

an afterword after words: notes towards a concrete poetic

Despite over a century of poetic innovation since Stéphane Mallarmé's "Un Coup de Dés Jamais n'Abolira le Hasard"¹ (1896) & almost 50 years since the publication of Eugen Gomringer's manifesto "Concrete Poetry" (1956), there is still no accepted critical vocabulary for concrete poetry². Concrete poetry is often contextualized historically & is categorized as a subgenre of radicalized praxis from its predominantly modernist period in the 1950s through to the present. By reiterating this historical precedent – a stridently modernist activity – criticism on concrete poetry more often than not reifies the idea that this form is still in its infancy, requiring a citation of poetic precedent in order to justify its existence. Brion Gysin remarked that "writing is fifty years behind painting," (Gysin np), an assertion evident in the cultural & critical reception for concrete poetry. Readings based upon libidinal economies, political structures (& the refusal to reinforce these structures) & rhizomatic readings (such as those fore-grounded below) are as valid to concrete poetry — if not more so because of its attempt to shatter the chain of signification — as they are in other forms of post-modern poetry. I suggest that concrete poetry can also be closely read in conjunction with Sianne Ngai's idea of a poetics of disgust as a 'inarticulate mark' that

deliberately interferes with close reading, a practice based on the principle that what is at stake in every textual encounter is a hidden or buried object, a concept of symbolic meaning that can be discovered by the reader only if she or he reads 'deeply' enough. (Ngai 116)

¹ Translated by Christopher Mulrooney as "One Toss of the Dice will never Abolish Chance."

² Using the term "concrete poetry" (as opposed to the more accepted term "visual poetry") is also quite problematic, & is further discussed in a pair of interviews I conducted with Paul Dutton & Darren Wershler-Henry in *filling Station* magazine (see the bibliography for more details).

Concrete poetry momentarily rejects the idea of the readerly reward for close reading, the idea of the 'hidden or buried object,' interferes with signification & momentarily interrupts the capitalist structure of language.

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Concrete poetry has expanded beyond the tightly modernist "clean concrete" poems of the 1950s — typified by Eugen Gomringer & Mary Ellen Solt. Gomringer & Solt sought simplicity & clarity in their materialist use of semantic particles (Gomringer's "Silencio" & Solt's "Flowers in Concrete" are examples). Gomringer argues that concrete poetry is an essentially modernist gesture that "realize[s] the idea of a universal poetry" & can "unite the view of the world expressed in the mother tongue with physical reality" ("Concrete Poetry" np). Created by a dictatorial author-function, the modernist concrete poem limits & sanctions the role of the reader according to strict formulations; the reading space is "ordered by the poet [...h]e determines the play-area, the field or force & suggests its possibilities" ("From Line to Constellation" np). Writing in 1954, Gomringer argued for a poetic which both reflects & augments commercial advertisements & graphic design:

[h]eadlines, slogans, groups of sounds & letters give rise to forms which could be models of a new poetry just waiting to be taken up for meaningful use [...]
So the new poem is simple & can be perceived visually as a whole as well as in its parts. ("From Line to Constellation" np).

Gomringer proposes that "languages are on the road to formal simplification; abbreviated, restricted forms of language are emerging" ("From Line to Constellation" np). This reduction & "simplification" of language — this attempt to create a universal poetic based on headlines & slogans — is now completely submerged into contemporary graphic design & advertising. As Marjorie Perloff states, this

call for what Eugen Gomringer has characterized as 'reduced language' for 'poems [...] as easily understood as signs in airports & traffic signs,' runs the risk of producing poems 'poems' that *are* airport & traffic signs.

(120, original emphasis)

The form of the modernist concrete poem today is no more than an advertisement; completely co-opted by the 'golden arches', the Nike 'swoosh', & the Dell logo. By aping slogans & corporate logos as poetic forms, modernist concrete directly & unquestioningly underwrites Capitalist exchange, & "[t]he question remains [...] whether the conflation of concrete poetry & advertising isn't a kind of dead end for the former" (Perloff 119).

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The concrete poetry which I endorse here — & which stylistically is of most influence on my own work — is a poetic without direct one-to-one signification. It is rhizomatic in composition, pointing both to & away from multiple shifting clouds of meanings & construction, where writing "has nothing to do with signifying [...] it has to do with surveying [&] mapping" (Deleuze & Guattari 7). A rhizome is a non-centered, supportive system (think of the growth patterns of mushrooms & peanuts) — an "antigenealogy" (7) resistant to the type of the modernist situating within a historical framework to which concrete poetry is so often subjected. Instead of a single, arborescent (think of branches forming around a monolithic centre) historical & critical framework, rhizomatic writing is "a map not a tracing"; & as a map it has

multiple entryways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back to the 'same'. The map has to do with performance, whereas the tracing always involved an alleged 'competence'. (Deleuze & Guattari 12)

The writing I foreground in these "multiple entryways" is that which focuses on excess — the leftovers, the refuse, the waste. Writing which overflows the container of the hegemony.

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Concrete poetry, as Steve McCaffery argues in regard to bill bissett's writing, embodies an "interplay of forces & intensities, both through & yet quite frequently despite, language" in a flow of "non-verbal energy" (93). This flow, McCaffery argues, is composed of "forces oppositionally related to the signifying graphism of writing" (94) which struggle against the "constraint mechanisms of grammar" (93). This oppositionality in bissett's writing is not only seen in his letter-based work, but also in his body of concrete poetry — & is indicative of a larger movement in concrete poetry. I believe that this movement rejects the "valorization of the representational" (McCaffery "Writing as a General Economy" 202) in favour of an economic interplay of meaning & eruption. I propose a poetic where the author-function is fulfilled both by the biological 'author' of the text, & the technology by which it is created. Business machines & tools — the printer, photocopier, shredder, scanner, 3-hole punch, letraset (dry-transfer) — move beyond the role of device in concrete poetry through a poetics of waste & refuse — into a role closer to that of author/reader. If "Capitalism begins when you / open the Dictionary" (McCaffery "Lyric's Larnyx" 178), then concrete poetry is a means of political & economic critique upon both reading & writing practice & the Capitalist means of exchange.

I recognize that theorizing a language outside of Capitalist exchange is problematic, but what I am concerned with proposing is a writing that articulates a poetics troubling that economic master narrative. Because "[a]ll that signifies can be sold" (bpNichol "Catalogue of the 'Pataphysical Hardware Company" 161), I am intrigued by the possibility of a (briefly) non-signifying poetic. The 26-letter alphabet has been completely co-opted by the Capitalist hegemony as a system of materialist exchange. As "a rule of grammar is a power marker before it is a syntactic marker" (Deleuze & Guattari 76) syntax & grammar both reinforce the master narrative. Any movement to refuse or oppose Capitalism in writing only serves to reify it as the

other, reinforcing its grip on representational language. The best we can strive for are momentary eruptions of non-meaning which are then co-opted back into representation by the very act of identification, pointing & naming. These brief eruptions

disengage with the idea of transmission of meaning through heavily codified & linear language in favour of ambiguity [...] disrupt[ing] the possibility of a transferal of Deleuze & Guattari's notion of Capitalist ideology through text as regulated by grammar & syntax. (Christie 4)

However brief these eruptions of ambiguity are, they still work as an opposition to narrative & meaning politically & economically.

Writing that works within a general economy "transgresses the prohibition of semantic operation & risks the loss of meaning" — meaning written in the terms of a restricted economy. In concrete poetry, the excesses & eruptions of a general economy are prioritized as "a return to the material base of language [...] as a method of losing meaning, holding on to graphicism" (McCaffery "Writing as a General Economy" 214). The "presupposed stasis" (201) of the restricted economy is troubled through ongoing general economic eruptions — much like the spread of acne on previously smooth faced pubescent. In concrete poetry the restricted economic meaning "complicate[d] & unsettle[d]" (209) by libidinal eruptions spreads both micro- & macro-scopically to include systems of exchange from the graphic symbols of language (letters, punctuation, etc) through to the containers of this communication (the page, book, etc.). The matter of the restricted economy shifts from an investment in communication through the visual mark (the grapheme) to an investment in the mark itself, the grapheme & the container of communication. The economic relationship of restricted to general is one of flux as;

often we will detect a rupture made & instantly appropriated by the restrictive. The meaningless, for example, will be ascribed a meaning; loss will be rendered profitable by its being assigned a value

(McCaffery "Writing as a General Economy" 203).

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The libidinal excess typified in machine-based concrete poetry is not tied to a biological author, but rather to the excess & waste caused in the production by business machines of "correct" & legible documents. The shifting distinction between general & restrictive economies in machine-based concrete poetry, revolves not only around textual meaning, but also the categorization of text, & the role of writer in book production & consumption:

Ink, as the amorphous liquid that the word & letter shape into visible meaning, is shown to be of the order of a powerful, anti-semantic force, perhaps the 'instinctual' linguistic 'unconscious' repressed within writing.

(McCaffery "Bill Bissett" 105)

These texts are the documentation of the *waste* & *excess* produced through non-prescribed use of business machines. The documentation of this libidinal excess, of this waste, categorizes "the letter not as phoneme but as ink, & further insist[s] on that materiality" (McCaffery "Bill Bissett" 105). By using the machines for unintended purpose "non-meaning" erupts in the creation of "meaningful" (business related) documents.

A parallel can be drawn between business-machine based concrete poetry & the poetry of RACTER — the "most highly developed artificial writer in the field of prose synthesis" (Racter np) — has an implicit challenge to the role of the author in the creation of poetry. Machine-based poetry, whether the work of RACTER, photocopy degeneration, or the refuse created by shredders & 3-hole punches,

demonstrates the fundamental irrelevance of the writing subject in the manufacture of the written product [...]for the machine, the category of the author has simply vanished, subsumed by a detached language that can function perfectly well, despite the absence of poetic agency. (Bök 10-12)

Machine-based poetry questions both the author-function, but also the way that text accumulates & is dispersed on the page. John Riddell's "a shredded text" (1989) for instance, provides a source text to the machine which then "reads" the text & excretes the waste material of that consumption; "a tangle of page strips excreted from the nether end of a paper shredder" (Wershler-Henry 124). The general economic use of a machine created to be used in a restricted economy troubles not only the "use-value" of the machines but also that of the writer.

Riddell, as author becomes implicit in a restricted economy acting as editor to restrict the amount of waste that permitted to enter the manuscript of book. General & restricted economies shift as the normally restrictive site of creation (the machine) becomes creator of excess & non-meaning based writing. The author has become the voice of restraint & reason attempting to limit the presentation of continuous waste production as writing. The "cautious proceduralities" (McCaffery "Writing as a General Economy" 203) of structural poetics are discarded in favour of the documentation of a reading machine's waste as textual production. The paper shredder fractures the text through a "willing error" from a single united field of meaning with accepted social value to a series of pieces increasing "the rate & momentum of [...]disposal" (McCaffery "Writing as a General Economy" 220) spreading value across a larger field.

What radical concrete presents to the reader is a record of the *waste* produced by the consumption (reading) of a text by a machine. If "[t]o read [...] is a labour of language. To read is to find meanings" (Barthes 11), then the consumption & expulsion of texts by machines such as photocopies & shredders also finds

meanings where meanings are not expected, fracturing the text at the level of the *seme*. In a text where “everything signifies ceaselessly & several times, but without being delegated to a great final ensemble, to an ultimate structure” (Barthes 12) even waste becomes poetically charged.

To discuss mechanically-produced poetry libidinally in terms of “waste” & “excess” is troubled, because to dismiss these works out-of-hand as unintentional could be considered “anthropic prejudice” as “what we might dismiss as a technical fault in a device, we might otherwise glorify as a stylistic quirk in a person” (Bök 10-12). The machinistic impulse to create is beyond the frame of this paper, however “because the machine derives pleasure from its function, it cannot, as yet, exceed the stoic limit of its own fixed logic, except perhaps when an accident, like a [...] glitch, occurs” (Bök 16). By embracing the poetics of glitch — the mistake beyond “human error” — we assign the generative space of the minimal swerve of error to a process-based poetics, where the process & the product are controlled by the device, & not the author:

the clinamen of such a disaster may in fact indicate the symptom of some obscure passion in the machine — an ironic reflex, perhaps, not unlike the apostasy of mischief (Bök 16).

Echoing Marshall McLuhan, bpNichol suggested that in photocopier degeneration poetry “the machine is the message [...]the text itself ultimately disappears” (Sharp Facts np).

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The voicing of these texts, like the texts themselves, is “pulled off the page even as [it] disintegrate[s], a double thrust of text into silence” (Nichol np). In my own practice concrete poetry is not a score for oral performance & is not meant to be articulated in sound. This “double thrust of text into silence” then becomes another issue of the rejection of exchange in concrete poetry. While the concrete poet cannot

control how the reader will approach – or even perform a text – it is my aim to step away from performance of these poems in order to further complicate the exchange value of poetry. While 'value' & 'commodity' are never completely escaped, its transferal can be troubled by the removal of the verbal from the communication equation:

Communication 'occurs' by means of a sole instantaneous circuit, & for it to be 'good' communication must take place fast – there is no time for silence. Silence is banished from our screens; it has no place in communication. Media images [...] never fall silent: images & messages must follow one upon the other without interruption. But silence is exactly that – a blip in the circuitry; a minor catastrophe, a slip which [...] becomes highly meaningful – a break laden now with anxiety, now with jubilation. (Baudrillard 13)

The performative "minor catastrophe" operates as an economic clinamen; a minimal swerve away from the normative creation of a spoken text.

This refusal to participate in the oral performance of concrete poetry by rejecting the idea of the visual poem as score for orality — & the composition of concrete poetry itself – relates to Sianne Ngai's idea of a poetics where "disgust, & not desire, is our most common effective response to capitalism & patriarchy" (Ngai 98). A poetic of disgust includes both the "the figure of the turn, or moment of exclusion [...] the movement away from the object as if to shun it" & the "negative utterance" (103). I extend Ngai's formulation of the "inarticulate sound" to print-based media as well as the 'inarticulate mark'. Ngai suggests that one of the articulations of disgust is the "inarticulate sound" where "[n]o words are used in the expression of disgust & thus the question of what words 'mean' is simply irrelevant to this particular type of utterance" (Ngai 103). Concrete poetry – the 'inarticulate mark' – treats language as "raw matter" without a reinforced referent as a means to briefly interrupt capitalist exchange-based signification by

insisting on the disappearance of the referent while at the same time refusing to defer to other terms. It won't coagulate into a unitary meaning & it also won't move; it can't be displaced. (Ngai 114)

The 'inarticulate mark' of concrete poetry ultimately expresses a poetics of disgust & exclusion, where its language "only covers a space; the reader cannot fix it metaphorically, assign a concept to it, nor send it on a metonymic voyage along a chain of other terms" (Ngai 114).

Concrete poetry as an 'inarticulate mark' is a formulation of a poetics of excess; an excess which is not one of desire, but instead one of revulsion & rejection. Unlike clean modernist concrete, contemporary concrete poetry distances itself from a universal language of sloganeering & advertising. It actively attempts to interrupt language's making of capitalist value through the dis-assembly & re-assembly of the *mark* & the *grapheme*. Concrete poetry as a momentarily non-signifying map is an always impossible system of inarticulation, caught in the double-bind of the creation of meaning.

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