Introduction
Kristen Gallagher

Beyond Conceptualisms: Poetics after Critique and the End of the Individual Voice

Johanna Drucker, Poetry Project Newsletter, April / May 2012

CONCEPTUAL WRITING WAS INTRIGUING AND PROVOCATIVE. In the last few years, its practices have generated much debate. But as its outlines have become more defined, it seems to be passing into another phase. Institutionalization often signals that energetic innovation is becoming history or at least has ceased to break new ground. Anthologized, reviewed, theorized and retheorized, its publications supported by Kickstarter campaigns, its high-profile figures the subject of blogs and tweets, conceptual writing may be over. Many of its identifiable moves are taught in the edgier academic programs where its procedural techniques distance the work from the stock-in-trade of more conventional "creative" writing. As someone who has long advocated courses in "self-repression," especially for the young, I have no problem with these mash-ups, lists, re-mediations, and other mechanically generated outputs replacing epiphanic or confessional verse in the classroom. But in this derivative second and third generation, the work loses most of its interest. Read aloud, much conceptualism might as well be automated text-to-voice samplings of

contemporary language across a spectrum from banal to more banal. Flattened, ordinary, stripped of affect, the text-generating machines of its formulae do not compose as much as produce a text. Some conceptual writing is downright boring. Some is exceptional, even poignantly, richly humanistic, not mechanistic in the least.

But as an intellectual product, conceptual writing is as indicative of our thought-forms. In our time as any other-provided the repeated "our" in that statement refers to some higher order, emergent form of culture, rather than a self-selected community of elite practitioners whose careers are bound to its promotion. Captured specimens of a linguistic field, conceptual works not only exemplify the crass and bankrupt state of language, its inability to signify with credibility let alone authenticity-except as demonstrations, exemplars rather than representations-they are the discursive formation of an adaptive system bootstrapping itself to the next level of mind meld and social order. Neither its meteoric rise nor its demise can be read as part of a standard life cycle of fashion trends of poetics, in which one style or school is replaced by another in a bid for top billing. Something else is going on here that seems to signal a tectonic cultural shift. Or not. Apocalyptic pronouncements have a way of sounding hollow as soon as uttered. But pausing to consider what conceptual writing's modus operandi says about the state of poetics, the arc of the avant-

garde, the longer trajectory of romanticism, and the emergent conditions of language ideologies might still be useful. Individual works and insightful critics have served as the instruments for realizing conceptual writing, but they are as integral to the systemic transformations as agents of any other belief system or aesthetic practice. Which is merely to say, conceptual writing can be read as a cultural indicator in which the end of individual talent, demise of critique, and rise of aggregate authorship are probably in the ascendancy.

Some impulses for conceptual writing can be tracked to the critical texts of OuLiPo's "writing under constraint," or LangPo's socio-formal techniques of the (now very old) "new sentence," or other defining limitations for poetic writing. Points of inception, within the conceptual art movement or minimalist and procedural work that came to the fore in the 1960s, also might be used as milestones or reference frames to guide historical understanding of the conditions and contexts from which the impulse against late-romantic heroic individualism sprung. The uncreative impulse, though not interchangeable with conceptualism, is one of its closely associated tendencies, marking a break with traditions of expressivity. Fluxus, happenings and other manifestations of broader cultural shifts in the second half of the 20th century, offer their own insights into the particulars of practices that eschewed any trace of interior life in favor of socially based and procedurally executed work. Exceptions abound and

each case is distinct, but the now well-mapped territory reveals a series of sharp breaks and ruptures in which terms of serialism, process and instructionbased production transformed the post-World War II aesthetic landscape in the United States, Europe, and those parts of South America and other geographies with a shared modernist legacy. A pedant might track such techniques further back, into the esoteric realm of Gabriel Peignot's 1842 publication Amusements Philologiques, whose contents resonate more closely with "All of Billy Joel's Greatest Hits Played at Once" than with the indulgences of Flarf, the tedium of retypings, or the rigorously crafted exigencies of the best work produced from tightly controlled specifications. Peignot's anthology has its own prehistory in the meditative acrostics of the 9th-century monk Hrabaus Maurus, highly formalized sonnet sequences, kabbalistic mutterings and gematrial divinations, among other poetic prescriptions and prescriptive poetics.

But origin myths are descriptive, not explanatory, no matter how they appear at first glance. The question raised now by conceptual writing is what it signaled and how its institutionalization coincides with other shifts and signals. Is this literature at the end of literature? That seems too simplistic an answer. Conceptual writing is not the same as electronic literature, but the aesthetic sensibility of rule-based work is chronologically coincident with its

development. Procedural work finds expression in the computational games that parallel algorithmic processing. Not by accident are the terms of production similar. The implications may be counterintuitive. Rather than merely imagining that the aesthetic wing of cultural development legitimizes, familiarizes and domesticates the technological, we may be witnessing unintended consequences of changes wrought by communications systems and their cultural effects. If we shift scale, stop looking at authors and works, and look instead at the larger phenomena of literary expression and language systems, what then?

Aggregation engines and natural language processing programs, though challenged by the complexity of linguistic usage and nuance, have made enormous advances. Data mining of large corporations makes use of algorithms that combine word frequency, sequence, context and other factors to sort and condense enormous quantities of text into a reduced restatement. The result is not a summary or paraphrase, but a selection and ordering according to parameters that can be set by the programmer. Just as conceptual writing is not a representation of current culture, but a part of it, an expressed manifestation, so work like Matthew Hurst's "Hapax Legomenon of Steve Jobs" is a distillation of discourse events, not a summary of them:

...conjure up a magical or incredible new electronic gadget in

front of an awed crowd were ...a master showman. All computers do is (L and shuffle numbers he once explained but...'

The distinction (between a primary artifact and a representational one) is more than trivial, since the replacement of "secondary-ness" with first order composition as a way of presenting analysis collapses old distinctions between text and commentary, work and exegesis. This processual activity has a resemblance to other forms of aggregate authorship, and the crowdsourced production of discourse and widespread, real-time, massively scaled participatory models of social media, are all producing synthetic summary expressions. A project like "We Feel Fine," created by Jonathan Harris and Sep Kamvar, though not "poetry" per se or even strictly literary, is an aesthetic project with collectivity at its heart. Some of Noah Wardrip-Fruin's browser projects, gathering and aggregating language, were harbingers of other text productions to come, among dozens of other examples.

If the "death of the author" rhetoric of the 1960s and 70s promoted a rethinking, showing that cultural subjects were produced as much as they were producers (i.e., were enunciated subjects who were spoken, not merely enunciating subjects or speakers), the hypertrophic escalation of celebrity culture paradigms in the same era

made the benefits of branding apparent even if the bathwater of originality had been tossed out with the creative writing baby. Written text has never been so radically and rapidly subject to the synthetic elimination of all trace of origin or authorship. The deracination of language in the web environment is enabled by the very character of digital text files-their fluidity and fungibility. Counted, sorted, repurposed and reordered, my texts are made of words as shared and generic as the letters that compose them. We may have our individual stylistic fingerprint, the meme-genetic code with its identifying idiosyncrasies as distinct as our retinal imprint, but once returned to the field of language, poetic elements lose their defining identity quickly enough. The question of how poetic figures emerge from the field of language when discourse streams and live feed artifacts are constantly filtering the cultural soup complicates older distinctions between aesthetic and nonaesthetic objects. Modernism's acts of sublation, the challenge of the ordinary to the extraordinary that were conspicuous features of Dada, collage, and Duchamp's readymades, were gestures that registered because they still could. In our time aesthetic precincts have to be secured in order to guarantee an arena in which violations or outrages might register. Futurism's provocations would never find front-page billing nowadays.

Publicity machines and power moves are intimately related. The leverage afforded to poetic or aesthetic discourse when

its distinctness combined with visibility, when a poet was a mainstream celebrity figure, when a Byron could be the inspiration for an adjective that might characterize fashion, styles, ways of acting, thinking, being and being perceived, or a Rodchenko might aspire to reframe the world through a tilt of camera angle-that potential is gone. Aesthetic activity holds too small a market share of popular and mainstream culture to register on public consciousness, let alone public conscience. But for most of its several centuries' run, modernism's taproot in romantic ideology drew heavily on the notion of opposition and critique. Whether flaunting disregard for bourgeois conventions, or upending the tables of polite discourse, or slapping the face of public taste, the artistic attachment to posing a critique has been one of the hallmarks of the long legacy of romanticism up through the avantgarde and beyond. Attachment to some notion of politics as a task for poetics, rooted in the notion of critique, is premised on the idea that artistic identity had a privileged role in the culture. Artists were other, somehow apart, the watchdogs, the agents provocateurs, the self-styled shamans, outsiders, whistleblowers, or keepers of the flame of moral conscience in a fallen world. Metaphors of salvation and redemption aside (and with them, all whiff of theology), the sense that the artist's role was linked to critique has come to be a feature of the contemporary scene. We can read the writings of the modern philosophers, aestheticians, the passionate advocates of social change, radical

epistemological defamiliarizers and imaginative visionaries. All are premised on the same principle of utopian reform. Critique is so much the touchstone of aesthetic practice that it goes unquestioned, the every-other-word out of the mouth of MFA students, the unexamined term of discussion, my work, the work, everyone's work is always 'a critique of"-just as the Cult Studs practitioners are always laying bare the workings of media and cultural system, performing their "critiques" ad nauseam as if they were not complicit in the situations they put themselves outside of.

But as the theoretical precepts of complex systems begin to come online (in literal as well as metaphoric senses), the status of critique changes. If authorship and its myths of agency dissolve in a situation where writing is aggregated, made, constructed, processed so that poetics emerge out of the mass of discourse rather than being other from it, then the grounds of distinction on which the figure of the author gained purchase fall away as well. We become authorettes, components of an authorial stream, bits of the larger code tide. Critique was dependent on apart-ness and distinction, relied on the configured condition of identity to sustain its premises-the outsider otherness, a contrived stance at best, but a much-cherished one, was the requirement for such a practice, rooted in what look now like very mechanical distinctions of self and other, subject and object, self and world, perceiving consciousness and a priori phenomena.

In a cultural world where complex systems theory has emerged as a property of the very conditions it arises to explain, and a post-vitalist paradigm erases simplistic conceptions of an essential property intrinsic to "life forms," the idea of the "living condition of language" no longer suggests a metaphor, but points to an actuality. The old model, in which the artist played moral conscience to the culture, but could never make headway, blocked in a paradigm of contradictions, in which false consciousness necessarily abounds, is replaced by a new materialist approach, in which systemic changes might be brought about to ensure the viability of the system's own dynamic operations. Probably that is too utopian as well, but at least it removes the stigma of moral superiority from poet practitioners self-styling their work as political in a blunt instrument approach to the business of both politics and writing. The reaction formation of political rhetoric to its circumstance always imprinted works with the mold of that to which they were opposed.

Is it odd to come to the end of a discussion of the institutionalization of conceptual writing with a description of systems thinking and emergent agency?

In his notion of the noösphere, Ivan ilhich created a kind of weird science of emerging awareness in information spaces

and systems, eclipsed the social studies of human agency or institutions. Rather than continue our study of media, we recognize we are part of the mediating system of study. Language is no longer merely a medium, but part of that cognitive informatics that subsumes human consciousness the way the alien energies absorbed the children's awareness in Arthur Clarke's Childhood's End. All the old binarisms are rethought-subject/object, body/mind, self/other, avant-garde/ mainstream, margin/center-and the procedural transformation of being as knowing makes poiesis a new techne in which we are the medium, not merely a means of its production or use.

Conceptualism is probably over now, even in its newest iterations. The generative energy has gone out of procedural work and gestures of appropriation, retranslation, transcribing, and other methods of production that take an idea as a point of departure and carry out its terms to whatever affectless effect can be realized. What will happen to poetry and imaginative work after the wave of conceptualisms finishes its full dismantling of received notions of author, text, originality and creativity? Conceptual writing signaled the end of the era of individual voice. Poetics of the swarm, mind-meld writing, poiesis as the hapax legomenon of the culture? Conceptual writing is not the same as algorithmic processing. Aesthetic practice is not the mirror neuron of the mainstream. But the operations

currently performed on language and through language are having their way with us with similar effects.

Posted in Obituaries on Monday, April 2nd, 2012 by Kenneth Goldsmith.