

—Marx, “The Value Form”¹³⁸

Marx envisioned commodities “reflecting” off one another in a similarly incomplete fashion as relations of value. Looking closely at Debord’s words, we can see that spectacle, or the ‘epic poem’ of commodities in ‘blind struggle,’ is not a conflict told *in* a genre; *it is the only genre*, or the genre that operates above all others. Seeing genre with this mindset ties together a lot of loose ends about why they choose to work in one genre at a time. Each genre is organized according to the same commodity standard, organized differently. Thus the group identifies that element and works accordingly. As this war is a struggle that ‘no fall of Troy can bring to an end,’ as Debord states, it is by definition, *incomplete*. Therefore, to *complete* the epic poem involves ending the capitalist mode of production. The goal of *The Complete Poem* is nothing short of triggering a communist revolution in words.

How does this work further the revolution in language? Put simply, to “complete” the poem would mean blocking the endless creation of new values. It would involve destroying the exchange value of money, or in the poem’s case, *words*. A few of the stanzas in argot that conclude the book hint at how this can be done:

I should know. So don’t avoid
the bridge when it’s plagued

¹³⁸ Karl Marx, “The Value-Form: Appendix to the 1st German Edition of Capital, Volume 1, 1867,” trans. Mike Roth and Wal Suchting, *Capital and Class* No.4, no. Spring 1978 (1867 1978): 130–50.

with helicopters,
don't run inside just because it's hot
out and don't forget to relax,

Alex, when all the words don't cash in to
images, because if the words ever get to
the dump, they can be dispersed like
old clothes, and the images can be more like,
everybody eats.¹³⁹

These stanzas, from the sections of jargon that open the book, equate revolutionary activist strategies with strategies enacted on language. The first stanza offers advice: if you're carrying out illegal activities, don't draw attention to yourself. 'Don't avoid the bridge when it's plagued with helicopters' or 'run inside just because it's hot'—as in, swarming with police—just stay out in the open and blend in. These lines replay a common theme found in Francois Villon's *Ballades en jargon*, for example:

Changes andosses souvent
Et tires tout droit au temple
Et eschicques tost en brouant
Quen la iarte ne soiez emple

¹³⁹ Bernadette Corporation, *The Complete Poem / Bernadette Corporation*, 162–63.

Change often what you wear
And head straight toward sanctuary,
And watch out as you speed along
Lest you end up in that wide gown.¹⁴⁰

Francois Villon and the group of thieves known as *Les Coquillards* used the jargon to conceal their motives from the police and to avoid the gibbet. The incident at Tarnac tells us that the structure of authority remains the same, as does the need for jargon.

The second Bernadette Corporation stanza details how to destroy the exchange value of words by halting language's capacity to be exchanged for images. If the 'words ever get to the dump,' then 'everybody eats'—'images' can become more communist. What is being articulated is an ars-poetica of communist strategies that torque the material of words rather than allow them to operate as referential vehicles for images. When one learns to read through the poetic strategies, *The Complete Poem* is filled with passages giving advice on forms of physical and linguistic subterfuge. "Helicopters" to refer to "police helicopters," which then links polysemically to the surveillance of spectacle. There are instances of *epenthesis* (word concealed in another word) as for example with the name "Alex" repeated inside the word "relax." There are puns, such as how the phrase "desire for a car!" refers to a desire for political *autonomy*. Once we grasp that poetic language is not being deployed as a representational vehicle for content but as a tool and weapon

¹⁴⁰ François Villon and Barbara Nelson Sargent-Baur, *Complete Poems*, Toronto Medieval Texts and Translations 9 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 302–3.

in an ongoing war waged by the subordinate classes, then many of the strategies of *The Complete Poem* become clearer.

THE IMAGINARY PARTY AND BLOOM

In 1999, *Tiqqun* published a manifesto theorizing a new political party that they called “The Imaginary Party.”¹⁴¹ Over the course of twenty-seven theses, *Tiqqun* outlines their program for a political party against production, one that can never be subsumed into a positive force. This position, they explain, is necessary due to spectacle’s ability to “render invisible expressions of negation”:

Because there is at first but the negative party of negativity, and because of an inability to liquidate this, the sorcery of the Spectacle consists in rendering invisible the expressions of negation—and this goes as well for the liberty to act as for suffering or pollution—its most remarkable character is precisely to be reputed as nonexistent, or, to be more exact, imaginary.¹⁴²

The unspoken target of the passage is moderates who might dismiss the concept of *spectacle* as imaginary. In a clever twist, *Tiqqun* argues that this very dismissal is a symptom of spectacle. As they explain:

¹⁴¹ “Theses on the Imaginary Party” was originally published in vol. 1 of group’s journal, *Tiqqun: Conscious Organ of the Imaginary Party : Exercises in Critical Metaphysics*, 1999. It can be read here:

<https://libcom.org/library/theses-imaginary-party>

¹⁴² Ibid, Thesis 1.

It is thus in the essence of the Spectacle to cast the opposing camp as a negligible residue, to make of it a total nothing, and which comes to the same thing, to declare it criminal and inhuman in its entirety, under the pain of having to know itself for a criminal and a monster. At bottom, it's why there are in this society but two parties: the party of those who pretend that there is but one party, and the party of those who know that there are in truth two. Already from this observation, one will know to recognize our party.¹⁴³

In those who 'pretend that there is but one party,' *Tiqqun* again condemns the social project that would ignore the class struggle for a broader conception of humanity. For *Tiqqun*, spectacle renders invisible expressions of negation by subsuming them into a positive force. They position their program in an ideological space prior to argument, a formally interesting but also tenuous space. If negativity always becomes positive through *spectacle*, the negation of negativity leads to an 'imaginary party.' Their stance creates a problem, as it lifts spectacle above criticism, since to criticize it is, by their estimation, to serve spectacle.

For *Tiqqun*, modern existentialism comes from our collective inability to recognize the root of our sorrow: capitalism. *Tiqqun* personifies modernity's malaise as *Bloom*, named after the fictional character Leopold Bloom in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). "As an observable *Stimmung*, as a specific affective tonality," they explain, "Bloom results from the extreme abstraction of the conditions of existence of the Spectacle."¹⁴⁴ Any modern art that lacks a

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ *Tiqqun* (Collective), ed., *Theory of Bloom*, trans. Robert Hurley, Lizenzausgabe (LBC Books [o.A. zum Erscheinungsort], 2012), 45–47.

fleshed out conception of the relationship between form and politics is Bloom. He is exemplified, Tiqqun says, by the metropolitan hipster, a voracious consumer of his own sorrowful self:

As the ultimate consumer of existence, the *hipster* lives within the confines of an endless experimentation *on himself*. Afflicted with a definitive lack of belief in humanity or in language, he has measured the volume of his being and decided never to go outside it, unless it's to ensure the self-promotion of his sterility. In this way, he has replaced the emptiness of experience with the experience of emptiness, while expecting an adventure for which he stays prepared but which never happens: all the possible scenarios have already been written. From ecstasy to disappointment, the solitary mass of *hipsters*—always already disappeared, always -already *forgotten*—continues drifting, like a raft full of suicidal dudes, lost on a depressionist ocean made of images and abstractions. They have nothing to transmit, nothing but the stock phrases about failed enjoyments and an aimless life in a furnished void.¹⁴⁵

Bloom is a large-scale attack on a modernist aesthetics without a program. Floating on the 'depressionist ocean,' the self-absorbed artist fails to see a cause for their suffering. A moment in *The Complete Poem* captures this 'raft' of dudes in a shipwreck, that, ironically, becomes the only moment that they recover language and action as a single unified force:

the on-screen disaster being a metaphor for a disaster in the real world, or for the invisible disaster each viewer carries inside, and if metaphor is an old Greek word for transportation, then a sinking ship is both a metaphoric disaster and a disaster of metaphor, as this is what is coming, as you¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Tiqqun (Collective), 51.

¹⁴⁶ Bernadette Corporation, *The Complete Poem* / Bernadette Corporation, 156–58.

Echoing Tiquun's chiasmus ("emptiness of experience/ experience of emptiness") Bernadette Corporation describe a poetic language that capsizes the image of language as a *vehicle* for content. A metaphor of disaster becomes a disaster of metaphor, leaving a language that has seen its exchangeability with images destroyed. In this uproarious *gag*, this "game of words replacing images, of descriptions replacing the world, canceling it," self-absorption becomes self-consuming.¹⁴⁷ To destroy "Bloom," subject, object, and language all must go down on the sinking ship. Eventually there is nothing left and the poem is complete.

¹⁴⁷ Bernadette Corporation, "Made in the USA #2," *Badlands Unlimited*, 2000 2012.

Tan Lin's Poetry of Mechanical Lies

“The last thing one wants to do while reading a poem is to care,” Tan Lin states in one of his characteristic proclamations that upend poetic convention.¹⁴⁸ “No one ever really knew Ronald Reagan, not Nancy, not the seventy-seven individuals he saved in his career as a lifeguard, and not even his own children—who have written that on numerous occasions he failed to recognize them. A great poem functions in a similar way. It cannot be remembered, it can only be filled with something that is unknown or no longer contains.”¹⁴⁹ If anyone has built on Andy Warhol’s idiom, it is Lin, who’s poetry is not like poetry, but like listening to someone talk about poetry in an entirely new way. Bad poems are remembered, great poems are forgotten. For Lin, poetry is not about expressing feelings, celebrating memory, or being truthful. It is about the abnegation of feeling, the endless sequence of forgetting that constitutes life, and most of all *lies*:

All lying comes down to sounds, and all sounds ultimately revert to noises and everybody who has ever spoken a word knows that till the day he or she dies. A great poem, like

¹⁴⁸ Tan Lin, “Ambient Stylistics,” *Conjunctions*, no. No. 35, American Poetry: States of the Art (2000): 131.

I mostly quote from this version of “Ambient Stylistics,” which should not be confused with another version, “ambient stylistics” anthologized in *Telling it Slant*.

Tan Lin, “ambient stylistics,” in *Telling It Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s*, ed. Mark Wallace and Steven Marks, Modern and Contemporary Poetics (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 339–65.

¹⁴⁹ Lin, “Ambient Stylistics,” 121.

Ronald Reagan, lies without knowing it. Lies are the most mechanical forms of speech known to man and his noises.¹⁵⁰

It is difficult to discern the relationship between the topics in this passage, or even which topic should hold our focus. Should we focus on the discourse on Reagan as a representative of America in the 1980s, the animalistic sounds of poetry, the different ways *lying* is construed, the speaker's own peculiar persona appearing in these statements, or the relationship between all of the above? 'Lying comes down to *sounds*' and 'sounds ultimately revert to noises,' a statement followed by the speaker himself telling a kind of lie: 'everybody who has ever spoken a word knows that till the day he or she dies.' Who is this contrarian speaker. Where would the impulse to say that 'a great poem, like Ronald Reagan, lies without knowing it'? Is it because Reagan forgot during the height of his Alzheimer's, and somehow a poet's relationship to language should capture some of that detached way of speaking? Finally, how are 'lies the most mechanical forms of speech known to man and his noises'?

The passage is characterized by a few qualities central to Lin's writing. First: the poetry aspired to in the passage is reflected in this peripatetic floating across topics.¹⁵¹ Second: though Lin desires to destroy conventional poetic emotion, his phrases are quite emotive. Take for example this phrase: "What is love an excuse for? Like writing, it usually is an excuse for saying something that didn't need or mean to be said."¹⁵² Third: all emotion is seen through the

¹⁵⁰ Lin, 133.

¹⁵¹ It could be that some sort of sentence parser or selection device is behind these sentences, though it is impossible to pinpoint how.

¹⁵² Lin, "Ambient Stylistics," 135.

discourse of media, as reflecting something non-emotional such as noises, sounds, interruptions, things not said, silence containing sound, etc. Love, in the sentence above, is characterized as a redundancy or verbal repetition. Fourth: Lin conveys emotion by destroying the strategies used to generate emotion in conventional lyric poetry. As Brian Kim Stefans summarizes, “Lies, the deception of surfaces, along with ‘boredom’ and the beauty of things entirely forgotten have since become recognizable Tan Lin themes, like bureaucracy for Kafka or the sea for Melville.”¹⁵³ Lying, being boring, and writing forgetful verse are antithetical to MFA poetry. While Lin’s embrace of these values reflects the conceptual writing avant-garde, his stated belief that poetry should be *easy* complicates that aesthetic. As he explains,

Poetry, like drugs, should not be difficult, it should be easy. Poetry should not be interesting, it should hold out the potential to be very insipid. Boring is the least of what most people have always realized, evidenced by the large numbers of Americans who have never read a poem. Poetry should not be morally uplifting, it should inspire a deep sense of relax. Poetry need not say anything important or humanly meaningful, it should merely evoke a mood.¹⁵⁴

Rather than avant-garde culture, Lin equates poetry with something as easy as watching television. MFAs got it wrong by emphasizing profundity, but avant-gardes did as well by emphasizing difficulty. Poetry should ‘merely evoke a mood.’

¹⁵³ Brian Kim Stefans, *Word Toys: Poetry and Technics*, Modern & Contemporary Poetics (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2017), 145.

¹⁵⁴ Lin, “Ambient Stylistics,” 140.

But what is a mood, or what is the mood of the above passage—and is it poetry? The style of these sentences is found across all of Lin’s writing. Lin has labelled it “ambient stylistics.” As illustrated in the above passages, ambient stylistics is akin to a poetry that *talks about* making poetry easy, which is actually a difficult idea.

More specifically, Lin does not produce boring texts in the manner of other Conceptual Writers, such as Kenneth Goldsmith.¹⁵⁵ Instead, he is interesting about boredom; truthful about lying, and creates something to be read about the value of not reading. To be critical of reading in this way makes Lin a good fit for this study. Though Lin’s attitude resembles Seth Price’s, Lin’s effort to create texts that are critical of reading starts from a different vantage, much earlier in the chain of culture than do the other artists in this study. His ambient stylistics (poetry) begins down in the subject’s relationship to any text. More than just a “mood,” ambient stylistics is characterized by the repeated use of templated anecdotes and aphorisms on erasure, doubling, boredom, and relaxation:

“Today, no poem should be written to be read and the best form of poetry would make all our feelings disappear the moment we were having them.”¹⁵⁶

“To have a photograph is not interesting; to have a photograph of a photograph is, and this is what a poem does better than any photograph can.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Kenneth Goldsmith and Figures (Firm), *Day* (Great Barrington, MA; Berkeley, CA: The Figures ; Distributed by Small Press Distribution, 2003).

¹⁵⁶ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004, the Joy of Cooking*, 24.

¹⁵⁷ Lin, “Ambient Stylistics,” 130.

“That is why most novels and poems are so utterly boring: they try to make something inside happen in an unpredictable way and this is always boring, whereas the best things that happen are barely happening or actually not quite happening on the outside of the novel.”¹⁵⁸

In each phrase Lin presents poetry as the production of a negation of poetic convention. If, as the first sentence says, poetry isn’t written to be read, then what is it meant to do? Lin calls attention to the moment of reading crowding out another experience and generating an artificial feeling. In the second example, how does a poem provide a better photograph of a photograph? Poetry, this sentence proposes, should be doubly artificial. It should not capture reality, but capture the condition of reality being captured. Language might do this by first artificializing *voice*, the capturing mechanism of poetry, so that it is less like a camera capturing reality than a camera capturing a photograph. Finally, in the third example, Lin attacks fiction, which, in trying to invent reality, makes it incredibly boring. Focusing on the context around the reading of the book rather than a book’s content seems to be the route for boring to become interesting.

Mechanical Lies

The structure and logic of these templated phrases can be brought into clearer focus when considered in the context of *lying*, a privileged act to which Lin’s writing persistently refers. Elsewhere in “ambient stylistics,” Lin says that “lying is the most sincere way of expressing

¹⁵⁸ Tan Lin, “Mary Mary Ellen Ellen,” *Conjunctions* No 38, no. rejoicing revoicing (2002): 111.

oneself...the easiest way we have of connecting one thing to another...[and] a highly flirtatious and mechanical form that the body has of creating a specific repetition of itself.”¹⁵⁹ That very same idea is repeated in Lin’s novella *Insomnia and the Aunt*, but framed slightly differently: “As Paul Newman said, lying is a highly flirtatious and mechanical form that the body has of creating a gene pool. For this reason lying is never natural...and best expressed with the eyes, whose motions are perceived to be distinct from the somaform and somatic expressions.”¹⁶⁰ In both of these passages lying is neither a cultural construct nor an ethical act, but a biological survival mechanism of the body. It does not refer to voicing something untrue, but to producing something new. In the first instance, lying creates a specific repetition of the body. In the second instance, it is like a mating dance: a way of attracting suitors to further the gene pool.

An important extended section on lying appears in Lin’s early prose piece, “Mary Mary Ellen Ellen” (2002):

When I look at certain paintings, especially those by Andy Warhol or those members of the Luminist Tradition like John Kensett and Martin Heade, I have trouble breathing. Maybe this is because a very good painting removes oxygen from the air at a constant rate and thus creates a perfectly mechanical system of doubles, and these doubles leave behind fossils, puns, paintings, actors, money. Every great painting is a mechanical lie

¹⁵⁹ Tan Lin, “ambient stylistics,” 344.

¹⁶⁰ Tan Lin, *Insomnia and the Aunt* (Chicago; Berkeley, CA: Kenning Editions ; Small Press Distribution, 2011), 11–13.

about a poem and every great poem is a lie about a painting. This is a poem about money. That is why this is fictional or that is why this is nonfiction pretending to be fictional.”¹⁶¹

Similar properties from the passages above, which are about poetry, appear in Lin’s discussion of fiction. The biological, the cultural, and the ethical cross into a single space. If we are used to saying that a great painting can *take your breath away*, here it does just that, by ‘remov[ing] oxygen from the air at a constant rate. The surrounding context around a painting is a ‘system of doubles,’ but even these doubles seem incoherent. What connects ‘fossils, puns, paintings, actors, money’? Perhaps because fossils are the dead remnants of things once living, puns ‘lie’ in the fashion that they signify two things at once, and paintings, actors, and money often signify something absent. A key sentence at the end transforms mediums into relational categories: ‘every great painting is a mechanical lie about a poem and every great poem is a lie about a painting.’ One medium conceals a reference to the other. But, if, as Lin subsequently states: ‘This is a poem about money,’ then we should assume that what we are actually reading is about *painting*. If he is using words to write about a painting that we readers cannot see, that would explain how this poem is ‘nonfiction pretending to be fictional.’

Lin may be hinting that he is looking at a painting and narrating. For readers of this passage, concealing the ekphrastic situation is what creates the allure of poetry. Seen this way, both fiction and nonfiction are also relational values, or a matter of perspective. Nonfiction is not closer to the real world than fiction. A painting or poem becomes a *mechanical lie* as it is read as the expression of a psyche that is actually a “machine language”—a descriptive speech placed in the wrong context used to trigger a metaphor. Identifying its machine language disperses its

¹⁶¹ Lin, “Mary Mary Ellen Ellen,” 119.

missing contexts and its romance. In this sense, we grasp how, as Lin says in “ambient stylistics,” “the great American poem should be hopelessly redundant.” To be redundant is to present a mundane description that only exists in a hidden viewing context in such a way as to lend it metaphorical, anthropomorphizing properties. “Lying” suddenly appears to be the linguistic feints that come with describing various media within one framework or another. The passage above hints that *lying* means linking together a hybrid language-media environment of which we only gain partial view. Put differently, the concealed view of the painting, the full context of the ekphrastic, is what generates the ambiguity known as “poetry.” In reading Lin’s poetry, a reader is misreading his actual context. In this sense, lying is telling the truth in such a way that the reader mistakes it for something else. A misreading is not only encouraged, Lin implies, it is inevitable, when we start to view media without ethical presumptions.

Conceiving of poetry as a form of misrecognition brings it closer to the notion of everyday life that was the goal of some of the avant-garde, though Lin does not romanticize the content of life. Instead, he presents poetry as the inevitable misrecognitions, occlusions, and deceptions of discursive transit connecting all media formats and occurring at an intimate level as we engage with any text. Lin further advances the logic of the mechanical lying in another passage from “ambient stylistics”:

One wants to make lying less natural, less organic, but one wants to make the machinery of lying with feeling and one’s voice visible like a rule of etiquette or a TV commercial that interrupts a program one is watching. One wants a poetry made out of innumerable interruptions and lies and half truths and averted eyes and the hum of refrigerators being lied to as if they were really machines like us. All lying should aspire to the unnatural and

inanimate part of us, the interruptions, the part of our brain where all our dead feelings go (there are so very many of them lodged there), and lying never abandons us even after the body is dead. One desires an organoleptics of lying, of repeating over and over again those feelings that always lie, and thus are always true to themselves: such lying and only such lying could accommodate the world as we know it. The world is filled with endless shopping malls and paved over wetlands and airports and coffee shops.¹⁶²

Thinking of media in this fashion creates a poetic fit for late capitalist sprawl.¹⁶³ The lie is both animate and inanimate, mechanical and human, unnatural, yet also regenerating the passion sought in the human voice. Rather than accept the human capacities of machines, Lin wants to explore new machinic dimensions lurking in the human and its languages. A poetic for this late capitalist environment must be honest in recognizing the fraudulent side of cultural discourse. In making room for the ‘innumerable interruptions and lies and half truths and averted eyes and the hum of refrigerators being lied to as if they were really machines like us,’ Lin expands the range of our emotional capacity. A language that would level the hierarchy between different media—thought of in the broad sense to include humans and refrigerators—might recover the novelty that has grown stale as humans continue to be positioned atop the hierarchy of media.

¹⁶² Tan Lin, “ambient stylistics,” 345.

¹⁶³ As Jennifer Scappettone notes, this poetic appears as “unflappable poetic analogies, even site reports, for developments (or entropies) architect Rem Koolhaas theorizes in a rather more melancholic tract on ‘Junkspace’.” Jennifer Scappettone, “Versus Seamlessness: Architectonics of Pseudocomplicity in Tan Lin’s Ambient Poetics,” *Boundary 2* 36, no. 3 (September 1, 2009): 67, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-2009-020>.

As a way of seeing language, Lin's approach has ramifications for literary studies, genealogical method, and history. When much of the humanities involves remembering history, Lin's desire to relax the reader and help them forget could be construed as a- or even anti-historical. That this aesthetic is also antithetical to avant-garde political conviction and difficulty, as well as the subject-centered state of MFA poetry, is instructive. Lin, however is not trying to tell us that we should forget the past. And really, his defense of easy entertainment is a backdoor avant-garde gesture. These approaches are tied together for how they carry out the wrong kind of lie—an emotional lie. The lie that they seem to miss is a foundational relationship between media formats and language, one that generates emotion as a mistaken identity.

Humanistic programs driven by a social purpose lack the tools for analyzing this kind of lying. An “organoleptics” of lying, as Lin calls it (involving the use of sense organs) generates novelty by appearing metaphorical. This novelty as we will soon see, is not created or expressed; it is *found* in the misreadings of one media through another. Though Lin rejects what we conventionally think of as truth, he seeks the truth about the untruths of our media. Returning to the passage above, the rhetorical figure that does the most work in bridging the gap between truth and untruth is the pun (one of the ‘evacuated doubles’ from the prior passage). Lying is the ‘most sincere’ form that ‘never abandons us even after the body is dead’ because in death we continue to ‘lie’—supine.

Lin also uses the mechanical lie to critique the modes of address common to criticism and scholarship. One of the common rhetorical templates that he has developed presents readers with the structure of a subordinate clause that is actually not subordinate at all. Usually these take an “As everyone who has ever___can tell you..” variation: “As everyone who has ever watched a TV show about nature or wild animals mating can tell you, beauty, like reading lies in increasing

forms of inexactitude.”¹⁶⁴ Or, “As anyone who has ever sequenced a painting will tell you, perceptual mistakes are never sublime.”¹⁶⁵ And finally: “As any mathematician can tell you, lovers like drapes are feeble signs of a light that can’t come in, for the minute a TV show or a person becomes memorized (the worst form of recognition), it or she ceases to exist in any meaningful way.”¹⁶⁶ The surety of these claims are undergirded by the absurd and unsubstantiated reference to specialized experience. These lies create the ‘mechanical double’ as a romantic lyric. They imply that claims of originality in scholarship echo the same false properties that plague the poetry of the self, a refusal to recognize that plagiarism is central to language. Due to the nature of argument, we are forced to play this role, which, in many ways perpetuates so many lies about how we interact with texts in our day-to-day life.

The evacuated presence at the center of Lin’s mechanical lies fits a cybernetic logic more than an avant-garde one. The term cybernetics in this context refers to the legacy of early architecture of control systems that now has become digital logic. There has long been resistance to cybernetics in avant-garde subsets. The situationist view, for examples, views cybernetic concepts such as “system” and “network” as the latest form of capitalist alienation. To summarize Alexander Galloway, this method abstracts the human decision-maker into a node in a network that has the potential to function either as expected or unexpectedly.¹⁶⁷ In “The Cybernetic Hypothesis,” the post-situationist group *Tiqqun* traces this knowledge formation to

¹⁶⁴ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004, the Joy of Cooking*, 82.

¹⁶⁵ Lin, 26.

¹⁶⁶ Lin, *Insomnia and the Aunt*, 35.

¹⁶⁷ Alexander R. Galloway, “The Cybernetic Hypothesis,” *Differences* 25, no. 1 (May 1, 2014): 107–31, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2420021>.

Claude Shannon's (1916-2001) concept of information, which connected information to the number of binary digits required to encode a message. Once information could be represented and memorized by machines via binary encoding, *Tiqqun* asserts, it could then be sold back to people as interpersonal "communication" in the form of data.¹⁶⁸ "Cybernetics," *Tiqqun* concludes, "is the project of recreating the world within an infinite feedback loop involving these two moments: *representation* separating, *communication* connecting, the first bringing death, the second mimicking life."¹⁶⁹ *Tiqqun*'s critique is that in abstracting human characteristics into data points, humans are separated from their substance. Once that data is packaged and sold as communication, it appears living but is actually dead. For *Tiqqun*, cybernetics and any digital technology that tries to represent the human with a machine reflects Spectacle's continued effort to abstract and dominate humanity. Terms such as system and network may appear new, but they are merely the new shape of the same old alienation of the worker separated from the product of their labor.

Tiqqun's description of communication as evacuated humanity sounds a lot like Lin's mechanical lies and oxygenless doubles. The key difference is that Lin does not see this evacuating of the human as a form of alienation caused by class conflict. Instead, it is a neutral principle embedded in the linguistic relationship of all media formats. Lin's neutral view adapts principles of second-wave "neocybernetic" sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998). The final chapter in Lin's book *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* is titled "dictionary on systems theory," and in an interview, Lin describes the book as a "self-reproducing florilegia...what [Niklas]

¹⁶⁸ *Tiqqun* (Collective), *The Cybernetic Hypothesis*, 2010, 29, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/tiqqun-the-cybernetic-hypothesis>.

¹⁶⁹ *Tiqqun* (Collective), 17–18.

Luhmann terms a ‘loosely-coupled medium.’”¹⁷⁰ To understand the potential that Lin sees in the logic of digital communication for the future of poetry requires a baseline understanding of Luhmann’s theory.

Luhmann, a German sociologist, was a central figure in the second wave cybernetics or “neo cybernetics” of the 1970s-1990s. This wave revised the tenets of systems developed in first wave of cybernetics from the 1940s-1970s. At the time that Luhmann worked, critical theory was maturing and becoming popular. Luhmann was something of an outsider to this movement, as he considered the emphasis on humanistic action in critical theory (as in the work of Jürgen Habermas) to be sentimental and flawed. This problematic humanism mitigated the potential of social theory by relying on the notion of society as a single unified field of “stratification” and “unequal distribution” (as in Marxism). Luhmann realized that a revised version of cybernetic systems theory could resolve this issue. He proposed that society was instead made up of intersecting, functionally differentiated communication systems that had *no* outside environment.¹⁷¹ Invoking the idea of the closure of communication, Luhmann conceived not of forms in relation to what is unformed, chance, or an outside environment, but in relation to mediums in other systems and nothing else.

The core of his theory is an idiosyncratic definition of communication premised on the unbridgeable distance between all levels of systems, including what he called “consciousness

¹⁷⁰ Tan Lin, Writing as metadata container, interview by Chris Alexander et al., Web, April 2010, <https://jacket2.org/interviews/writing-metadata-container>. Unpaginated but if in PDF format, this quote is around pp. 4.

¹⁷¹ Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, Meridian, Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2000), 1–2.

systems.” As he explains in his book on *Art as a Social System*, communication is autonomous at every level, meaning it never crosses the boundary from one person’s perception into that of another:

Communication is an independent formation in the medium of meaning, an emergent reality that presupposes living beings capable of consciousness but is irreducible to any one of these beings, not even to all of them taken together. Compared to consciousness, communication executes an extremely slow, time-consuming sequence of sign transformations (which means, among other things, that the participating consciousness gains time for its own perceptions, imaginations, and trains of thought.) Communication recursively recalls and anticipates further communications, and solely within the network of self-created communications can it produce communications as the operative elements of its own system. In doing so, communication generates a distinct autopoietic system in the strict (not just “metaphorical”) sense of the term. And, given the form in which it organizes its own autopoiesis, communication cannot receive or produce perceptions. But it can certainly communicate about perceptions—for example, when someone says, “I have seen that...”¹⁷²

In this paragraph, two things stand out. First, Luhmann seeks to correct the notion that *communication* reaches across or through language into another’s consciousness.

Communication, he argues, should be seen as never crossing any psychic barrier. It is ‘a formation in the medium of meaning,’ which is to say a form, or a selection of elements in

¹⁷² Luhmann, 9.

another *medium* known as ‘meaning.’ Communication involves manipulating elements in the medium of meaning. It is independent of perception or whatever goes on internally in each participant. Compared to our internal processes, communication is an ‘extremely slow sequence of sign transformations.’ Second—and particularly relevant to Lin’s literary style—communication ‘communicates about perceptions—for example, when someone says or writes, ‘I have seen that...’” This view of communication as a second-order activity could explain why Lin prefers to always write in a second-order manner that *tells*, instead of in an immersive manner that *shows*. Take, for example the phrases earlier in this chapter: “Today, no poem should be written to be read,” or “to have a photograph of a photograph is not interesting...” These statements highlight communication itself and never assume that they can bridge the distance between one and another person’s perception. Lin’s poetic voice, the voice of the lie, is an attempt to imagine the voice of communication through a system-centered method.

For Luhmann, the distinction between perception and communication governed all systems, from the deepest—consciousness—to outer levels from central nervous system to social systems such as law and art. Every system was an “observing system” organized according to a process centered on communication and never presupposing a unified outside world stratified according to any one concept, such as “class.” Instead, the observing system used a set of “distinctions” for distinguishing itself from everything else. These distinctions included “system/environment, medium/form, first- and second-order observation, self-reference and external reference, and...the distinction between psychic systems (systems of consciousness) and social systems (systems of communication).¹⁷³ These distinctions were used by an observing system to expand *autopoietically*, or to recursively create the elements that defined the system.

¹⁷³ Luhmann, 2–3.

“Autopoietic systems,” Luhmann determined, “are not only self-organizing systems, they not only produce and eventually change their own *structures*; their self-reference applies to the production of other *components* as well.”¹⁷⁴

In calling his book *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* a ‘loosely coupled medium,’ Lin was referring to the means by which an observing system distinguishes itself by separating “medium” from “form.” The point of this distinction is to no longer distinguish form against the unformed, chance, or some other modernist figure of an unknowable outside. In Luhmann’s logic, there are only intersecting systems, no outside. A form is that which is visible as a selection of elements within a more general medium of reference. The observing system (or as Lin would say, “control vocabulary”) determines what counts as form and medium, which are relational categories. As Luhmann explains, “the term *element* does not refer to natural constants...rather, it points to units constructed (distinguished) by an observing system—to units for counting money, for example, or to tones in music.”¹⁷⁵ Recall the reference to money in the painting that Lin describes earlier in this essay. “Money” suggests an observing system organizing form and medium, just as does “painting.” As Luhmann explains, “such elements always also function as forms in another medium. Words and tones, for example, constitute forms in the acoustic medium just as letters function as forms in the optical medium of the visible.”¹⁷⁶ If your medium is acoustic, your forms are sounds—phonemes. If your medium is optical, your form is graphemes. To take another example, literary genres such as poetry and fiction are *forms* in the *medium* of words. They are possible ways to organize words but not the only possible ways. To

¹⁷⁴ Luhmann, Niklas, “The Autopoiesis of Social Systems,” 3.

¹⁷⁵ Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, 103.

¹⁷⁶ Luhmann, 106.

see them as forms means recognizing how they functionally differentiate themselves from other ways to organize words. For Luhmann, the defining principle of these literary genres is that they *delay* information conveyed through words. The difference between poetry and non-poetry is simply that the content conveyed is “delayed” through the use of “verbal sounds and references to meanings [that] mutually illuminate one another.”¹⁷⁷

The startling consequence of Luhmann’s method is that in allowing all social structures to be understood as relationships between form and medium, Luhmann saw the world as an artist and placed artistic method atop all others. When Lin says *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* is a ‘loosely-coupled medium,’ he means that we need to see it as an ‘observing system’ with a number of different options for perceiving form and medium. These perceptions are, given the title, what Lin calls “control vocabularies,” a term from Library Studies that refers to the categories used to organize books by the Library of Congress. One or other control vocabulary—painting, poetry, fiction, and more—organized the relationship of form and medium. The 13-plate sequence titled “A Field Guide to American Painting” that opens the book would be the observing system of *painting*. When we look at “plate 1” in that section, however, we are faced with a range of different symbols that refer beyond painting:

5:27 35°

What are the forms of non-reading and what are the non-forms a reading might take? Poetry = wallpaper. Novel = design object. Text as ambient soundtrack? Dew-champ wanted to create works of art that were non-retinal. It would be nice to create works of literature that didn’t have to be read but could be looked at, like placemats. The most exasperating thing at a poetry reading is always the sound of a poet reading.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Luhmann, 25.

¹⁷⁸ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004, the Joy of Cooking*, 16.

There is a lot to be uncertain about in this passage. To start, we can think of *reading* itself as the *medium* with various *forms* and “non-forms” played against one another. In conceptualizing the possibility of a “non-form of reading,” we are made to objectify reading itself rather than objects to be read. Going a step beyond Robert Smithson’s phrase “Language to be looked at and/or Things to be Read,” Lin imagines a reading that does not need to be read. Lin generates the sense that reading itself is not a single universal activity, but something whose very substance changes depending on the observing system used to read.

A few pages later in “Plate 6,” we find the same rhetorical structure; only now, “painting” has replaced “reading.”:

What are the forms of non-painting and what are the forms a non-painting might take?...Dew-champ wanted to create works of art that were non-retinal. It would be nice to imagine a painting that didn’t need to be looked at but could be sampled like the newspaper, the television or the weather....¹⁷⁹

Grammatically, the conditional mood “it would be nice to create” or here, “it would be nice to imagine...” and declarative phrases such as “the most exasperating thing at a poetry reading...” are rhetorical templates often used by Lin to signal a repetition of structure or medium being fit with a new “form” or control vocabulary. What he signals to us is that the grammatical structure is a *medium* into which many *forms* can be fit. Now adding the newspaper, the television, and the weather, Lin has moved from a question of “reading” and “looking” to “looking” vs. “sampling,” which also suggests a discourse around digital music. In this repeated template with new elements, “reading” is no longer the medium. Once reading is seen as a form slotted into a rhetorical template, then it is no longer the tool used to “read” the passage. The question this

¹⁷⁹ Lin, 26.

paradox raises is this: if we are not the ones instituting a uniform mode of reading across different control vocabularies, then what “reads” and what is “reading”?

Perhaps we can understand Lin’s approach to reading by looking at ways critics have understood his writing. Kristin Gallagher has highlighted how Lin’s writing evokes a shift from Language Poetry’s shredding “structures of utterance or idiolects” to something more like

a literary botanist who uses style to cross-pollinate the standard vocabulary systems for organizing information, and in doing so opens new ground for thinking through the reading environments established by those “vocabularies.” This new style of writing produces in the reader a less clear sense of where one vocabulary begins and another ends. It’s not merely about the relationships between things and ideas, but about how we read, and are always reading, often according to methods and guidelines we are not entirely conscious of.¹⁸⁰

Gallagher captures how readers are often unaware as to what “reading environment” they are in at any moment in reading a Lin text. As Gallagher notes, it is not about ‘things and ideas’ or a surface and a depth, but an endlessly read sequence of control vocabularies. We can add that this control vocabulary is always simultaneously bound to a hidden physical format. At the same time, the crucial shift that needs to be more clearly unpacked is how *reading* is not an activity

¹⁸⁰ Kristen Gallagher, “Cooking a Book with Low-Level Durational Energy; or, How to Read Tan Lin’s Seven Controlled Vocabularies,” in *Reading the Difficulties: Dialogues with Contemporary American Innovative Poetry*, ed. Thomas Fink and Judith Halden-Sullivan (Tuscaloosa, UNITED STATES: University of Alabama Press, 2014), 93–94, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/columbia/detail.action?docID=1656741>.

but an *object* that itself can be read. Somehow the system tenets of medium and form replace reading with “observing.” When a specific vocabulary is allowed to dictate what is recognized, then the act of reading becomes subordinate to determining the coordinates in a system.

As I mentioned earlier, Luhmann viewed literary genres as delays in the medium of words. Marcel Duchamp once called his work *The Large Glass* “a delay in glass as you would say a poem in prose or a spittoon in silver.”¹⁸¹ In Duchamp’s phrase, form exists in relation to a medium, with which it shares its elements. An observing context allows us to recognize one or the other. Lin too speaks of delays in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*:

Speaking with one’s lips creates the most delicate forms of local reading and diagrams of white noise that take the form of color, i.e., a delay. It would be useful to finally compile a dictionary of the various forms of delay that are possible. Delay for sunlight falling in trees. Delay for cigarettes. Delay for the sake of lovemaking. Delay for unidentifiable birdsong. And finally, the most difficult delay: delay for seeing itself.¹⁸²

Looking at sunlight, smoking a cigarette, listening to birdsong are forms in the medium of delay, or ways of organizing elements amidst the many possibilities of that medium. Each is visible in relation to what the delay prevents from occurring: reaching a destination, sleep, etc. In mapping a network of disappearing events, the world appears as mediums organized into forms. The form/medium structure uses its closure to open out into an uncanny daily life.

The world as a series of delays helps us think differently about vocabulary and media formats. The vocabulary of one observing system can be a *delay* from our recognition that what we read is a “machine language”—a series of instructions or facts seen in the wrong context. Take the line “Poetry = wallpaper.” When read in a book such as *7CV*, it makes us think

¹⁸¹ Marcel Duchamp, *The essential writings of Marcel Duchamp: salt seller, marchand du sel*, ed. Michel Sanouillet, 1. Aufl (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), 26.

¹⁸² Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004, the Joy of Cooking*, 68.

metaphorically about poetry as wallpaper. If we were to see an actual poem as wallpaper, the figurative value would change. Lin has published an internet wallpaper version titled, “ELEVEN MINUTE PAINTING” [FIG. 2]. The top contains the section from *7CV*:

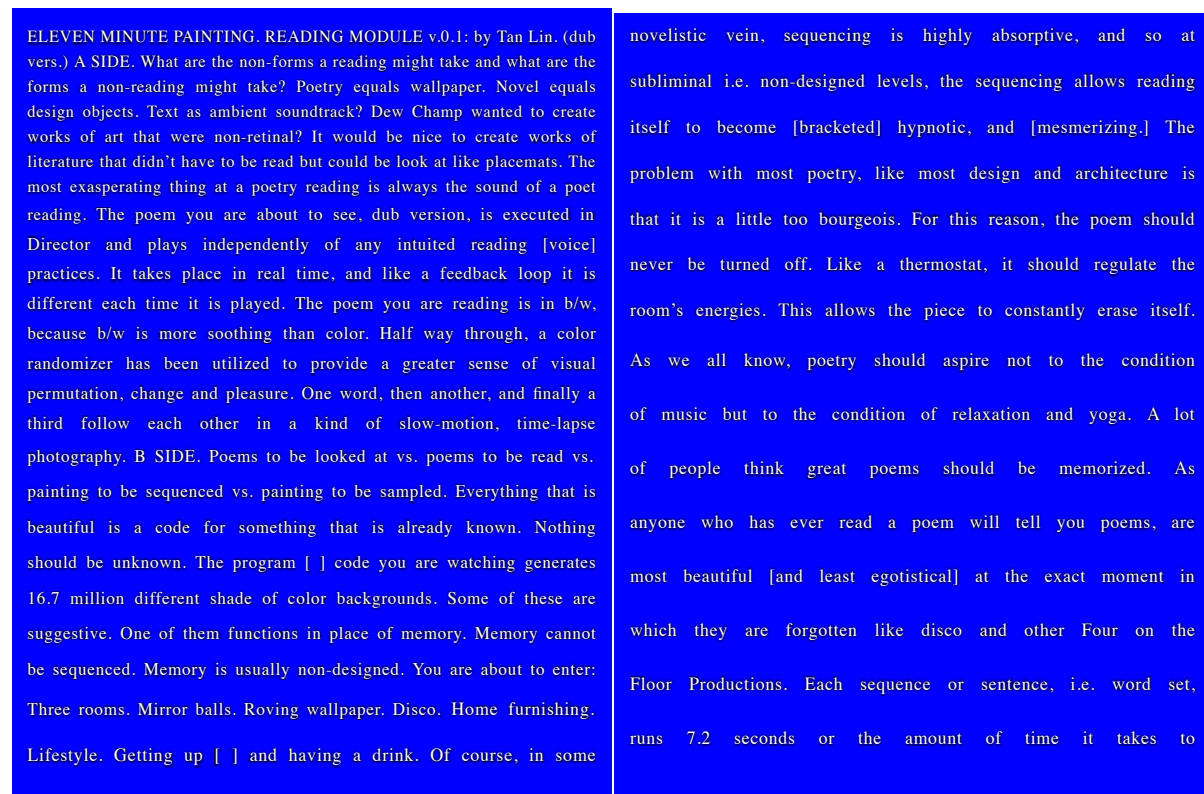
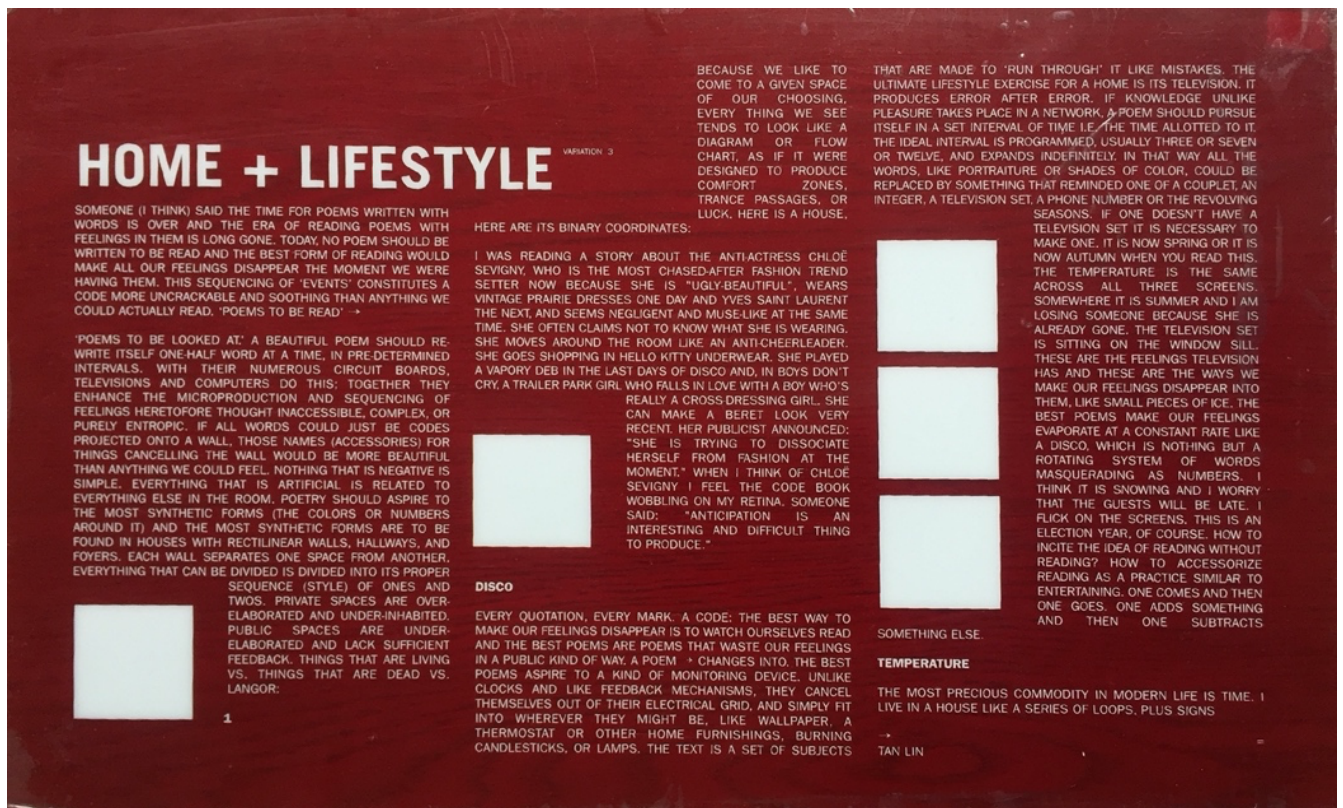


Figure 2. <https://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Lin-Flash.html>

What was segmented into short paragraphs and separated onto pages in *7CV* is now a continuous stream of paratactic sentences. As we move into a new version, we learn that “sequencing is highly absorptive.” The technical language from *7CV* such as the time and temperature gauge, or “side B” (of a record) in *7CV* have been removed. The new sequence alters the balance of vocabularies. In this version, the metaphorical epiphany “poetry equals wallpaper” has been destroyed by giving us a digital wallpaper.

Or take another phrase: “it would be nice to create works of literature that didn’t have to be read but could be looked at like placemats.” This sentence again appears to refer to a

metaphorical condition rather than a physical one. It generates an evocative image that pushes against the definition of literature as a readable media. Lin has constructed this metaphorical situation in the form of a transparent polymer literary placemat. Once that specific object is discovered, the metaphor dissolves into yet another “machine language” that indexes no metaphysical value.



"HOME + LIFESTYLE," literary placemat

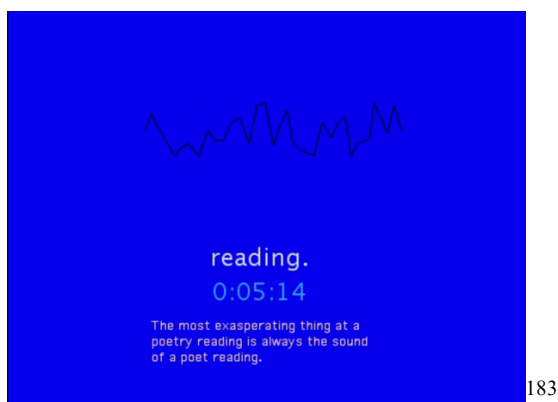
In the placemat version, the blank white spaces provided by the pages in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* have been translated into decorative white squares. This sequence contains some of the same sentences and others from different sections of *7CV* and other texts by Lin. The opening paragraph returns us to a set of declarations in the same grammatical structure as *7CV*:

Someone (I think) said the time for poems written with words is over and the era of reading poems with feelings in them is long gone. Today, no poem should be written to be read and the best form of reading would make all our feelings disappear the moment

we were having them. This sequencing of events constitutes a code more uncrackable and soothing than anything we could actually read.

The transit from one medium (the book) to another (the placemat) creates the conditions whereby poems are not made to be “read” in the conventional sense. Instead of a book with metaphorical values, Lin has created a hub of metaphorical, immaterial, poetic evocations waiting to be demystified by physical counterparts. “Writing” means demystifying a metaphor in the material space of a new medium. This kind of poetry is, in short, a true poetic of technological innovation.

The final line of the passage once again puts is in what appears to be an expressive statement: “The most exasperating thing at a poetry reading is always the sound of the poet reading.” Read in the context of the book, the phrase takes a jab at the over-emotive reading voice that lyric poets have a tendency to use in live readings. The statement assumes a more literal, questioning character, however, when it is heard in yet another one of Lin’s variations recited by an artificial voice:



¹⁸³ “Eleven Minute Painting” Reading Module v. 0.1 (dub ver.) From Pennsound: “*Eleven Minute Painting* was first exhibited as computer and video monitor installation piece for *27 Merging Artists* at the Spike Gallery (NYC), June 19-July 20, 2002. The video projection of the work was screened at New Langton Arts Center, (San Francisco, CA,

Listening to the AI voice, what initially was the experimental poet's disgust with MFA-style readings becomes, in a darkly funny twist, the perplexity of an AI unable to comprehend human emotion. Again, the metaphorical weight of the phrase dissolves when it is revealed to be a denotative statement. "ELEVEN MINUTE PAINTING," as this version is titled, ends at exactly eleven minutes. In giving an atemporal medium of painting time, which necessarily ends, it is yet another instance of a reading that makes "all our feelings disappear the moment we were having them." After having read the sequenced "ELEVEN MINUTE PAINTING," the earlier phrase, "As anyone who has ever sequenced a painting will tell you, perceptual mistakes are never sublime," is no longer metaphysical; it is matter of fact. Poetic or figurative value is shown to be, in Lin's texts, a 'perceptual mistake.' Knowing this structure helps us understand Lin's editorial note:

there is nothing spectral, bracketed [] or metaphysical that remains, which is merely the husk of things that were true at the moment when they were once, [hallucinated] and by once I mean once written down without hope for any future, imagined or otherwise intended. There is truth and there is truth.¹⁸⁴

Truth is only what is true at the moment it was written down. But the second after that moment of inscription, the truth becomes a [hallucination]. 'There is truth and there is truth' can be read as "on one hand there is *false* truth and on the other hand there is this *real* truth," or empirically

April 2002), the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York, NY, January 10, 2003), and at the Drawing Center." <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Lin-Video.html>

¹⁸⁴ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004, the Joy of Cooking*, 10.

as pointing out units: “*there* is (truth) and *there* is truth.” Lin’s texts try to illustrate why both conceptions of truth are one.

Beyond reshaping a conceptual poetics of appropriation, or a writing a post-critique Language poetry, Lin has created a poetics of technological innovation that objectifies reading. He mimics a system wherein to “read” involves immediately erasing a mistaken context with a proper context. That is done by generating specific objects out of unspecific phrases. In the poetic world Lin has made, “desire” involves *ignoring* the demystification that reveals a [hallucination] to be a machine language. Or as Lin writes in *7CV*, “Desiring is a form of hallucinating information. Desiring less is a way of hallucinating more.”¹⁸⁵ Desire can always be commodified in this structure, though it need not be. In *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, to desire is to ‘hallucinate’ that more information exists in a phrase than actually does. We can hallucinate more by desiring less if we recognize that a desire in a new context contains much more poetic possibility than we recognize. To desire less means to see more imaginatively what exists but is not in front of us. The less you desire, the more you get to imagine what it could mean for a book to not need to be read at all, to “hallucinate” an unreadable book. In desiring less, Lin’s readers index a cross media event that intertwines various media formats in a network that is never the sum of its parts. As more formats are expanded into, the particularity of writing—or poetry—disappears. The cross-media event creates a closed loop with authorship constituting an empty center.

In turn, “truth” is writing that generates both a hallucination and perceptual mistake. This is *autopoiesis*: each variation generates redundancy against the literary image (which we might call “lyrical value”). The book thus evolves across statements that are cancelled into specific

¹⁸⁵ Lin, 136.

objects. As one reads the text across different media formats, the missing objects slowly fill in. Poetry becomes the transit of an immaterial discursive statement that generates a “new” media, a “machine language” whose metaphorical capacity vastly outpaces those of human written expression. This transit is a text that “reads” itself, an expanding network of media, of nothing but sequences of machines and their control vocabularies that use rhetorical templates to generate blindspots moving across discrete formats. Poetic meaning, truth, and interest are *missing contexts* of other control vocabularies, i.e., a technical or machine language seen in the wrong place. But this indexical movement across a surface does not mean that the book is any less sublime to the reader who only reads the book. In the end, this structure gives us a new working definition of poetry: a delay in the recognition that the material is a lie that *lies* within the immaterial. We should recall the key systems-theory term *autopoiesis*, or a “self-making” that is also self-writing, autonomous and about itself. The pun on autopoiesis allows what is read to also be a writing of the mechanical lie.

The Writing Below Sturtevant's Remakes

From the 1960s until her death in 2014, the artist Sturtevant (Elaine Horan, 1924-2014) carried out a hermetic artistic practice of remaking and restaging the works of her contemporaries and restaging them for her own purposes. Some of the 20th century's most famous artists including Jasper Johns, Frank Stella, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys, Yvonne Rainer, Keith Haring, Mike Kelley, Felix Gonzalez Torres, Anselm Kiefer, and Paul McCarthy saw their work transformed into "Sturtevents."¹⁸⁶ Because she used other artists' works as the raw material of her own, Sturtevant was categorized as a proto-appropriation artist. Only recently has consensus changed thanks to a group of critics that have brought out new complexities in her practice.¹⁸⁷ This critical refashioning centers on the idea that Sturtevant is less concerned with generating an insular art historical discussion about appropriation than with attacking intellectual deterioration due to popular culture. In other words, Sturtevant's critique centered on her own time and place, not on timeless philosophical or formal questions.

¹⁸⁶ Sturtevant has received major institutional and collector support. In 2004, the Museum Für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt, Germany held a major Sturtevant exhibition, and MoMA held one in New York in 2014. According to Christie's, Sturtevant's *Warhol Diptych* sold for approximately \$5.1m.

<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5896047>

¹⁸⁷ Later in her career these differences grew more pronounced, as she built large scale installations that incorporated many parts and works of sculpture, video, and text. One of her last works, *House of Horrors*, 2010, was her most ambitious. It was a theme park ride through various moments in her own history of remaking.

This new consensus highlights subtle differences that disqualify Sturtevant's copies from being true copies. Discussing Sturtevant's *Johns 0-9*, a remake of Jasper Johns' *0 through 9*, Peter Eleey notes that in the original painting, Johns used random numbers to instill random order. In her remake, Sturtevant discarded this random order. In doing so, Eleey argues, Sturtevant is deploying Johns' "highly recognisable style to subtly turn the vernacular pedestrianism [Johns] claimed of his sources against themselves, and hinting that unruly assumptions about progress sit beneath the quiet surfaces of his progressive sequence of digits."¹⁸⁸ Eleey implies that the slight change from random to not random imbues her remake with a darker socio-political commentary that upends a chauvinism apparent in Johns' original.

Michael Lobel also highlights subtle differences that disqualify Sturtevant's remakes from being pure appropriations. Discussing her 1966 show at Galerie J in France, which included remakes of a number of artists affiliated with Pop Art, Lobel argues "that her practice does not involve making copies...[but rather a] simultaneous extension and critique of the duplication inherent in Pop Art, for it encourages us to recognize that any repetition necessarily involves the introduction of some measure of difference."¹⁸⁹ To mistake her artworks as duplicates, Lobel adds, affirms "just how habitual and unselfconscious our ways of seeing can become, particularly in a culture in which we are constantly bombarded by images."¹⁹⁰ For Lobel, the critique of a Sturtevant remake is directed at the cultural conditions that would allow us to mistake her remakes for copies.

¹⁸⁸ Peter Eleey et al., *Sturtevant: Double Trouble* (New York, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 50.

¹⁸⁹ Michael Lobel, "Inappropriate Appropriation," *Parkett*, no. 75 (2005): 141.

¹⁹⁰ Lobel, 147.

The third argument comes from Bruce Hainley. Like Lobel and Eleey, Hainley pushes audiences to see Sturtevant's remakes as interventions in the malignant dynamics of popular culture.¹⁹¹ Discussing Sturtevant's movie *The Dark Threat of Absence* (which reworks Paul McCarthy's 1995 film, *The Painter*), Hainley asserts that it evokes "an internalization of mutilation, of toxic consumption—from the cartooned individual to the pixilated mass seeking statistical confirmation of personal existence via popularity contests, [and] fear factors."¹⁹² Her remake is not a commentary on painting or on Paul McCarthy, Hainley implies, but on the broken values of televisual and digital culture. These arguments share one thing in common: all push audiences to view Sturtevant's art less in terms of art-historical allusion and more in terms of criticizing the culture at large. Sturtevant uses artists' style as raw material. She uses McCarthy to create a commentary that is not about McCarthy, but about the effects of televisual culture. She *uses* Johns and *uses* various Pop artists to talk about other things—American order, image culture, and more.

This is not the only kind of argument that these critics have made about Sturtevant. They also view Sturtevant as what Eleey calls an "actionist who adopted style as her medium in order to investigate aspects of art's making, circulation, consumption, and canonization."¹⁹³ In this guise, Sturtevant exposes art's unseen role in perpetuating (and sometimes resisting) problematic attitudes. Hainley presents this side of Sturtevant in analyzing her work *The Store of Claes*

¹⁹¹ Bruce Hainley, *Under the Sign of [Sic]: Sturtevant's Volte-Face*, Semiotext(e) Active Agents Series (Los Angeles, CA : Cambridge, Mass: Semiotext(e) ; Distributed by the MIT Press, 2013).

¹⁹² Bruce Hainley, "Sturtevant," *Artforum International* 46, no. 5 (January 2005): 177–78. In her artist statement on the movie, Sturtevant also insists that the movie is indeed "NOT ABOUT PAINTING."

¹⁹³ Eleey et al., *Sturtevant*, 50.

Oldenburg (1967), a remake of *The Store* (1967) by Claes Oldenburg. Highlighting the many interlinked nodes that synchronized Oldenburg “to the recurring rhythms of production and exhibition...geographic franchising...and relevance in terms of inventiveness and critical recognized bona fides,” Sturtevant’s *The Store of Claes Oldenburg* exposes the “total structure” that consolidated Oldenburg’s *The Store* as a “landmark” in art history.¹⁹⁴ By repeating Oldenburg’s gesture, the force of Oldenburg’s art recedes and that of the publicity machine that cultivates status—from art reviews, criticism, to scholarship—is brought forward.

In revealing what is “inappropriate,” she forces us to confront the source of the meaning we attach to Oldenburg’s art.¹⁹⁵ Too often such meaning, Hainley explains, comes from a lazy “nonthinking” that “occurs through a reliance on proper names and an arrogant crossbreeding of synecdoche and metonymy.”¹⁹⁶ Sturtevant’s use of other artists’ personal stylistic signature thus highlights “the imaging of contemporaneity: When Sturtevant first repeated them, Warhol was barely ‘Warhol,’ Johns ‘Johns,’ or Lichtenstein ‘Lichtenstein’; what have become their iconic works were then hardly icons.”¹⁹⁷

This argument also has problems as it assumes that the writing of these critics is somehow outside of such a legitimization network. Finding the differences in Sturtevant’s remakes requires special access primarily available to art world insiders. The label of appropriation has never fully been dismissed because that is what appears to those who engage with Sturtevant’s art through images in locations other than Paris or New York City. Furthermore, someone seeing

¹⁹⁴ Hainley, *Under the Sign of [Sic]*, 16, 26.

¹⁹⁵ Hainley, 40.

¹⁹⁶ Hainley, “Sturtevant,” 177.

¹⁹⁷ Hainley, 177.

Sturtevant's versions of these originals may never completely reject the initial sense of allusion. The question of Johns' own style is always there in *Johns 0-9*. All of the things said about Sturtevant's *Dark Threat* were already present in McCarthy's *The Painter*. It can easily be argued that the hard part isn't redoing what another artist did in order to mount a *new* critique, but doing it the first time. Finally, there is a question of who such an argument might serve, when not all of her artworks contain visible differences from their originals. Her Warhol screen prints are hard to distinguish from their sources. Discussing Sturtevant's remakes of Warhol's *Flower* screenprints, for example, Elisa Schaar points out that while there has been "no significant value added" with "each additional repetition"—there has been a significant added market value: "As Warhol's striking *Flower* motif had been a big commercial success from the start, it already came with a sizeable market for Sturtevant to tap into."¹⁹⁸ Hainley was blown away by Sturtevant's *Cold Fear* exhibition at Anthony Reynolds in 2006—comprised of a Duchamp work and two *Warhol Black Marylins*. Looking at the very same works, "with spotlights pointed at them, focusing visual attention in an otherwise dark room," Schaar sees "the ultimate collector's fetish."¹⁹⁹

In short, it is possible to flip around Sturtevant's attack on the "total structure." In recognizing the subtle differences of her remakes, audiences outside of hubs such as New York City may be subordinating themselves to those at the center of the market. The misrecognitions that Sturtevant created anticipated her own inevitable place within this total structure. If Sturtevant's art was about imaging the contemporary (as Hainley proposes), the key target of her

¹⁹⁸ Elisa Schaar, "Spinoza in Vegas, Sturtevant Everywhere: A Case of Critical (Re-)Discoveries and Artistic Self-Reinventions," *Art History* 33, no. 5 (December 1, 2010): 905–6, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8365.2010.00785.x>.

¹⁹⁹ Schaar, 904.

works was not *images* as they are popularly understood, but how the art-historical institution canonizes (“images”) its artists. Creating a work that cannot be appropriated also must mean creating a work that evades interpretation by the critical methods that are so instrumental to the canonization that drives the total structure of art institutions and their markets. A critical method requires that an artist be legible within a coherent set of historical parameters. Sturtevant went through pains to not be totally legible (in both works and biography), which leaves a festering interpretive contradiction. She shares this contradiction with the other artists in my study. In the following section, I argue that her texts carry new insights for framing the formal, art-historical, and economic contradictions at the center of her practice.

Sturtevant’s Texts

Most of Sturtevant’s texts were published to accompany artworks or full exhibitions. Sometimes they were delivered as lectures or talks and published later. Occasionally they were published on their own. Previously available only in her archive, many of her texts were recently published in a volume called *The Razzle Dazzle of Thinking*.²⁰⁰ Whether taking the form of lectures, statements, essays, letters, or short text-artworks, these texts are often dense and lineated in a distinctive prose not organized according to the history of poetic form, but according to the dynamism of their own internal control vocabulary, a set of key terms in alchemic tension for which we must infer meaning according to their use.²⁰¹ These texts provide

²⁰⁰ Elaine Sturtevant, *Sturtevant: The Razzle Dazzle of Thinking* (Ausstellung, Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2010).

²⁰¹ There is a revisionist issue with these texts, which were primarily written, delivered, and published late in her career, following the hiatus in her work from 1974-1985. I am not sure if that means that they are efforts to form a discourse about those early works, consolidating those ideas in language, or if they should be discounted as self-revisionism.

a jarring formal poetic structure alongside her visual works, and show Sturtevant carrying out a much different conversation than occurs in scholarship. While certain themes such as the formal questions contemporary art poses in relation to entertainment culture overlap, Sturtevant's own writing carries a much more esoteric poststructural idiom. Concepts such as "articulated visibilities," "the silent power of art" and "reversals in representation" suggest a conversation that is at once formal—concerning visual and linguistic issues—and historical, but never distinctly either. The key aspect of these texts is that they expose audiences to a vast conflict happening below what appears as a silent visual practice on the surface. Especially notable for this study is that this conflict involves the possibility of scholarship historicizing Sturtevant. Foundationally, they put the question of historicizing her art within the formal structure of her art. All aesthetic gestures, including scholarship and criticism take place within a "total structure."

We can begin to grasp Sturtevant's vast linguistic world by focusing on a few of her key terms. To begin, I would like to highlight Sturtevant's use of the term *understructure*, a concept central to her theory of art. As she uses the term, the *understructure* refers to a formal skeleton operating below the surface of an artwork but organizing and governing that surface. She defines term differently depending on the text, but a useful explanation appears in "Modes of thought Modes of Being" (2003):²⁰²

However, to go beyond the surface of art, to probe the understructure, the silent power of art, demands utilizing representation's duality to drastically reverse content. Thus when

²⁰² NOTE: As far as I know, "Modes of Thought Modes of Being" was a lecture possibly performed at her exhibit "The Dark Threat of Absence Fragmented and Sliced" at Thaddeus Ropac in Paris, 2003).

the content no longer refers to the visible, there is the radical leap from image to concept, from interior to exterior.²⁰³

Like conceptualism, the understructure appears premised on negating visibility ('when the content no longer refers to the visible'). Notably, however, it refers to the notion of conceptualism, or an art of ideas rather than surface images, without stating itself as such. Instead, it replaces conceptualism's premise as a single unified notion with various stages and actions. The understructure is not a single practice, but rather a new set of smaller divisions. Lacking definitions for other key terms in the passage, it is very difficult to find solid ground. To know what the understructure is requires knowing what is meant by the "surface of art," "the silent power of art," "representation's duality," "interior," "exterior," and more. It is clear how, when the content of art refers to something non-visible, an 'image' becomes a 'concept' and we move 'from interior to exterior,' but it is not clear what 'interior' and 'exterior' refer to.

The "understructure" gives the "procedural norms that allow [a] reputation to burgeon: the production and exhibition...and critical and historical crosschecking" an abstract structure akin to a work of art.²⁰⁴ It creates a form for what appears outside of an artwork or what lacks shape: the markers of how an artist fits art history through a way of organizing politics and aesthetics. The shape of the understructure becomes clearer when some of Sturtevant's other key terms, such as "representation's duality" are better defined.

In a letter to Michael Lobel, Sturtevant outlined the stages for manipulating "representation's duality," depicting it as a series of steps that alter the relationship between objects and images. These properties are, for Sturtevant, core elements. Manipulating them

²⁰³ Sturtevant, *Sturtevant*, 69.

²⁰⁴ Bruce Hainley, "Store as Cunt," *Art Journal* 70, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 86.

grants the artist access to “articulated visibilities,” the hallowed form lying deep below the surface of artworks:

<u>OBJECT</u> IMAGE	REPRESENTATION
<u>IMAGE</u> OBJECT	REVERSAL CYBER HIERARCHIES
<u>OBJECT</u> OBJECT	IN-ITSELF REPRESENTATION
<u>OBJECT</u> IMAGE	REPRESENTATION
<u>CONCEPT</u> IMAGE	JETTED REPRESENTATION
<u>IMAGE</u> IMAGE	ARTICULATED VISIBILITIES ²⁰⁵

The forming shape of the understructure does not generate more clarity for the reader. As we descend, we remain caught in abstract relationships, terms connected by opaque bonds of tension. There is, however, logic to this descent. The first stage involves a standard relationship: giving an object priority over its image leads to what is standardly thought of as *representation* or mimesis. The second frame involves the reversal of that standard. “Cyber hierarchies,” Sturtevant’s term for digital technology, treated “images” as prior to their “objects,” similar to the postmodern idea of the map before the territory or to the notion that images come to shape reality. When an ‘object’ is seen in priority with itself, perhaps we get *in-itself representation*. One way to read this position is that there is no way to conceive of a world outside of representation. Or rather, it can be conceptually imagined, but always only within the rubric of representation’s split of object and image. Then we return to the initial stage of ‘object/image’ once again. A crucial point here is that representation returns but not as it once was in the

²⁰⁵ Sturtevant, *Sturtevant*, 207. “Object-Image Structure”

beginning. Upon setting off on this journey, the artist now is able to see beyond what appears on the surface as standard representation. Only then are we able to divide ‘concept’ by ‘image’ and get ‘jetted representation,’ suggesting a forceful push out to the exterior. Put differently, representation is *thrown out*, like “a throw of the dice” a phrase that Sturtevant frequently uses and that carries allusions to chance-determined activities. At this point, we are able to see without our eyes. This space does not involve seeing image as prior to object but seeing image as prior to *image*. This form of seeing is what is required in looking at a Sturtevant. We are asked not to see a copy of Warhol or Johns, but to see through the stages of reversing representation into an *articulated* space. In this space, representation registers the history of reversals upon it and we use our minds to visualize what cannot be seen but can only be *articulated* in language.

We are left with two contradictions: 1) While we might assume that the move in towards the understructure and the silent power of art would coincide with a move in toward the interior, the opposite is the case: as we move down and in towards the silent power of art, we are simultaneously forced out to an exterior of an unknown quality. 2) The ‘silent power of art’—keyword *silent*—is a condition where visibilities are articulated with words and therefore *not* silent. The fact that the understructure leads to the exterior is perhaps why Hainley equates it with the procedural norms and historical cross-checking that is necessary to form a reputation. The exterior would be what operates exterior to an artwork but exerts force upon it. Sturtevant binds the exterior (or context) to a formal procedure. In turn, both the formal issues of originality vs copy (the difference between her remakes and their originals), and the context become parts of a single intertwined formal procedure. Such a structure suggests something far different for Sturtevant’s art than what an art-historical critical method has offered her. In order for anyone to

say that there is no outside to the social project of art, they must create a formal structure demonstrating that to be the case. Sturtevant has done that.

The move towards the interior ‘silent power’ of art coincides with a move to the exterior because Sturtevant’s conception of interior and exterior include overlapping notions. Part of the overlap points to a more physical interior/exterior in the sense of an artwork’s existence—what we see in terms of shape, materials, images, symbols, with exterior being its surrounding context. Then we might think of the interior silent power of art as the driving conceptual force motivating an artwork. Finally, there is a third unexplored idea of interior and exterior that Sturtevant adapted from poststructuralist theory. To explore this side of her thinking, I will analyze a few more passages. In her lecture “MAN IS DOUBLE MAN IS COPY MAN IS CLONE,” Sturtevant adds more detail to the process occurring below the surface of an artwork:

The thrust of the work is to engender thinking, to create discourse.
To push visibilities against articulation.
To resist and impose cybernetics’ negative force.
To reveal the danger of the same.
To give visible action to words.
To give power to thought.²⁰⁶

The cut text emphasizes a descent (and perhaps reflects Foucault’s “cutting” archeological method). As we descend below the surface, however, each cut occurs on the same plane. More clearly than in the graph sent to Michael Lobel discussed above, we see how the move below the surface fights digitality, or ‘cybernetics’ negative force,’ which, as the graph shows, is when ‘image’ is placed over ‘object.’ Placing image over object is not the same as copying an artwork. Image-over-object creates an empty content with ‘negative force.’ Exposing this force reveals ‘the danger of the same.’ Sturtevant often references this concept in relation to “eternal

²⁰⁶ Sturtevant, 115.

recurrence,” Nietzsche’s parable about being visited by a demon who presents you with an opportunity to live every moment over again an innumerable number of times. Eternal return has been interpreted as a lesson to live in “total affirmation of the moment” and in such a way that “demands that we free our thought from any false sense of purposes (i.e. from teleology) or origins.”²⁰⁷ How does eternal recurrence relate to Sturtevant’s remakes? First, the return to representation in the graph above echoes the condition of the one who knows of the possibility of eternal return. They can change nothing about representation, but are aware of a difference. Sturtevant could be hinting that the logic of appropriation is akin to being trapped in eternal recurrence, without having been visited by the demon. The goal of her remakes such as *The Store of Claes Oldenburg*, or Duchamp’s *Fresh Widow*, is to create the awareness brought by a visit from the demon. This visit forces us to live in the endless present that is and is not a copy—just as our relived life in Nietzsche’s parable both is and is not a copy.

Reading further provides deeper insight. Sturtevant presents her own aesthetic process as if it were an eternal recurrence that “brings us full force back to representation”:

Further development of this conceptual thinking brings us full
force back to representation.
Not of image as image-in-itself,
but rather of cyber modes of thinking.
Shifting mental structures that impose
on language, knowledge, power:
the vitality, essence and the meaning of life.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ Douglas Burnham, *The Nietzsche Dictionary*, Bloomsbury Philosophy Dictionaries (London New Delhi New York Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 119–20.

²⁰⁸ Sturtevant, *Sturtevant*, 115.

We are still within the paradigm that was graphed and sent to Lobel, somewhere around the 2nd - 5th stages (the return to ‘representation’ and ‘cyber modes of thinking’). These stages are not hierarchical, as the return to ‘representation’ leads to ‘cyber modes of thinking.’ Also, it is difficult to tell what should be considered positive or negative. Perhaps “‘cyber modes of thinking’ impose on the language, knowledge and power,’ *which are* the ‘vitality, essence and the meaning of life.’ In mimicking cybernetics’ function, a remake creates a ‘same’ that is different—the condition of eternal recurrence. In this stage of the understructure, the terrain of battle is a conceptual arena of ‘shifting mental structures,’ which control ‘vitality, essence, and the meaning of life.’ Creating art in a mode that generates a ‘return to representation’ but falsely (as remake) allows Sturtevant to meet digital culture on the plane of ‘shifting mental structures’ and present eternal recurrence as an antidote. This process suggests that the digital regime of media traps us out of time or off-time without providing us with self-consciousness of our condition. Sturtevant’s goal is to realign aesthetics with its future time, and in turn to restore the avant-garde’s original program as a front-leading aesthetic prophecy.

In 2000, Sturtevant produced a series of one-liner image-text combos that she called the “ET VOILA” essays, which could be translated as “and that’s that” or “there you go.” These little images illustrate late capitalist superficiality. Although some, such as the image of tan fake breasts and a rubber duck with the caption “What you ‘see’ is not / what you get,” are more obvious, most encourage a thinking beyond “that’s that.” They also give us a deeper understanding of the relationship that Sturtevant sees between her art practice and the culture at large. In one ET VOILA, a closeup filtered-green image of the cartoon hand of the Disney character Shrek pulls earwax out of his ear. The caption to the image says “The truth is what is /

and then what / that truth is / voilà.”²⁰⁹ Pairing image and text together suggests a circular logic meant to clear our senses. The circular phrase captures how the essence of truth, just as an “original painting,” can always be repeated to create a higher order truth. Thinking this way is, for Sturtevant, the route to enlightened perception.

The sickly green filter of the image is a motif that Sturtevant also uses in *Gober Partially Buried Sinks* (1997), and her two videos, *The Greening of America* (2000) and *The Greening of America 2* (2001). As Hainley remarks, the *Greening* videos “throw up and repeat images of a jizz-squirt of Heinz’s green ketchup, radioactive green lips, piles of greenbacks, and a green-eyed eerily human monkey to articulate how an excess (green ketchup) becomes connected to limitation (money) and transgression (genetic manipulation; cloning) to end up as exhaustion, articulated by a toilet plunger sucking up puce fecal muck through a green Astroturf sinkhole.”²¹⁰ In the lecture “The Ketchup Essay” from 2001, Sturtevant equates green ketchup with her artistic practice: “Being disconcerted over the surface difference in the work of Sturtevant is like asking what is Paul McCarthy going to do now that ketchup is green.”²¹¹ McCarthy is the artist who originally used the red ketchup for his video *The Painter*. Those who would be disconcerted by her works not being exact copies are, she implies, missing the point. She then summarizes her thinking: “The disorder of the same that is yet not the same edges out the profound running

²⁰⁹ Sturtevant, 191.

²¹⁰ Sturtevant, *Artforum International*; New York. Vol. 46, Iss. 5 (Jan 2005)

²¹¹ At this time, Heinz had begun marketing green ketchup as a promo for the *Shrek* movie franchise. See

<https://www.wpxi.com/archive/this-day-july-10-2000-heinz-ez-squirt-colored-ketchup-debuts/YHSDWPPYBFEPXKVR5EUVY3H6YI/>

threads that rob the eye of its fixed gaze.”²¹² The phrase ‘the same that is not the same’ is not identical to “copies that are actually not copies,” or “stylistic remakes with subtle differences.” Sturtevant’s phrase still leaves ambiguity in the repeat of “same” as something that is not quite *difference*. In terms of her visual remakes, the ‘same that is not the same’ does not refer to a copy with subtle differences from its original.

She articulated this condition of difference and sameness in a rough draft of an ET VOILÀ ESSAY: “GREEN KETCHUP IS NO DIFFERENT / THAN RED KETCHUP / EXCEPT IT’S THE SAME.”²¹³ The placement of the conjunction ‘except’ scrambles conventional logic. Removing the conjunction gives an easily-interpreted statement: *Green ketchup is no different than red ketchup, it’s the same*; marketing is the only thing that distinguishes red and green ketchup. Removing the word ‘no’ but keeping the word ‘except’ leaves a similar idea: “Green ketchup is different than red ketchup, except it’s the same.” Again, the difference is superficial. With her placing of ‘except,’ however, Sturtevant implies that her remakes do not expose the false consciousness of advertising. These three channels can be visualized together as equivalences between source, copy, and remake. To consider one example: Andy Warhol’s *Flowers* print and a copy are akin to the superficial difference between green and red ketchup. Sturtevant’s remake is akin to a ‘same that is not the same,’ or the ‘except’ that is the same. She equates the logic of original and copy (green and red ketchup) with digital logic. Adding the “except” creates neither equivalence nor difference, but the third space of an

²¹² Elaine Sturtevant, Alexander Tolnay, and Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, eds., *Sturtevant - Shifting mental structures: anlässlich der Ausstellung “Sturtevant”, Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, 9 March/März - 21 April 2002*, Reihe Cantz (Exhibition Sturtevant, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002).

²¹³ Sturtevant, *Sturtevant*, 92.

“articulated visibility.” For Sturtevant, art means accessing articulated visibilities along different cultural axes amidst a social battle for control of representation. Sturtevant’s way of seeing the field of players is similar to Guy Debord’s—only without class struggle as the central conflict. As the epic poem of commodities conflict, “spectacle” subordinates art to class struggle. In Sturtevant’s view, class struggle is subordinate to the duality of representation (reversals on objects and images).

Without the governing value of class war, something else must play the role of the “exterior,” the opponent in art’s struggle for control of representation. Sturtevant situates this exterior in poststructuralism’s version of modernity, which aimed beyond historical materialism. More insight on how her remakes reshape the exterior can be found in her lecture, “MAN IS DOUBLE MAN IS COPY MAN IS CLONE”:

Cogent and crucial images are used to push out the fault lines
and the falsity of current thought structures,
to display the impediments and brutality inherent
in our obsessive desire for appearance and immediacy.

A forward that further agitates the thunderous noise of infinity
that was pressed on us by the long ago death of God.
For man without God is man without an exterior.
This fast forward to infinity holds the terror of being without limits.
And the grand paradox is that this facade of liberty demands
and creates a crushing need to seek limits.
And the biggest and best is transgression.
A leaden world, with its entire space
just one step over the line.

The cyber fold then jumps in to do its dirty tricks:
locking our ontology of darkness into the permanent fix of a self
that rumbles with its own references.
An extremely narrow and severe limit.
A limit with the rage of producing a vast barren interior.

This dark threat of absence pushes transgression to a higher power as it
jolt hierarchies into reversals.

An upside-down that is not play
but deadly serious.
Man as God.
Information as Knowledge.
Image over Object.
Copy as Origin.
Truth as Falsity.²¹⁴

Foucault's poststructural philosophy treats the death of God as our collective fall into limitless modernity—in the form of difference replacing substance, signifiers replacing signs, and free transgression into the void. This notion reflects the idea of images being taken over objects. Sturtevant treats this positive limitlessness as an endless effort to fill our 'vast barren interior' with the outside force once provided by God. In this narrative, 'the death of God' (and the rise of rationality) did not lead to emancipation, but to bondage. Without God, we are not free to act against superstition, or to pursue progress as our highest goal, but are faced with 'the terror of being without limits,' and 'the grand paradox' of 'the crushing need to seek limits'—an interminable search for a new authority. Our Freedom leads to 'transgression,' which, to Sturtevant, is not free expression against repressive stricture, but a destructive form of compensation. Losing theological humility definitive of modernity coincides with the 'cyber-fold' that reflects civilization's never-ending search for limits. The final five lines summarize the new regime. Due to this misguided search, we now reside in an empty, post-hierarchical world. Without an exterior God to reflect ourselves against, we view 'Man as God,' 'Information as Knowledge,' etc.

²¹⁴ Sturtevant, 115–16.

Sturtevant's notions of transgression and limit adapt a reading of modernity outlined by Michel Foucault in his 1963 essay, "A Preface to Transgression."²¹⁵ Foucault argued that following "the death of God," transgression and limit are no longer dialectical. The death of God led to "an ontological void fixed at the limit of our thought and the interrogation of limit replaces the search for totality." This secularization extended to language, which denatured our eroticism, placing it in the void where it "sets up as the Law the limit it transgresses."²¹⁶ In our modern conception of language, Foucault says, "we encounter the absence of God, our death, limits, and their transgression."²¹⁷ The light of "solar inversion" is found in "those who have liberated their thought from all forms of dialectical language." Exemplary for Foucault was Georges Bataille's phrase, "What I call night differs from the darkness of thoughts: night possesses the violence of light. Yes, night: the youth and the intoxication of thinking."²¹⁸ The idea here is that night and evil were no longer in a dialectical relationship with day and good. Foucault explains transgression and 'the solar inversion of satanic denial' in this way:

Transgression opens onto a scintillating and constantly affirmed world, a world without shadow or twilight, without that serpentine "no" that bites into fruits and lodges their contradictions at their core. It is the solar inversion of satanic denial. It was originally linked to the divine, or rather, from this limit marked by the sacred it opens the space

²¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion, Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Michel Foucault ; Vol. 2 (New York: New Press, 1998), 69-89.

²¹⁶ Foucault, 85.

²¹⁷ Foucault, 86.

²¹⁸ Foucault, 86.

where the divine functions. The discovery of such a category by a philosophy that questions itself about the existence of the limit is evidently one of the countless signs that our path is a path of return and that, with each day, we are becoming more Greek. Yet this motion should not be understood as the promised return to a homeland or the recovery of an original soil that produced and will naturally resolve every opposition. In reintroducing the experience of the divine at the center of thought, philosophy has been well aware since Nietzsche (or it should very well know) that it questions an origin without positivity and an opening indifferent to the patience of the negative. No form of dialectical movement, no analysis of constitutions and of their transcendental ground can serve as support for thinking about such an experience or even as access to this experience. In our day, would not the instantaneous play of the limit and of transgression be the essential test for a thought that centers on the “origin,” for that form of thought to which Nietzsche dedicated us from the beginning of his works and one that would absolutely and in the same motion, a Critique and an Ontology, an understanding that comprehends both finitude and being?²¹⁹

Foucault is interested in the condition of transgression becoming non-dialectical. Using this condition, he theorizes his genealogical method in the context of Nietzsche’s eternal return, as refusing origins in the search for limits and their transgression. The subtext is that he is using this structure to reinterpret modern sexuality and eroticism. “The solar inversion of satanic denial” refers to how eroticism no longer connotes darkness in modernity. In the Bataille quote, the ‘solar inversion’ is that night is light and without guilt. Framing transgression in this fashion

²¹⁹ Foucault, 75.

does not imply that eroticism (which Foucault calls ‘sexuality’) is animalistic or naturalized. Rather, eroticism maintains the trace of its original connection to the divine. Foucault goes on to conceive this new state for transgression as a condition of language grounded in what he calls “the experience of the philosopher who finds, not outside his language...but at the inner core of its possibilities, the transgression of his philosophical being; and thus, the nondialectical language of the limit that only arises in transgressing the one who speaks.”²²⁰ Sturtevant’s placement of the conjunction “except” in her ET VOILA essay discussed above reflects Foucault’s new philosophical language. Like Foucault, Sturtevant finds that access to the exterior is now found via the interior; the limit is found by transgressing the language of ‘the one who speaks.’ We also can see that Sturtevant’s means of accessing the silent power of art echoes Foucault’s swerve into ‘the inner *core* of [language’s] possibilities’ culminating with self-transgression. Just as for Foucault with language, for Sturtevant, the absence-filled core of art contained a transgression of the creating artist. One key difference between them is that Foucault’s transgression opened into an oceanic void while Sturtevant maintains a coherent formal structure around the duality of representation.

There are also signs that Sturtevant found Foucault’s notion excessively masculine. On the published version of her lecture “The Solar Inversion of Satanic Denial into Desire” (2000) an image of a bright red phallus pokes from the right border of the page, as if to emphasize that crossing the limit of page and language is devilishly male. “Man,” Sturtevant remarks in the text, “is turgid with the big high of climbing / over the insurmountable relation of time and being.”²²¹

The devilish red phallus also could allude to the demon in Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence.

²²⁰ Foucault, 80.

²²¹ Sturtevant, *Sturtevant*, 123.

If transgressing the limit of the speaking self reveals the way to a new philosophical language, it also furthers a male chauvinism responsible for the rejection of history and our capture in an endless present that is “the reverse of jerking against experience”:

The rejection of history and reversals of hierarchies has driven origins from fast retreat to the reverse of jerking against experience, creating the grand contradiction that origins are now farther away from the farthest. As if they never existed.²²²

At the core of Sturtevant’s theory of art is a desire to preserve the divine. She is surprisingly critical of a groundless genealogy without origins or telos. Some sense of origins, she suggests, are necessary as exterior to grant us the ability to “jerk against experience.” The ‘reversal of hierarchies’ to which she refers are “Man as God. / Information as Knowledge / Image over Object / Copy as Origin / Truth as Falsity,” each slotting into positions in the duality of representation. These reversals, and the rejection of history lead us to accept experience at face value (‘the reverse of jerking against experience’). This situation, she implies, creates the ‘grand contradiction’ that origin is now ‘farther away from the farthest.’ In other words, in thrusting into the beyond without limits, we are left to deal with the ‘dark threat of absence,’ or nihilism. The ‘jerk against’ experience continues to insinuate devilish male desire as the force behind transgression and limit. The phallic conceit is carried further as Sturtevant elaborates on the liberated man that ‘hovers with excited friction’:

The appearance of great liberation, no longer bearing the heavy load of finitude, conceals the deadly trap that man without exterior is man without interior. As such, even with his new form as god, man’s life, labour, language, power and ‘being’ are all thrown brutally to the surface. Hope, desire, obsession, all that he is

²²² Sturtevant, 123.

and does, are now formed, informed and controlled by what circles about, what sits and hovers with excited friction.²²³

This lofty discussion about man's relationship to God can be connected to her formal discussion about art. 'All that he is and does, are now formed, informed and controlled by what circles about, what sits and hovers with excited friction' resembles the notion that historical context, setting, market, museum guides (which Sturtevant laments elsewhere), exhibition catalogs, and artist statements hover phallically around artworks. In place of substance, or an exterior that gives our interior meaning, art becomes a multiplicity of discourses. It seems that Sturtevant cannot quite apply poststructuralism to visual art, as she equates Foucaultian transgression with the emptying out of content in digital culture. Both are part of humanity's effort to fill its "vast barren interior" after the death of God. Sturtevant cannot quite rid herself of the concept of origin, which is an ineradicable truth and indestructible source of all art for her. This preserving mechanism keeps her from romanticizing about modernist voids.

She never fully defined the substance in the core of art's "silent power." Inferring from her texts, the silent power of art is the origin recovered by reversing representation's dualities. This power is *silent* both because all of the surrounding context of understructure creates discourse, and because it must be articulated as a visibility that has remained unseen and unspoken. As Sturtevant puts it in "Interior/Exterior Visibilities" (1996), down in the understructure of art,

Content no longer refers to the visible but points to the invisible which pushes to deeper layers: an interior and silent space. It is this drastic misplacement of image to concept that moves the dynamics from visible

²²³ Sturtevant, 123.

to invisible.²²⁴

‘Silent space’ is similar to Foucault’s notion in “Preface to Transgression” of a philosophical language that touches the absence of language. But silent space is only accessed within the duality of representation, within an artistic structuring of the social world. In the end, Sturtevant does not destroy hierarchies. Her art is not deconstruction, it does not celebrate the void, but keeps adding further layers of structure, via ‘powerful reversals’ on the dualities of representation. Audiences can be forgiven for not following Sturtevant down these depths. After all, as she warns us, “for those of you who are into cosmetics, remember that thinking ruins your face.”²²⁵

²²⁴ Sturtevant, 148.

²²⁵ Sturtevant, 183.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I analyzed a body of artist texts, a style of writing that aims to evade critical methods used to interpret artworks and situate them in a broader social project. This writing recreates the conditions of the original avant-garde: a site for formal novelty, dismissal of standards, renewed intensity, excitement, as well as engagement for art and mobility for artists. This style of writing takes as its “medium” the entire critical ecosystem, meaning the institutions, participants, and norms organizing a field of artists, authors, critics, audiences, scholars, and curators. There are two reasons for its emergence: 1) because the critical ecosystem developed over the 20th century has now matured, and 2) because artists have slowly incorporated writing and critical method into their practices. This combination has led to artists texts that attack foundational principles of the ecosystem, none more so than genealogical method, the purpose given to art in a broader social project.

In attacking genealogical method, this intellectual art rediscovers originality within a contradiction about the original avant-garde. In one way of thinking about the avant-garde, the relationship between artistic form and politics is concrete, pure, unmetaphorical. In this version, the past was past. In another way of thinking about it, the avant-garde is produced, controlled, and governed by critical methods in the present. Because this belatedness is never able to be eradicated from critical methods (leading to an ever-present sense that artworks are serving someone else), the core of art becomes hollow and empty. Scholarship makes it seem as if the relationship between artistic form and politics is driven by a concrete logic in which something (revolution) should have already occurred. But the something never arrives. This decline in possibility has led to a certain covert suspicion cast on institutions and their methods. In

response, artist texts are less interested in attacking realities than attacking institutionalized ways of reading reality.

It is no coincidence that all of the artists in this study work(ed) in New York City. The core of art's social project emanates from New York City. It is where the relationship between form and politics is decided, because it is where selections are made, money is controlled, and publicity granted. I do not want to call these artist texts "fake," but they share a veneer of artificiality related to this process. Bernadette Corporation's advertisements; Seth Price's artistic statements and art-historical essays; Tan Lin's lyric poems, and Sturtevant's paintings all could be considered "fakes." This artificiality does not only call attention to the fakeness of the culture at large, but to the artificiality that the intellectual space of art centered in New York shares with the culture at large. Furthermore, these works do not address the emptiness of life that an avant-garde seeks to rectify; they address the emptiness in the idea of the avant-garde generated within the art world of New York City. For this reason, they are only tentatively able to be assimilated into the institutions that they attack. More than anything, their anarchic inability to be historicized requires an honesty of the critic that runs against institutional standards. Interpreting such artworks is always limited by the fact that these texts often disallow interpretive goals from being realized.

So what do texts that are self-conscious about their own historicization tell us about the future of art and literature? In taking on the entire field of historicizing, these texts testify to the collapse and reorientation of primary and secondary disciplines. They suggest that the general methodological standards that organize cultural fields across disciplines may be more important for understanding the past than events. Just as with the theme of being fake, these artist texts can be oriented along this axis of critical method. *Dispersion* attacks method by creating a practice

that always includes its own articulation. In using a Marxist-Situationist method to create zombie youth culture, Bernadette Corporation covertly assert a single governing battle as controlling all others, and a language of resistance understood only through affiliation against a common enemy. Because they are organized by “control vocabularies,” Tan Lin’s texts suggest that art’s mysterious aura is determined by misreading one critical idiom as another. Finally, in casting both artworks and their surrounding discourses as participating in the conceptual architecture of representation, Sturtevant leaves no room for distanced historicizing. Each of these artists emphasize that what has passed as art history comes from the organizational logic of the present.

This research has important implications for literary studies. First, it shows that the strategies that count as “literary” to artists are much more expansive than those recognized by most of literary studies, which, depending on perspective could be exciting or disastrous. If readers think it important to continue the avant-garde legacy of pushing fiction into unexpected places, then these texts are interesting because they restore shock and the unknown to literary activities. They create strange situations and odd thinking. If readers prefer texts with a clear relationship to established genres and allusions to a tradition of other works within that genre, then these texts are more difficult to pin down—though they should still be of interest. I have focused primarily on how these texts filter literary strategies through the discourses of contemporary art and art history. Certainly, more could be said about their conversation with literary history, specifically Price’s engagement with autofiction, Bernadette Corporation’s adaptation of Oulipo and procedural writing, Tan Lin’s position within conceptual writing, and Sturtevant’s ambitious reclaiming of Foucault and Nietzsche’s philosophy. The relationship these texts cultivate with prior literary traditions is something I hope to expand upon (and that I hope others will expand upon) in the future.

Because I come from literary studies, my interpretation of these texts may not fit neatly into art history. This difference is both positive and negative. On one hand, not having an art historical background helps me see these texts more broadly as attacks on method. On the other hand, I lack detail regarding the specific contexts of these texts, either in relation to an artist's broader practice or to a text's position within contemporary art's circuits of distribution. I am also wary of how removing these texts from contemporary art critical discourse seems to foreclose their potential to provide a critique of the culture at large. In arguing that Price's text *Dispersion* is a statement/essay that *is* the artwork, and that it outpaces critical interpretations of his art, terms such as bourgeois/revolutionary, production/counter-production, avant-garde/mainstream longer make sense. There is no implied enemy in one class or group. There are only contradictory conditions for cultural resistance and a pursuit of novelty and shock, wherever they may be. Viewing texts in this fashion as attacks on critique—essentially attacks on attack—does not mean that I am against thinking about art within history; only that artist texts are pushing against long-held conventions about historicization.

The relationship I have articulated between formal strategy and political ideology also could be developed further in the future. Price uses autofiction to raise suspicion about his own motives, while Bernadette Corporation uses poetic procedures to fictionalize their own story, artistic practice, and political activities. There are key differences in the implied politics of their approaches. Price's work is ideologically void—or makes the void of ideology its ideology, which does not lend itself easily to a program. Bernadette Corporation's strategies evolve from Situationism. The problems (such as the whitewashing of culture into a bland mayonnaise) diagnosed by Bernadette Corporation echo those attacked by Sturtevant. While Sturtevant attributes cultural decline to mass culture, Bernadette Corporation emphasizes a capitalist enemy.

Sturtevant and Seth Price create works that cannot serve a Situationist ideology. Price's belief in the transformative conditions wrought by new cultural technology can be found in Tan Lin's texts. Both Lin and Bernadette Corporation reject older subject-centered forms of writing for outsourced methods. Lin's adoption of Luhmann's anti-Frankfurt School systems theory make him more of a techno-realist than a materialist. His poetry is evidence for a humanist hermeneutics centered on recognition of system closure.

The artists in this study cultivate texts that resist historicization. To conclude, I would like to propose three 20th century archetypes that have evolved into the 20th century to become templates for a future avant-garde that is "critical of reading."²²⁶

1. *Cynic*. One of the central problems with critical method is that it requires objectivity in the form of naïve artists and artworks. A history occurs after an artwork or an artist, who must be incapable of corrupting critical method. A coherent real identity and real presence in the past is required for historical work to occur. A cynic anticipates the needs of history and outpaces them. They have mastered critical method and present art as a game of magic and fraud. They do this deceptive work to serve the present, and to outpace a historical gaze that stultifies potential. The cynic focuses on Nietzschean conditions: how doctrines serve interests and lessons are strategies. The cynic cultivates a free-wheeling trickster identity that abuses efforts to make serious culture. If they expose violence in cultural technologies, they always do so to imply that such exposure is futile. The cynic gleefully highlights the flaws of genealogical method by defending an untenable position: a "belief in not believing."

²²⁶ Price, "Was Ist Los," 59.

2. *Situationist*. Situationism usually refers to the ideas of the mid 20th century French cultural collective the Situationists. I use it broadly to refer to any leftwing approach that views cultural media as a battleground for class war in the present moment. Situationism travels differently than cynicism but arrives at the same destination. The key difference is that today's situationist believes in the metaphorical link between artistic form and politics. To many, the situationist appears cynical because they believe in a single enemy called Spectacle (though not always named as such), that subordinates culture to being a tool that consolidates the economic position of a dominant class. Because one characteristic of Spectacle is the assimilation of resistance to Spectacle, the cultural forms that resist Spectacle soon become Spectacle. The only way to avoid becoming Spectacle is to continually reinvent resistance. To protect themselves from this cooptation, which means concealing themselves from the archive, new situationist writing is filled with insider codes, masked identities, and contradictory positions.
3. *Cybernetician*. As with Situationism, cybernetics refers to a 20th century movement that involved research into control systems, the field of thought that contributed to early formulations of digital culture. In this systems theory, human coordinates are replaced with networked nodes organized as closed systems aimed at self-survival but necessarily in contact with one another. Systems appear "self-making" rather than self-expressive and can appear to organize the world in the perspective of their system. In today's cultural field, I use the term cybernetician to refer to any method that is optimistic about digital logic, machine learning, artificial intelligence, and so on. A situationist might take a cybernetic approach as a disguise. A cynic might take a cybernetic approach as an inevitability. A cybernetician is interested in the potential of posthumanity more than

they are worried about or critical of the evacuation of earlier notions of humanity.

Lacking the organizing hierarchy of class war, the cybernetician views digital innovation as filled with potential. Using programming, databases, and procedures, the cybernetician promotes machine values over ethical values. They do so, however, to create something fresh and new.

Today, markets seem unstoppable. New technologies outpace critical method, and the metaphorical chain linking artistic form and politics based on the 20th century's horrors has proved useless in determining the future. In response to these factors, these artist texts represent a break in the relationship between artistic form and politics, and a desire to reform it anew. This practice takes shape across many mediums and can appear imitative or underskilled on the surface. As illustrated by Sturtevant's reversals around representation, the surfaces of these approaches conceal complex thinking about art's social purpose, and efforts to hide in the many activities that occur inside of an art network of producing, marketing, selling, and discussing of works of art. Rather than having clear identities, artists today wear masks that they can slip in and out of as they attempt to fashion a future practice critical of today's ways of reading. All of these masks anticipate future critical methods, framing the 21st century relationship between form and politics as theatrical and realistic, fit for a present when the future course of the humanities has never been less certain.

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