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THE BODY IN AVANT GARDE POETRY

A Thesis Presented

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the use of the body in avant-garde poetics, relating it to both theory and contemporary culture. An outline of how the body has been depicted, represented, and formalized in modernism is made, and contemporary issues involving the body, from what Meredith M. Render calls the “alienability” of the body to posthuman hybridity and technological transcendence. Language poetry, including the works of M. SourbeSe Philip, Clark Coolidge, Steve McCaffery, Charles Bernstein, Karen Mac Cormack, Lyn Hejinian, and Bruce Andrews is then examined for the body’s fraught usage in a generally non-referential poetics. The body’s place in conceptual writing combines contemporary technologies with a look back at Antonin Artaud’s *corps sans organes*.

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## CHAPTER 1 REPRESENTATION, THE CONTEMPORARY BODY, AND POETICS

This study examines the body in late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century avant-garde poetry, especially poetry surrounding the practices of those associated with Language and Conceptual poetics. Such an exercise is beset by immediate problems, since the very notion of a contemporary “avant-garde,” with its premise of prescient futurity, may seem obsolete to many artists and critics (Carroll). Likewise, the body itself is no easy matter to discuss, with long-held philosophies of the body as part of the mind-body duality (whether Platonic, Christian, Cartesian, etc.) or objectivist materialism no longer uncontested. The contemporary body is a zone of contention, with many competing forces, histories, technologies, and signs ensuring that there is a sense of plurality to any acknowledgement of the body. Thinking about the body conscientiously is thus a difficult kind of thinking, since there are always more of these various forces at play than can be described. If the body as a “thing” is not a single and self-identical thing, then its expression as a sign in works of poetry which are both self-contained environments of signs and embedded expressions of a history, an ethics, and a culture only add to the bewildering complexity of possibilities bodies afford. This study thus can’t make wholesale claims of what the body is or what the body does in contemporary avant-garde poetics, since doing so would occlude the dynamism of complex potentials and uses that any poem both takes part in and is produced-by.

What this study can do is more modest. In the following pages a brief history of the body in modernism and postmodernism will be sketched to show the ways the body has been used in arts once the notion of representation was deemed to be problematic. Poetry will be viewed as a part of culture, related to politics, social movements, science, and philosophy. The notion of representation is important to this study, because if bodies no longer can be represented by conventional means, new ways of negotiating them symbolically will be necessary. While philosophy and theory will be covered to address these issues in a more general sense, the specificity of a poem to present signs in a certain configuration speaks to a different type of signification. Deciphering just what this signification can be if it no longer seeks to represent a shared or consensus reality will be one of the main goals. Despite the many views of postmodern thinking on the body and culture that could render representation of the body in any singular sense absurd, the world is undergoing a radical shift in terms of climate, environment, and technology. All of these shifts place their pressures on bodies, physically and semiotically. It is the aim of this study to view avant-garde poetry not as obsolete but as the attempt to depict a transforming world (and hence transforming bodies) in exigent forms.

While representation of the body perhaps has never been simple throughout history, ranging from Greek formal idealism to the chimera and monsters of symbol-laden Hieronymous Bosch paintings, modernism challenged not just the object of representation but the practice of representation, in art and society. Revolutions in industrial production, transportation, communication (the telegraph and the radio),

chemical and materials synthesis, and image-making helped shift society from centering around the rural landscape to the urban center. This gave more people the opportunity to access education and artistic forms once reserved for the elite, both enabling a different class of artists with different preoccupations than previous generations and a different public with different investments in the arts, enabling new sentiments like Lautréamont's "La poésie doit être faite par tous. Non par un" [Poetry must be made by all. Not by one.] which challenged previously-held assumptions about art, who was entitled to high-art and what the purposes of art should be (Lautréamont). With advances in technology came concerns of worker obsolescence, as traditional crafts were challenged by automated manufacturing.

Just as social revolutions spread throughout Europe and beyond, avant-garde circles were beginning to emerge. In some ways the avant-garde was a response to both technology and capitalism, where the arts, faced with increased automation, control, and representation through mechanical means, sought expression in the personal, the irrational, the unconscious, and the symbolic, challenging the mechanistic worldview of the Enlightenment which had produced the new industries and new manners of securing control over the populace. The avant-garde also developed a market value, even as it seemed to project itself critically against its society. The newly-emerged middle class, now capable of supporting the arts, sometimes saw the apparent innovation of the avant-garde as a form of cultural capital or trophy investment. This in turn motivated artists to innovate and produce novel or provocative work for remunerative rewards and recognition, which led to formal renovation in poetry as evidenced in the proliferation of

verse forms, free verse poetry, and the invention of the prose poem, chromatic experimentation and vague tonality in music, and, in painting, the rise of the sketch, the symbolic, and the socially daring, as evidenced in the detailed corpses of Théodore Géricault and the “obscene” paintings of new artists like Manet who painted the controversial “Déjeuner Sur L’herbe” with the unabashed eye contact of the nude female, or Gustave Courbet’s “L’Origin Du Monde” (1866), which depicts the genitals and abdomen of a woman whose face is not shown. The avant-garde both challenged the critiqueless reception of history or social influence and proffered new techniques for expressing meaning and value for a changing culture. Republics, utopian projects, and new political philosophies proliferated. The avant-garde reached beyond the work of individual artists to become movements, with the impressionists and symbolists notable in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century, emerging from the “art for art’s sake” of symbolism and aestheticism, newly embarked on a rapid technological, scientific, and social revolution, elicited the first sustained forays into abstraction, in which the figural and representational are eschewed in deference to the purely constructive. The first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw in painting fauvism, expressionism, constructivism, and cubism, in music the new timbral awareness of so-called “impressionist” music, Italian futurist noise machines, bitonality, and the rise of atonality, in poetry the last wave of symbolist poetry, and the medium-consciousness of the verse of Mallarme or Apollinaire, where typography and linguistic resonances both challenged reading. World War One with its industrialized warfare that decimated countries and maimed citizens, illustrated the depth

of social and political problems, and raised the exigence for art and expression as not just being important for artist-individuals like Wilde's artistic "elect" (Wilde) but instead always depending on a culture and politics which cannot be entirely excised from aesthetics. In the sciences and humanities, Freud's theories were becoming prevalent, and relativity and quantum mechanics were starting to shake the foundations of knowledge and reality. Art entered into an age of manifestoes and stylistic variability as urban modernity manifested as a multiplicity of modes and perspectives.

Form, medium, and context, became increasingly important in the arts. The cubists, Cezanne, and Matisse all emphasized the importance of the painting as a surface to the work of art, calling for new ways to look at representations of the human body, and new ways of projecting what it can be. At the same time, Marcel Duchamp showed that art can be made by applying ideas to the commonplace and by making distinctions (the *infrathin*) in the already-made; the radically transformative might be possible in an object like a broom, a shovel, or a urinal, or by the mere addition of a sign in a banal object (Duchamp). The diverse artists of Dada rebelled against societal conventions in every artistic medium, from Hugo Ball's sound poems comprised of "primitive" syllables pronounced to produce effects in the absence of content (McCaffery, "Cacophany, Abstraction, and Potentiality: The Fate of the Dada Sound Poem"), to Kurt Schwitter's "Merzbau" installations of ephemera and refuse sculpted into installations, to nonsense plays, and to songs composed to the "lyrics" of newspaper articles. In music Schoenberg's systematic "pantonality" was being spread while others reinvested well-worn forms with shocking harmonies. In Russia poetry jumped from obscure symbolist

poetry to the more irreverent second generation of symbolists, all the way to Khlebnikov and Zaum, with its made-up yet evocative “transrational language” (Janacek). After the end of World War I and the Russian Revolution, much of the exigence for Dada died out, and many of its adherents moved on to Surrealism, which, in its form advanced by its originator, Andre Breton, was put forth as a “social revolution” that absorbed and refracted Freud’s theories, attempting to elevate the irrational, the unconscious, the informal, the spontaneous, and the random. Breton saw this as emphatically acting against society’s strictures and orders, stating “L’acte surréaliste le plus simple consiste, revolvers aux poings, à descendre dans la rue et à tirer au hasard, tant qu’on peut, dans la foule” [The most simple surrealist act consists of going into the street, revolvers in your fists, and firing at hazard as much as you can, into the crowd] (Breton). With Surrealism’s absorption into the marketplace and creative vernacular, and the increasing conservatism and despotism of regimes across Europe, avant-garde experimentation and provocation became less recognized and celebrated until the end of the second World War.

The modernist project effectively modified conceptions of what bodies could be while not unconditionally accepting past models of the body. The body could be thought of in terms of a new materiality, not as a singular object but as the result of interacting perspectives, or collations or collages of disparate elements on a unified plane, or even, in the case of the Italian Futurists as a machine which, in the future, would meld with technology or be sacrificed to the improvements advanced by such technology (Marinetti). Formalism was explored along many lines of language to fashion bodies not

just which were representations, but which arose out of specific possibilities, whether from the phonemic play of Hugo Ball or Khlebnikov, taking the basic elements of speech production, available to many languages and culture, and expressing something (allegedly) independent of any, which served to stress the value of vocal production and perception (both corporeal processes), to the syntactic instrumentation of Gertrude Stein's writing, bending and twisting language to make novel forms, to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, where, on one hand, the body was looked at in an uncommon alimentary-digestive manner, serving to sanction all bodily processes as worthy of representation in art, while, on the other hand, experimenting in polystylism, perspective, and pastiche, which effectively rendered the body not as the standard of the self's relation to reality, but as a production that is contingent on a number of factors, a choice and matter of style and technique, illustrating the intimate connection between meaning, material, and technique.

The effect of cubism and futurism on the body was that the body is not just something which is seen as a received and recognized form—in a field of interacting shapes devoid of the illusionistic modeling of light that would give a sense of contour and texture, the body can be discovered. This body, assembled in a way that runs contrary to previously communicated experience, with different rules bearing on it than medical science (which has always, from humeral science, to mesmerism, to 20<sup>th</sup> century electroconvulsive therapy and lobotomies, been constructive, even if it purports to be analytical), thus affords us a chance to think about ourselves in new ways, as a series of glances, as views from different reference points, as always being styled in some way, as

operants in systems, and as part of dynamism and energetic flux. Modernism also gave rise to early conceptualism, where not just the utilitarian conventions of objects but also the designatory and symbolic elements we bring to it, inform materials.

While socially and politically modernism straddled many movements and philosophies, there was an increasing stress on the social and political in art, dissolving the boundaries between aesthetics and ethics, which made representations of bodies not merely significant on aesthetic and intellectual valences but also as actors in the world. The endless combinations that surrealist juxtaposition exuded gave bodies the ability to be conceived as anything, with any means, challenging some of modernism's tendencies to systemic thinking, and challenging the value of ossified and static thought. Whereas earlier modernism challenged historical conceptions of the body, offering new formal means of expressing bodies analogous to many of the intellectual and technological revolutions of the time, surrealism challenged the authoritativeness of any representation. For the conception of bodies, this allows for a generative potential when, before, bodies required materials, ideas, or means to be produced or described. Although this flaunts absurdity as the primary derived signification of the represented body, it opens the body up to "nonrepresentational," cultural, and anti-systemic modes that become important to postmodern discourse.

The Second World War was a ubiquitous trauma. The experiments of Modernism to challenge prevailing tastes, ideas, and preconceptions of society proved insufficient to counter humankind's capacity to design weapons of mass destruction, cruelty, torture, with new modes of delivering war to the very urban centers upon whose

shoulders modernists stood. If the modernist tendency to pastiche, to distort, and to reframe suggested a jaded indifference or even a sense of having transcended cultural and semiotic norms, the Second World War showed that there is no total neutrality.

Intellectual movements of the earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century often stressed system, from Saussure's course on general linguistics and its followers in many disciplines, to Freud, who sought to track neuroses to causes and primal drives, to behaviorism, to logical positivism with its atomic view of language, to set theory in mathematics. Even more evidently-individualistic forms of intellectualism like phenomenology, which studied experience as the only form of knowledge, were at least related to system, including Martin Heidegger's infamous Nazi membership and a postwar French philosophy divided, in part, along Résistance participations. Surrealism, which would seem to have no relation to ideology, had allied itself with various forms of communism, with many members initially enthusiastic about Soviet communism and many public rifts and schisms about what system of communism was to be supported (the movement's most famous painter, Salvatore Dali, was dismissed from the group with the anagram of his name, "Avida Dollars").

While the war by no means ended systematic thinking, it effectively showed how contingent all cultural production is, how censorship can facilitate repression, and how the formal revolutions that had swept over every branch of aesthetics are insufficient in themselves to effect the sorts of social changes their creators often conceived as attending their work. The experiments of the avant-garde lost their sense of futurity, no longer serving as the standard vanguard of cultural possibilities but rather showing how these

examples failed to serve the actual demands of the time, allowing atrocities to occur. After the Second World War artists and intellectuals no longer could solely invest their thoughts in medium and form. Many felt the need to rebuild a society which would not commit the same errors as previous generations. This led to a fervor in systems-thinking. In music composers like Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen rigorously composed works that employed crystalline patterns over most conceivable variables of musical composition, including pitch, rhythm, tempo, dynamics, and even timbre. Picasso-derived analytical abstraction became de rigeur. The structural innovation of Saussurean linguistics was applied to fields like anthropology, and mass culture was formally analyzed. Intellectuals were at pains to try to harmonize Marxism with the writings of Freud.

But system and rigor were also being challenged with equal insistence. The informal and formless were to preoccupy artists to an unprecedented degree. In France, Georges Bataille, a one-time member of surrealism (himself “excommunicated” from the group as a “philosophe-excrément”) who balked at the movement’s idealism, theorized on formlessness, “nonknowledge,” excess, and evil to challenge what he considered to be the illusory integrity of capitalistic, fascistic, and social ideologies. Nontraditional figures were being looked to as viable producers of art, unspoiled by the academy or culture. Figures like Jean Genet emerged from the underground to international cultural acclaim. The artist Jean Dubuffet curated shows of works of institutionalized mental patients who seemed to be heedless of aesthetic conventions. Authenticity, immediacy, and energy became emphasized.

Although abstraction was by no means new to the postwar period, it received new attention as being a way out of modernism's labyrinth into something more appropriate for the new society. Abstract expression gained notoriety for its shift of thinking from art as an object to art as process and event. In physics cloud chambers allowed scientists to track the motions of electrons in glass vessels, leaving physical traces for something that otherwise would be too small and mobile to observe. Jackson Pollock, building on a drip technique pioneered by André Masson and other surrealists, emerged from relative obscurity by making dynamic paintings that depicted nothing identifiable while recording his gestures, energies, and forces. The body was not being depicted, yet paintings were emerging from the body, testifying to the body's presence, its choices, tics, movements, and insistence in a novel way. The result was tangles of tracks, blots, and traces, dizzying and with no definite primary orientation. This effectuated a powerful critique against structure.

While structure was still going strong midcentury with figures like Le Corbusier, Xenakis, and Piet Mondrian in favor, abstraction was able to critique conventions of form. While Mondrian divided canvases up into geometric sections in which primary colors, with relatively little nuance, were applied inside hard lines, Mark Rothko developed canvases of fields of color, which, although divided, were done so without absolute boundaries, the fields composed of minute variations so that even this "flat" painting composed of a division into geometrical objects might appear to be systemic, upon closer inspection it escapes the strictures it would first appear to insinuate. The paintings of Wols were rife with organic suggestion, from cell-forms and bacilli, yet

suggested not biological determinism but complexity and dynamism. Franz Kline's stark gestural paintings, alongside the more excessive drawings of Henri Michaux, took the beams, dashes, crossings, spots, and arcs familiar to alphabets and script and deployed them asemically, assembling something like a script without words or a sign for something which has not been otherwise designated by practice.

Indeterminacy became a sort of catchphrase. The composer John Cage wrote aleatory music, where the performer gets to choose what to play, thereby eschewing the view of absolute art dependent on a solitary creator. Cage also brought his innovations to writing, where he popularized the mesostich and "writing through," using a given text and erasing or otherwise eliding its contents to either nonlocal linguistic connections or to make novel combinations using only recycled material. Logic and the sciences themselves seemed to hint at indeterminacy being fundamental to systems-thinking, as in the case of Gödel's Incompleteness theorem, or nature itself, like in Heisenberg's Uncertainty theorem in quantum mechanics, which uses zones of probability rather than the precise coordinates of classical mechanics to describe what is hypothesized to be impossible to be completely described for a specific moment in time. Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* asserted that many intellectual problems arise out of language, yet language was something that never could totalize the world, even when reduced to its simplest statements, such as in the case of urging actions in relation to deictics.

Abstraction challenged the hegemony of signification, allowing for bodies to be thought of in other ways than as objects of representation in the arts. Textual practices

like John Cage's encouraged thinking about embedded representation, of receiving a code and altering it using its own constituent parts; a body can thus emerge from something quite different, or the inorganic or conceptual from the physical. Antonin Artaud wrote, in the radio play "Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu," about a "corps sans organes," a body that is not institutionalized, instrumentalized, placed under the strictures of any social, political, or ethical program, any teleology or rationalism, that is its own brute experience divested of any of the occluding signs or directives which are induced into its signification (Artaud). New logics based on discontinuity and indefiniteness could produce bodies which are not completely circumscribed by rational proportions but which are under flux, porous, and constructive.

The arts and culture went through drastic changes in the decades following the Second World War. In America feminism and the civil rights movement began their attempt to give platforms for those denied voices, marginalized, and oppressed. Television and the radio made the diffusion of images and ideas instantaneous, even as it threatened society with a consensus culture with standards of beauty, propriety, and values. The art world began to view abstraction as passé, missing out on the cultural exchanges then taking place. Pop Art emerged and with it, repackaging consumer culture as commentary on the contemporary world, ambiguously capitalizing on it or providing Duchampian conceptual critique, depending on your taste. The Beats, the Hippies, drug culture, and the "sexual revolution" challenged convention along different lines than figuration or abstraction, including cultural sampling, like the Beatles using sitars and popularizing meditation, and questioning social practices themselves, not

merely cultural representations. The art now challenged traditional concepts of authenticity and creativity, directly critiqued or took part in society, and staged events or interventions with the innovation of performance art. In one moment in one place art seemed to consist solely of packaging. In another moment, elsewhere, art was purposefully ephemeral. In Japan a *Gutai* painter might labor over a canvas in a public setting only to burn it once it was complete. Performances and multimedia happenings stressed experience over products which inevitably turn to commodities. Boundaries which had seemed sacrosanct were now being effaced. Protests, armed forces, and manifestoes spread, and, along with them critiques of colonial powers, repressive regimes, and mistreatment of people based on gender or race proliferated. Postmodernism, which had been stewing in intellectual circles since the postwar period, was developing a new and multitudinous form in the social dynamism of the 60s.

If critique and concept were at the vanguard of this movement, the body enjoyed renewed attention. The formalism of minimalism was subverted by female artists like Eva Hesse and Yayoi Kusama, who reinvested the minimalism's tendency to make rigidly geometric or gridded art with suggestive and teeming organic forms. Underground films gave people with nonnormative sexualities or identities an opportunity to express themselves as themselves. Video art, like Richard Serra's "Hand Catching Lead" (1968) was capable of showing the body doing things that often escape notice, or by introducing abstraction or conceptualism into bodily movements. At the same time, the body itself was becoming a medium for art. The Vienna Actionists staged events which included masturbation, anointing themselves with feces, lashing

themselves, and cutting themselves to push the body to extremes. In 1971 Chris Burden, for a performance piece entitled “Shoot,” had an assistant shoot him in the arm with a .22 caliber rifle. The paintings of Francis Bacon gained notoriety, with their corporeal obsessiveness, their focus on meat, flayed bodies, the exposure of the body’s interior to the external environment, as well as its different perspectives gleaned from mechanical forms of recording and printing and imaging techniques that enabled the body’s interior to be seen.

The postmodern body was at risk and fragile at turns, violent and transgressive at others. Sometimes it was coded with overwhelming complexity, comprised of so many different sources that it was difficult to make sense of, like in some of Bacon’s portraits, while, at others consisting of a disarming simplicity, like Richard Serra’s video of a human hand doing a repetitive task and getting progressively dirtier in the process. While images of war were broadcast through homes across America, and countries fought for their sovereignty against colonial powers, and while sex and sexuality were brought out of hiding into cultural discourse, intellectuals were dismantling systems and providing means of appraising a culture which had become heterogenous. Situationalism was born, attempting to appeal to a younger generation, to critique cultural commodification and redefine urban spaces. Deconstruction, championed by Derrida, showed how language is never one definite and total thing, that even the most concerted language often works to undo some of what it systematizes. In the Americas, Erving Goffman critiqued social institutions and illustrated how the self, rather than being the emblem of some untrammelled identity, is largely constructed by the society in which the

individual finds her or himself. Roland Barthes famously called for the death of the notion of the author, and with it the birth of the text. The notion of “discourse” became increasingly important to thought, with Michel Foucault pioneering postmodern views on sexuality, finding the notion of sexual of identity to be largely a production of discourses that constituted it; by this discourse it can be regulated, so even the seemingly liberatory significance of sexual expression can be indicative to being part of a framework of imposed power (Foucault).

While postmodernity’s critical toolkit included ways of viewing discourse, representation, and expression as elusive, indefinite, yet always subject to issues of control, and the postmodern body was becoming increasingly polyvocal and heterogenous, technology, economics, and politics were rapidly altering cultures worldwide. If quantum mechanics’ haziness and relativity’s complexity introduced strangeness and the indefinite into cultural consciousness, the discovery of DNA and the rapid progress of computing changed the sense on not just what we are but what we can become in ways that became inextricable from the body. Medical imaging advanced from X-rays to MRI, fMRI, CAT scans, and PET scans, allowing the interior of the body to be viewed for both diagnostic and research purposes. Computing power and access multiplied rapidly, and with this advancement came computer’s shift from being capable of modeling aspects of reality, like Lorenz’s groundbreaking nonlinear modeling of weather forecasting in 1963 to contemporary computing’s ability to simulate reality or alter users’ experiences of reality.

With this unprecedented advance in technologies becomes a pressure for the contemporary body to be redefined, to be given new boundaries and parameters in order to situate it with the changing awareness of how the body operates and what operates on the body. Since we are now able to extract DNA, to take biopsies, develop cell cultures, extract eggs and sperm cells, blood, plasma, and marrow, remove tumors and organs, embryos, fetuses, and stem cells, bodily identity has become increasingly complex and difficult to negotiate. In 1990 the California Supreme Court ruled in *Moore v. Regents of the University of California*, that John Moore, who had been treated for hairy-cell leukemia, did not have the right to ownership or compensation for the white blood cell line cultivated by his doctors from his spleen's tissue (Render). The ruling challenges contemporary notions of the body, its extent, and the complex notions of rights and even ownership with respect to bodies. No consent was asked of Moore, nor was he made aware of any potential uses of his bodily materials. It is uncertain where bodies end and impersonal biological material begins, yet nearly every human body now can be priced by its constituent parts for the medical industry. Meredith M. Render writes that it is now "beyond dispute that the human body's capacities have become increasingly alienable" (Render).

This alienability is one of the contemporary conditions of the body, a body which now has a capacity for otherness distinct from Cartesian mind-body dualities or the Christian view of the body as degraded and contingent, compared to the purity of the soul. The new alienability is no longer merely an "other-than," a determination of heterogeneity and difference, but is also an "other-for," an alterity not just of matter but

of *service*, which situates the body and its parts as a differential complex of economic potentials and social controls (a ruling for Moore would have altered the medical-technological industry in such a way that patients could profit from their own procedures, reducing profit margins for the industry, as well as affecting changes to the law and rights associated to the body whose ramifications could be far-reaching and various). New modes of visualizing the body, of differentiating it into parts, of quantifying it, of valuing it, makes for a body that is no longer just personal. There are others who can use it, and due to the increased specialization of sciences and technology, there are others who can use it in ways we cannot. The body extends past sensation and even mechanism to features and capacities whose relevance or value may be unknown to the individual. To be other-for is to know that even the bodily integrity that seems to be a human right has its limits when economics and control are involved. The heterogeneity that characterizes the contemporary mind can also be applied to the contemporary body, to redefine what it is or isn't, what it can do, what can be done to it, for whom and for what. If *différance* shows that signification is never exact, and that, consequently, any system structured by signs can never be absolutely integral, the alienability of the contemporary body shows that even things as seemingly fundamental and inherent as material and identity can be subjected to the same process of heterogeneity, distinction, and alterity.

Modern medicine's pharmaceuticals, treatments, imaging, surgical interventions, its capacity to document, reproduce, and alter genetic code, its reproductive capacities, and its ability to craft inorganic implants ranging from structural rods and plates to artificial organs helps contribute to what David Le Breton calls *le corps brouillard*, a tendency for

“technocratic” contemporaries to view the body as a rough draft, something which can be improved by purchases meant to rectify its flaws (Le Breton). If communes were the sites of utopias in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, ranging from Coleridge’s pantisocracy to Oneida Christian communism, and modernism staked some of its more utopian dreams on the perfection of cities from the futurist idealization of technology and skyscrapers to the surrealist fascination with randomness in urban interactions like the proto-dérive of *Nadja*, the contemporary body has also become the cite of utopian idealism. The body is now cite + site, an always unfinished signifying canvas and the arena in which the individual interfaces with the world. Judith Butler, David Le Breton, Christine Detrez, Bernard Andrieu, and many other theorists have shown how the human body can be viewed as a cultural construct, conditioned from infancy to construe every aspect of its significance and functioning towards some end, ranging from the differences male and female infants are treated physically and linguistically (Butler), to the way fairy tales tend to valorize beauty and problematize “ugliness” (Detrez), to medical literature’s descriptions of surgical interventions of pregnant women as being for “the couple” or “the fetus” rather than stating that the procedure is being conducted in the woman’s own body (Van der Ploeg), to the more conspicuous conditioning by modern media with the production and distribution of idealized male and female forms, bodies are not just matter but a subject materialism affected by countless and nearly-constant force vectors. The idea of control then, of willing the body to conform to one’s own views, is prevalent in our culture. Parents may give boys who don’t meet up with average growth development rates human growth hormones to conform with societal expectations. People may become addicted to bodybuilding, regimenting their diet and exercise to

“sculpt” their body. Body dysmorphia and eating disorders are increasingly common when social media and the ubiquity of media become standard. Even phenomena like cutting attest to the importance of the body to contemporary individuality. While these disorders are prevalent in contemporary society, idealism of the body’s role in society and society’s future are not diminished.

While theorists ponder the human-technology hybrid “cyborg” as a possibility (or inevitability) as humankind develops an ever-greater sophistication of technology and intimacy with technology, the body is being considered as being “posthuman,” extending beyond its biological capacities. The ramifications for this theoretical field and the body are endless due to the combinatorial potential of hybridity yet little-known, practically. There is a current vogue among some to take part in what is called “body-hacking,” which Peoc’h and Druel define as a “forme de modification corporelle s’attache à augmenter l’humain par le biais de la technologie pour lui donner des capacités supérieures à la nature” [a form of corporeal modification that strives to augment the human by technological means to give the human capabilities superior to those of nature](133) David le Breton ascribes to the posthumanists a sort of “gnostic thinking” of the body’s base nature adapted to contemporary technology. Body Hackers, often people without medical degrees and surgical training, perform operations like inserting a magnet under the skin that enables the person to detect subtle variations in the electric field. While the movement is nascent and relatively unsophisticated, despite the efforts of its pioneer Kevin Warwick who calls it a “science fiction becoming a reality” (Peoc’h,

Druel), it address a contemporary hope of progress that is situated, not in agrarian plots or constructed metropolises but in the body.

The poetics of the contemporary body is heterogenous. On one hand the body is constructed by a culture, and one's own body now has an alterity that is not just a differential alienation but an "other-for." Our systems of representation have ventured from attempts at "realistic" modeling to symbolism, to abstraction and attempted asemiology. Bodies are subject to discrimination, war, and torture, which all find new means as technologies change. The same technology that allows the average person greater access to information, to the ability to communicate at great distances instantly via various modalities, develops pilotless drones that can kill from different continents at the press of a button. Just as the concept of value or capital emerged from the capitalistic economic system in such a way as to be universally applicable, quantifying anything from air to the stem cells of fetuses, the concept of information or data is now ubiquitous, which users constantly emitting their location via their smartphones, their movements and heart rates with tools like the Fitbit, and even details about sexuality with Wifi enabled vibrators that offer users interactions with remote partners (Wilson-Barnao, Collie). In many cases accrued data may not even be viewed by humans, yet often derives from bodies and is used in ways that impact bodies. While the posthumanist or transhumanist body may locate idealizations of the body and technology as the next utopia, it can still highlight the linguistic turns of the body in contemporary society. Kevin Warwick speaks of the poverty of human communication, elaborating that "human language is sequential, subject to errors, and an incredibly slow way to communicating

with others. Our coding procedures called ‘language’ severely restrain our intellect” (Warwick). Contemporary poetics, moving past concepts of representation and abstraction, address our current heterogenous and alienable bodies by addressing Warwick’s concerns, both with novel means to adapt language to be polysemic and not sequential, while also focusing on these “poverties” of language.

## CHAPTER 2 LANGUAGE POETRY AND THE BODY

Language poetry emerged in the late sixties as a critique of institutional control of language, the social and individual effects of such control, as well as the prevailing fashion of poetry to be confessional, which produced at times a consensus poetry centered around the individual ego. The end of the sixties witnessed a withering status, among young intellectuals, of the institutions through which culture is codified and transmitted. If the prevailing culture is what produces race-based violence or unjustified foreign war, intellectuals questioned traditional modes of discourse and artistic creation as suspect for belonging to that culture. If the ego or self as a congealed form of identity was the ultimate basis of artistic expression, as the confessional poets had it, why was the ultimate authenticity of such expression bound up with dissolution of identity, mental illness, or madness, exemplified by its figureheads in Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath? Language poetry radically challenged both these domains of language, the isolated or insular ego and the totalizing cultural system.

By what Bob Perelman calls “verbal fracturing” (Perelman 64), the sense of wholeness that systemic forms of discourse convey is disrupted and reoriented to ends which are not necessarily definite and thus not capable of imposing power to the same clear teleological ends as are achievable by conventional (and conventionalizing) language. This fracturing broke away from the schematic quality of the confessional verse that had come to pervade the poetic mainstream. The fracturing of language also fractures the author, who no longer is the justifying manufacturer for a work of poetry but one agent in a problematized, radicalized field that does not enforce identity but questions

the means by which identity is communicated, by institutions, art, authors, and readers. Steve McCaffery describes this act as a “fundamental repudiation of the socially defined functions of author and reader as the productive and consumptive poles respectively of a commodital axis” (North 15).

The means to achieving this verbal fracturing are diverse, even if, fifty years into the language turn in poetry, there are several stereotypes about the poetics of Language poetry that would make it seem as if the writing was to some extent rote or otherwise ossified into certain technical motifs. From the titles of Language poetry volumes alone, much can be inferred about the way language is treated: there is the potential tmesis of David Melnick’s *PCOET*, which splinters into divagations of pronunciation and referentiality; Ron Silliman’s *N/O*, which splits a word and recalls the I/O of electrical terminology; and Alan Davies’ *A AN AV ES*, deleting characters from his name in order to get to elementary syllables which either are a part of the English language or are not, without hierarchizing either. Just from these titles, before a single poem is even read, we experience a language which has nonstandard additions, creating resonant nonwords, the use of symbol to split words into parts, and the employment of omission to reveal latent semiotic possibilities in words which may have seemed stratified, as in the name of a poet or the sign of language itself, as in Language poetry’s adoption of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E as a sign to show the operative and semiotic potential of linguistic modifications. Another technique is typographical and spatial. Many poems by Steve McCaffery and Susan Howe treat poems as language that has not only been modified in order to highlight the materiality of language use but also to use written

language's spatiality to perform additional operations that the linear form of poetry cannot do. Shapes, design, fragmentation, modifications of angle, differing degrees of darkness, and overlaying enable signs to employ both the polysemy endemic to language as well as novel configurations, combinations, trajectories, and means of organizing signs that further what Barrett Watten calls Language poetry's "radical particularity," its complexity, contingency, opacity, and *unsublatibility*—its defiance of the whole, whether a canonical reading of a line, a unitary paraphrase of an entire poem, or the poem's coherent absorption into aesthetic, cultural, social, and political discourses (Watten).

Language Poetry, despite the immense technical resources opened up by those modes of deletion, addition, and splitting of signs, as well as concrete-poetry like spatialization, is more known for its poetics of *parataxis* and what is known as *the new sentence*. Parataxis is the adjacent positioning of phrases, clauses, or syntactical units without indicating relationship or hierarchy. Karen Mac Cormack's opening stanza from *embrace* illustrates parataxis at work:

Tree in the shape of voices is shine by comparison broken.

Terse ligaments an Alhambra to live by, or mate equals conquer on par.

The adamant if loadstone falling of fill.

Type of bread.

Weathered [Tale Light, 61]

In this poem, syntactical units do not relate according to linguistic convention. Nouns are used in ambiguous ways, with novel relations to modifiers like “Terse ligaments” which modifies anatomy with a language-based term, and there is even some ambiguity of their status as nouns, since words like “shine,” “mate,” “fill” also function as verbs. The conjunction “if” is used in a novel way in line three, because “adamant if loadstone” could be interpreted in a Noun If Noun schema, which is linguistically unusual without greater linguistic structures to contextualize or structure the form, like “One by one I substituted one rock for another. Rhodochrosite if I saw amethyst. Amazonite if chalcedony. Adamant if loadstone.” The line lacks, however, such context, and, indeed, only adds to the difficulty in parsing with the more common meaning of adamant as an adjective of determination. The line is made even more complex with the inclusion of “falling of fill,” possibly combining verb forms via a preposition, which is a nonstandard linguistic structure and thus lacks a conventional interpretation. Parataxis thus works to multiply potential interpretations of a line or poem by working at a material level on the language used, sometimes in such a way to ambiguate units of a line or sentence, sometimes in a way to alter the part of speech of a word or its agreement, parallelism, or syntactical relation to other words in the sentence or line, and sometimes to form novel grammatical configurations.

The “New Sentence” is the other well-known (and stereotyped) technique of language poetry. It was formulated by Ron Silliman as a linguistic-aesthetic critique of capitalism and words’ tendencies to not only find themselves attached to commodities, but to “become commodities” (New Sentence 8). The New Sentence is in part a critique

of novelistic referentiality, which Silliman ties with the commodification of language, a commodification that has been growing since the advent of the printing press, forcing the word to “become transparent” in the reference of the object. This transparency is flawed in that the word is a material (read opaque) signifier and not the object referenced, operating in a linguistic system not the fetishistic symbolic currency of capitalism. The New Sentence formulated by Silliman would thus foreground language and challenge referentiality. Silliman himself offered a complex definition on what this sentence would be:

- 1) The paragraph organizes the sentences;
- 2) The paragraph is a unity of quantity, not logic or argument;
- 3) Sentence length is a unit of measure;
- 4) Sentence structure is altered for torque, or increased polysemy/ambiguity;
- 5) Syllogistic movement is (a) limited; (b) controlled;
- 6) Primary syllogistic movement is between the preceding and following sentences;
- 7) Secondary syllogistic movement is toward the paragraph as a whole, or the total work;
- 8) The limiting of syllogistic movement keeps the reader’s attention at or very close to the level of language, that is, most often at the sentence level or below.

(New Sentence, 91)

Some of the salient features of the New Sentence are thus in terms of logic and reasoning, with Silliman insisting that paragraphs cannot be paraphrastic with unitary glosses or chains of reasoning, and that any given sentence avoids a logical relationship to the preceding or following sentence. The result of this is wide ranging. The New Sentence, unlike the paratactic line, can seemingly be clear, comprised of interpretable and seemingly referential units. This is different than some of the more extreme expressions of Language poetry which systematically dissolve referentiality, like this moment in Bruce Andrews' "Swaps Ego" that proceeds from the elision of letters to the point where the remaining letters seem to make elementary syllables and rudimentary words of their own:

Bo Reason A In Ga e Water e on Atoni Barten er C ore  
Do Du in U y Mat Sti Last Laure s S o ar  
Fa I y Do tor

Ja a Bu a y Pa Ga y Di Da e Bea I P ea a...[Andrews 123]

The New Sentence teases meaning, only to render it complex and opaque through the sentence's relations with other sentences. Poem 46 from Lyn Hejinian's "The Unfollowing" begins:

A dream is a poor location for memories of things one hasn't noticed, things  
scarcely worth noticing

Whew—my head is like a chrysanthemum held upright on my neck

Underwriting the stick figure with its stock-still demeanor is its caption: “A  
Minute

Goes By”

Figs on a spot

In due course anti-lions and anti-asps will befriend wandering humans on sailing  
ships propelled by calm . . . [The Unfollowing, 58]

Here each sentence or line behaves as we would expect a sentence to behave. Yet, in reading sentence after sentence, we experience something like the unresolvable units of parataxis, except now they are tied by a more or less coherent utterance.

Reference this is upended at various levels in Language Poetry. Steve McCaffery called reference “that kind of blindness a window makes of the pane it is; that motoric thrust of the word which takes you out of language into a tenuous world of the other and so prevents you seeing what it is you see” (“The Death of the Subject”). The referentiality of a word is in some ways illusory, much like how altering intensities of colors on a more or less flat canvas can give the illusion of depth; a word is uttered or printed, having a material, spatial, or temporal existence that differs from the referential object, having no necessary connection other than convention. As Silliman’s critique suggests, reference is by no means an innocent illusion—it helps undergird the political-economic system, has its share in economic inequity and power relations of subjugation and authority. Language poetry sees reference as a blindness to the actual linguistic acts

being made. By operating on language to make language apparent, reference itself is critiqued.

The body is a fraught space, a fraught object, and a fraught sign in such poetry. A body is something whole, a container for transcendental differences of body and mind, interior and exterior, matter and consciousness. Parts connect to parts, making references complex, tending to insinuate a tacit completeness. If I write about a “living hand” the hand is bound up with associations of what a hand does—write, touch, grip, feel—and where a hand is situated. It would not be a living hand if not connected to a living wrist, in turn connected to a living forearm, elbow, upper arm, shoulder, etc. This sense of belonging makes Language Poetry’s task more difficult. If I am attempting “radical particularity” describing lips might not be practically radical—as much as we imagine, as Wilde did with Salome’s famous kiss of the decapitated Iokanaan, a mouth as an abstract unit, it still expresses its membership in a larger collection of parts or unity, even if we may employ surreal descriptions like a “faceless mouth” to try to undo such referentiality. Linguistic operations can in fact enhance the embodiedness of body references, like M. Philip NourbeSe’s “bod y” refrain in *Zong!*, which focalizes not merely the fragmentation of the material bodies of the murdered slaves of the text, but also serves to heal such fragmentation—the *d* and the *y* are within reach, although the *y* and the *why*, the reasoning of this schism are irreducibly gapped, taken in with the same glance, connected by the reader. In a paratactic context, the body can form a node of signification that, even in the chaos of otherwise jostling fragmentary signifiers, does not cease to signify some form of wholeness. The New Sentence may step over such concerns, with its

tendency of being locally coherent on the sentence level, thus making the body unproblematic, yet, if the poet is to avoid “syllogisms” on the level of surrounding sentences or even paragraph or stanza level, then the body is best avoided in order to avoid falling into fetishization.

Despite all of these hazards, the body and its parts is employed in Language Poetry. It is used less, perhaps, than in many other schools or trends of poetry, and it is used in different ways, since it so easily transcendentalizes to wholenesses, identities, or objects. Language poetry has to be careful, if it is to remain radical, to not allow the body to infect the poem with connections that contradictorily cohere the poem into resolution and undo the poem’s project. If the materiality of the body is overstressed or used too conventionally in the Language Poem, cultural norms can cause the poem to seemingly support agendas or worldviews inimical to the poet. If the phenomenology of the body is too emphatic, idealizations might sneak into the poem that counteract the Language Poem’s intense specificity that paradoxically enables polysemic potentials to emerge from the texture of a text. The body can swerve from one axis of materiality to another axis of idealization.

Clark Coolidge’s series of poems, “Diamonds,” written in 1966 are formatted visually to appear as page-centered diamonds consisting of 169 3-letter words. The poem beginning “ace” appears thusly:

ace  
act ado  
add aft ago

age aha aid aim  
 ail air ale all alp  
 amp and ant any ape arc  
 are arc arm art ash ask asp  
 ass ate awe awk awl axe aye any  
 bad bag bah bam ban bar bat bay bed  
 bee beg bet bib big bin bit boa bob bog  
 boo bop bow box boy bub bud bug bum bun bus  
 but bye cab cad cam can cap car cat caw cob cog  
 cod con coo cop cot cow coy cry cub cud cue cup cur  
 cut dab dad dam day deb den dew did die dig dim  
 duo dye ear eat ebb eek eel egg ego elf  
 eye fab fad fag fan far fat fax  
 fay fee fen few fib fig fin  
 fir fit fix flue fly fob  
 fog fop fry fun fur  
 gab gad gag gal  
 gam gap gar  
 gas gat  
 gay

[Coolidge, 30]

The many constraints are obvious. The words are mostly—but not always—in alphabetical order. Each row increases by one word until the middle line of the diamond, which contains 13 words, and then the rows decrease by one word until only containing a single word. Such a relentless structure would seem to equalize all of the words, to place equal importance on their appearance in the diamond. Yet there are words in significant

places, like “ace,” “cod,” “cur,” and “gay” which are located at the vertices of the diamond. There are also words that compose each of the edges of the diamond, which makes a readerly distinction between inner and outer. The body appears in the diamond with such entries as “arm,” “ass,” “ear,” and “eye.” Due to the strictures of the poem and their lack of any functional syntactical articulation—it is not an arm that does anything; it is not an eye that looks at anything—the body parts enter into a symmetrical relationship with other words, including words like “ado” or “far” which are different parts of speech. By instituting this sameness of diversity, qualities and functions can be dispersed or shared. If the words are all more-or-less equal members of an array of similar atoms, the body words’ referentiality is diminished, allowing the body to be thought in terms of form, not of its material reference, but of its signifiers and their relationship to other signifiers.

Due to the inner outer form and vertices, however, this might be an incomplete dissolution of reference. Is there some kind of relationship among “ace,” “cur,” “cod,” and “gay”? Cod is Middle English for testicles—hence codpieces worn by dancers—adding an anatomical resonance to the hinges of the diamond. Ace and cur could be polarized assessments, and gay, located at the bottom of the diamond, could lead to a confessional-style of reading the diamond. Looking at the edges of the diamond, on the left side there are three anatomical words (granting cod to be one), “ass,” “cod,” “gam,” and “eye.” On the right side of the diamond there are none. Is this simply a quirk of the systematic construction of the poem, a chance occurrence arisen from the alphabetical arrangement of three-letter words? Or is there some significance that, in a poem where

the word, “gay,” conspicuous and alone at the lower extreme of the page, the left, the sinister side of the poem, contains reference to male genitalia, the ass, a feminine signifier for a leg, and the eye? While such a reading may be forced, it illustrates how difficult it is for Language Poets to express the body as a formal language unit relating through language and design to other language units. Even in a poem as rigorous as this, the body extends from the page, tending towards a wholeness quite apart from the means of the poem.

Coolidge’s diamond poem “mat” consists solely of the words “mat,” “bow,” “lip,” “urn,” and “ken” presented always in that order. All of the words are nouns of physical things except for “ken,” which references a span of knowledge or sight. The poem is like a serial composition in movement, with the same units with the same relationship to each other. Such an array ensures that the words are experienced as patterns rather than statements. Despite this there are quirks. The series is unfinished at the bottom of the diamond, ending on “urn” not “ken”; all of the object words have been repeated 34 times, but “ken” and its reference to knowing has only appeared 33 times in the diamond. Is this once again a necessary outcome of the poem’s design, or does the omission of “ken” hint at a preference of materiality to the signified or ideality? The body word “lip” seems to have no special importance not reserved for the other words, yet it does not appear on any of the left side’s edges, appearing eight times on the diamond’s right edges. Thus, while the body loses reference as such to a materiality, it acquires a sense of signification of form (three letters), order or belonging (third in the series), and even suggests a sense of chirality, a tendency towards the right or an aversion from the left, spatializing the

signifier even as it seems to obey all of the rules that determine each of the series' members. Coolidge's construction allows for parts of the body to enter into deep relationship with other signifiers, to assume novel properties, and to assume relationships to space that differ from the parts' words' relationship to conventions of space.

In 1967 Coolidge wrote "Suite V," presenting spatialized text not as serialized or ordered sequences of words but as minimal dipoles, where one four letter word ending with "s" is centered near the top of the page and another four letter word ending with "s" is centered towards the bottom of the page. In one poem of this suite, "cans" is printed towards the top and "arms" is printed towards the bottom (Coolidge 63). The page is mostly blank, yet "cans" appears directly above "arms." The two words may at first appear simple. Cans is a plural of an object-word, and arms are body parts. Is there some sort of dissonance here, between the inertness and thinginess of cans, given visual priority at the top of the page, and arms, alive but visually subsidiary. The words themselves, however, have other meanings. "Cans" are slang for women's breast, so the seeming thinginess of cans can be undone to see an anatomized, even sexualized ("cans" is a male heteronormative epithet for breasts that is less commonly used by women) term. And arms can mean armaments, weapons. The space separating the two words, and their similarity in both being four letter words ending in s, makes their connection fraught with potential connection but no authoritative reading. One could read the page in any number of ways, from (a) cans as objects and arms as anatomy, (b) cans as objects and arms as weaponry, (c) cans as anatomy and arms as anatomy, or (d) cans as anatomy and arms as weaponry (a seeming inversion of the initial literal reading, where the thinginess of one

word becomes anatomical and the anatomical sense of the other is translated to thing). Any choice of the reading would be arbitrary, since there are no external cues on how to read it. Instead the words resonate as if in some quantum state of indeterminacy, both things and body parts, sensate and inanimate. The problem of referentiality of the body in Language Poetry isn't avoided here—in fact, it is embraced, but with it is enmeshed an alternative reference that makes the body reference ambiguous. While nothing about “arms” or “cans” would contradict bodily integrity or identity, by rendering those parts with the potential to be things, the integrity is blurred and imbued with other significations that question what body identity is.

Steve McCaffery, among poets associated with the Language movement, is one of the least prone to stylistic repetition and mannerism. His poems variously employ code and image, parataxis and textual manipulation, typography and linguistic breakdowns to probe what language can do and what it can be, in defiance of authority and convention. In his long poem, *The New Work*, the body is expressed in a conventional manner in an unconventional context. In this part of the poem there is an alternating successions of words or phrases marked out in parentheses and those contained in quotes, all printed in a block of text both left-and-right-justified, so as to appear as a thick column of uniform text. One segment of this of interest to this study runs:

“open the studio” (sex as an action of assemblage) “of hues which fail to fall into place” (bricolage) “you put your tongue in my cunt and someone else’s prick up my ass” (form is whatever is at hand and out of that comes system) “sources of the nerve to curiosity” (workable vaginas) [McCaffery 2002 127, 128]

The phrasal units of this excerpt are relatively clear, befitting a poetics related to the New Sentence. But, unlike the New Sentence, the form of the section seems to allude to other structures. The use of quotes indicates a speaker, or at least a textual source of some kind. Their varied forms, from an imperative command to a fragmented account, to a description of a sex act (with ambiguity of verb tense or exactly who is involved), to a slightly paratactic utterance (that, without context, could be read “sources of the nerve-to-curiosity” or “sources, of the nerve, to curiosity”)—all of which complicates the provenance of the quotes, as they don’t seem to be spoken by the same person at the same time. The parenthetical expressions could be editorial in nature, commenting on, interpreting, or defining the quoted text. The body, in this linguistic field, while apparently operating as conventional reference, only does so via a lens that views language as sourced, that views utterances as objects, making no explicit hierarchical determinations on which sources take precedence, what their provenance is, and thus what the parameters of their referentiality are. If the parenthetical words or phrases are indeed some sort of editorialization of the quotes, then the most corporeally-explicit quote, “you put your tongue in my cunt and someone else’s prick up my ass” is followed by not some consideration of the body as conventionally coded, but in terms of formalism, leading away from mere phenomenology or materialism to new dimensions of the body as sign. This body-as-sign—or, more precisely, body-as-signs, is evident a few pages into the same poem:

1760:

over

had the foot only survived (had been discovered)

the swelled veins (the strained sinews) and the  
irregular motion the irregular motion

and the motion (irregular) of the muscles  
("muscles") might have led us into a con-  
ception of those tortures which are so  
divinely expressed in the face in the face  
so wonderfully marked throughout the whole  
body                    a                    hole

see Nollekens [McCaffery 2002 136]

The dependence on sense on source is dramatized here. We read the same words repeated, sometimes plainly "the/irregular motion the irregular motion" and then in terms of different ways of presenting text like "and the motion (irregular)" or "the muscles / ("muscles")" that cause single words to signify in multiple ways. If we read "the motion (irregular)" where "irregular" is included in parenthesis as if an afterthought, an inessential detail, or an editorial comment, does that mean the irregularity repeated before was also an afterthought or an inessential detail? To what extent does the consistency of a text rely on parts mirroring each other, and, if this is necessary, what does it mean when the parts are not issued from the same source? Do we read the repetitions as mere repetition, or do they signify? "in the face in the face" could be speechlike reiteration, but syntactically the sentence reads "in the face in the face . . . marked throughout the whole body," giving an involuted, nested image of a face distributed through a body, like the eyes of Argus. Thus we get a composite body, a body of discrete reference, a body of multiple sources and modes, and a body which is exhibited with a sort of mereological

self-referencing ability not possible for macroscopic parts of material bodies. Adding to the complexity is the apparent historical attribution to the year 1760, the reference to the sculptor Nollekens, and the operations on language, where the word “over” is positioned directly over the word “discovered” as if extracted from it, and, on the penultimate line “a” lies directly below the a of “marked” in the line above, and “hole” is directly beneath “whole.” Not only is the sign of the body composite towards multiple types of function, but language itself generates language in a way to have the first and the last word of the block between the historical date and the deictic imperative.

This generative propensity for language, for words to contain other words, crops up again towards the end of the poem:

leg. nose. eyes. teeth.  
no yes [McCaffery 2002, 144]

The string “leg. nose. eyes. teeth” is body-explicit and unambiguous in a way that is uncharacteristic for Language Poetry and its project. Yet underneath this string we read “no” just below the n-o of “nose” and “yes” underneath “eyes,” as if there are determinations latent in the referentiality, responses, denials, affirmations, or decisions in the material of their signs. The body, even in such an evidently positive and statement-like presentation, might be a question to which the reader must answer. The body then, the body-as-signs, has syntactical properties that allow it to contradict its signs to be interpretable as syntactically other; what was an affirmative sentence becomes a question; what was unmistakable materiality becomes questionable. The added complexity here is that the responses, the “no” and “yes” issue from the body, so while we might be led to

think that the body is being effaced in order to complicate its syntax and reference, the very means to which we would respond to this syntactical warping, this taking statement as question, would be to utilize the responses provided from the linguistic materials of the just-denied body. This complex act does not undo referentiality but subsumes referentiality in a greater semiotic play.

The innovation of this form of body-representation in Language Poetry is not the only way the material of language can be foregrounded in such a way to amend conventional use of body signs into something more polysemic. McCaffery's "Eros-ion" is both text and a form of choreographic notation. It begins:

O  
PPP P P P P P E  
e uu U  
O oooeEoooO ooooooP [McCaffery 2002, 232]

Such writing isn't altogether unprecedented in Language Poetry, which, in its extremer excursions, often expresses strings of letters, symbols, and characters, signs below the level of semiotic resolution of the word, like Charles Bernstein's "Lift Off," which begins "HH/ ie, s obVrsxr;atjrn dugh" (Bernstein 36). On the next page of McCaffery's text, however, we see a "Lexical Key," wherein we read:

O = Overexcitation of Jim's penis  
P = Penetration of Jim's Philip's Ray's or Eric's penis  
E = Ejaculation (Ray only)  
U = Unpleasure following ejaculation  
(Ray, Betty, Philips, Cathy, Dorothy and Sue)

C = Curve of normal orgasm (Sue excluded) (McCaffery 2002 233)

While the performance of this text would bring us into an aesthetics like Pataphysics or Dada, the use of language, of single letters, and their repetitions, is not unlike McCaffery's "The Baker Transformation" which uses Shakespeare's 109<sup>th</sup> sonnet as a source for letters set into unstable motion like a chaotic chemical system. "The Baker Transformation" is a performance piece where individual letters are intoned, their repetition and alternation corresponding faithfully to Shakespeare's sonnet but lacking all of the sonnet's rich referentiality. "Eros-ion" looks the similar part and could be performed as such, yet the letters, in their repetition and semantic disorder, are here instead the source for which corporeal and somatic associations are coded. While codes are not new or even exclusive to McCaffery in Language Poetry, being found extensively in Hannah Weiner's writing with semaphores and Karen Mac Cormack's use of obsolete words then defined according to modern equivalents, "Eros-ion" straddles many of language's modes, foregrounding language in both the textual and the vocal sign, the metaphoric and cryptic nature of language, and its performative aspects. If Language Poetry must strive to undo the referentiality of the body in order to free it from fetishes of representation and control, then "Eros-ion" seems to say that any sort of sign is capable of becoming corporeal. A single letter can suffice to conjure up the body, its integrity, and its conventional roles. If Language Poetry takes up that part of the deconstructive project which considers totality to be an impossible proposition, then totality's converse, nullity, seems similarly impossible whenever a sign is invoked.

The New Sentence, as composed by poets like Ron Silliman and Lyn Hejinian, suggests different theories of the body. If syllogistic logic is no longer a primary means of connecting sentences, then we are led from direct reference into something more like a referential-field. In a work like Hejinian's *The Unfollowing* where individual poems are comprised of sentences that the poet claims have no logical relation to each other, whenever the body is instantiated multiple times in a poem, interpretation on what a body is becomes cloudy. In poem 33, for example, one sentence says, "My eyes have filled" (Hejinian 2016, 45). Four sentences later we read, "Very slowly with my eyes I follow the lines between boards that link the bedroom floor to the equator." There is also a boy "with a 104 degree fever" earlier in the poem. While it is natural to read the "my eyes" that appear twice in the poem as belonging to the same person, due to the stated construction of the poem, they may not refer to the same person—one of the "my eyes" may just as well belong to the feverish boy or some undisclosed, unnamed other person.

The body in such a poem is remarkable in that it is disarticulated. I mean this in two ways. On a more apparent level, the body, entering in field relations and not elaborated upon, does not operate in quite the teleological, social, and representational means as bodies conventionally do. But I also mean that the body in a New Sentence poem is like an *article* in grammar, an indication of reference. In the case of the New Sentence the referent is often displaced, effaced, or removed. But the body as *article* has been dis-artic-ulated in the sense that it is not a definite article. The seeming specificity of the body dissolves into something more like an indefinite article—in a New Sentence, every "the body" is more like "a body", the "the" not being specifiable to a single definite

object. This body as article is a body as a *radical article*, not definite enough to be “the body” but often too specific, due to the language of the sentence, to be “a-“ or “any” body. There is a thisness, a haecceity to the body in the New Sentence, but a strange haecceity in which identity has been dissolved. It both eschews identity and clings onto a species of identity without sufficient identification.

Jean-Luc Nancy writes of the semiotic body’s *areality* as a central ambiguity to bodies, that a body is at once areal, in the sense of pertaining to an area, being a property of place, as well as being areal in the sense of having “a lack of reality, or rather a held reality, light, suspended” (Nancy, 42 my translation). The text-as-field of a New Sentence poem leads to bodies behaving similar to Nancy’s concept. “My eyes” are not real in Hejinian’s poem, not in the conventional sense of the word “real”, yet they are held aloft and spatialized to have some form of reference to each other, occupying the same signs in different local environments, their relatedness supposable. They occupy the same area and thus can inform each other, filling and following possible for each, even though the lack of syllogistic—which is to say necessary—connection always creates a gap, a sense in which their connection is a “held reality” and thus not a natural reality. The interesting part of this areality, of “this” body (these bodies) in the area-of-the-poem is that the bodies aren’t the same yet construct themselves as an area from their similitude, yet an area formed by the heterogeneity around which each particular body reference is made. Thus the areal “eyes,” by the end of the poem, is not one “eyes” or the other, but an “eyes” informed by the environment of either. The actual signifier of “eyes” is, as it were, blank, like an anonymous version of a constant in a scientific

formula, having whatever associations the reader brings to it, but being conditioned now by its surrounding(s). To borrow a term from set theory and topology, the areal body sign is the result of its *neighborhoods*; the areal body sign changes not because of any necessity in-itself but due to the vicissitudes of its membership in its area.

## CHAPTER 3 THE BODY IN CONCEPTUAL WRITING

While Language Poetry's focus on the presentation of language is allied to theories of anti-commodification, polysemy, anti-representation, and the questioning of the conventional roles of author and reader (and by extension, literature and market), its specific poetics can lead, as I have attempted to show, to novel conceptions on how a body signifies. A critical response to political exigence is part of the Language poetry, but in its denial of global coherence Language Poetry tends to relate towards culture as if deconstructing it. While Language Poetry does produce works that involve themselves with contemporary culture issues, like Karen Mac Cormack's *At Issue*, which primarily uses language and phrases gleaned from women's health and style magazines, language is often so foregrounded that more discursive levels of semanticity that would engage with contemporary culture require some assembling by the reader. Conceptual poetry and conceptual writing, however, in not focusing entirely on the materials of language and the (de)constructs made possible by strict focus on these materials, but rather the context of language, where it is found, how it is employed, and by whom or what, focus on textual practices, mediums, means of distribution, situating the works as cultural products or artefacts. In this sense, even if a conceptual poem is critical of culture or politics, it is so while situated within the discursive system of that culture. The critical ambiguity of the work is not at the level of sign-level semiotics, as in Language Poetry, but what exactly the conceptual poem is as a work compared to the system or discourse it mines, relates to, or situates itself inside.

This level of ready but layered semanticity is directly related to contemporary culture, technology, and science. Communication systems allow for spontaneous communication with others residing on different continents. Science has discovered new forms of energy, with new dangers, has devised nanoscale machinery invisible to the naked eye, has unpacked the genome of the human and experimented on recombinant and synthetic means of genetic alteration and production. Computers have moved from the institution to the pocket, with communication and media now being ubiquitous to those of certain means. With these changes come both different understandings of what we are as people and what our linguistic expressions are. Language now takes new forms, from textspeak and tweeting, to comments in computer code, to algorithms which parse linguistic data for corporate or institutional means. Language poetry, posed as an extreme of the Modernist linguistic project, deriving from Mallarme, Apollinaire, Stein, Joyce, Pound, to Cage and Burroughs, is primarily a textual practice, where its operations occur on the page, as a sort of apotheosis to the printed medium. This is not a completely fair assessment, since some Language Poetry is focused on performance and some even envision language in innovative ways, such as linguistic environments combining architecture and language by Karen Mac Cormack, yet the poem and the book remain the resolving feature for most of the works.

Kenneth Goldsmith, one of the pioneers and exponents of conceptual writing, wrote that “Words very well might not only be written to be read but rather to be shared, moved, and manipulated, sometimes by humans, more often by machines, providing us with an extraordinary opportunity to reconsider what writing is and to define new roles

for the writer” (Uncreative Writing 15). To an era of writers familiar with Foucauldian flows of discourse and power and one which is exposed to a seemingly endless supply of literature, journalism, blogs, comments, etc., such a vision for writing is current. In this formulation we see where the problems lie: words are manipulated “sometimes by humans, more often by machines,” cluing us into the fact that in this global view of language human concerns are just one aspect or parameter for language. Goldsmith also stresses the changing role of what both writing and writers are. This is different from the Language Poetry, which dissembled and altered language itself, putting any product of the writing process under question, whether literature, the author, or the reader. Conceptual poetry, by viewing language as something of a stream on which flow discourses and works, some deeply embedded and others ephemeral, envisions authorship as a form of consumption and redistribution, changing the role of authors from stereotyped geniuses probing their experiences to express singular works to products of discourse who (re)package chunks of language.

“Unoriginal” is now the byword for the writer and the work. The aesthetics of conceptual writing is more varied than the “unoriginal” and “uncreative” epithets would suggest, ranging from what Goldsmith calls *patchwriting*, a practice of synthesizing text from various sources to make a coherent whole (Uncreative Writing 7), to plagiarism, altered presentation of existing texts, modifications of existing texts (whether by erasures, replacements of a certain word, phrase, name, or type of word), transcripts, sampling, or conversions of some sort, like Craig Dworkin’s *Parse*, which rewrites a grammar textbook, recoding every word not as a referential, communicative word but as a

grammatical term that the word in question is deemed to be. While such practices may seem purely intellectual, they are in some ways revelatory or even demystifying of the conventional creative process. It is easy for a poet to think she is being completely original, honing a line until it is unfamiliar yet rich, but the poet has been immersed in certain literatures, certain dialogues about literatures, has been exposed to certain media, to conversations with different people in different places—as well as all of the largely unconscious appearances and juxtapositions of language afforded by advertising or the physical proximity of different documents or media (if I were to let my eyes trace straight lines on my bookshelf I could read inter-book formations like “Petty Bartleby Monsieur Testament” or “Cruel Anatomy Blue Center”). This is all to say that there is likely provenance of some sort to most creative literary production, however chewed-up, complex, or multifaceted. One of the results of writing conceptually is that this provenance becomes clearer. If I am rewriting a grammar textbook using only grammatical terms, I become aware of marginal and complex cases, of certain interpretations I may be putting on a grammar, certain priorities I might place on certain constructions. If I am retyping an entire issue of *The New York Times*, as Kenneth Goldsmith does, I become aware of the relationship of font to expression, of format into the way I perceive the content—and it might seem that any little choice I make will have drastic repercussions for what this plagiarized text will be. In this respect, the role of the author may not be changed so much as multiplied; ostensibly the author becomes a conscious participant in the language practices that in many ways have produced the author—yet, importantly, the author also maybe becomes a more subtle version of the traditional author, the little mysteries of creation, the burden of artistic choice and

decisions now being placed on the interstices of sources, algorithms, and operations, and to all the presentations afforded to the text. The conceptual author is both nonauthor and something like a nanoauthor or cryptoauthor.

If Language poetry's sociopoetics of the body polemicizes the individual as constructive and composite, and power structures as synthetic, while nonetheless presenting bodies in novel forms where they are capable of taking part in novel significations, new contingencies, and even new memberships, Conceptual poetry, which does not necessarily deny language's capacity to produce structures of meaning (albeit structures produced and maintained by media/discourse), yet which subverts understanding of agency, provenance, and situation of meaning, understanding of what the body is, how it functions, and what it is a part of has different theoretical ramifications. There are questions that arise in relation to conceptual works that border on ontological inquiries into what reading is. Take Vito Acconci's "Removal," which is a representation of the alphabetized names of streets via their grid locations in "Hagstrom's Maps of the Five Boroughs":

J12 G13 G12 B11 K9 B11 F11 F14 D13 C6 C14 F2 A9 A9 B10 A9 C14 J9 B12  
B12 C12 C12 C12 C12 C12 C12 D13 D13 D13 D13 D13 D13 D14 D14 C5 C14  
C14 C14 H13 G2 B6 F14 G4 J9 F3 F6 F6 J7 H14 D14 K12 G4 B10 C12 K11

(Against Expression, 22)

Such a mechanical presentation of alphanumeric units doesn't lend itself to the idea of reading, without some sort of cypher. Yet once the reader is aware of the conceit of the work, she can appreciate the rhythms of urban design, the concentrations of proximal

locations as evoked by letters, restricted to the A-M range and numbers, restricted from the 1-28 range. This contrasts with a Language poem like Charles Bernstein's "Lift Off," quoted in the previous chapter, where the poem's presentation was splintered into letters and symbols which, while hardly spelling out a single uninterrupted word, still had its linguistic and semiotic resonances. In Acconici's work, there are few resonances with associative words or word roots—we are exposed to an extensive set of relations. Yet, at the same time, those relations are themselves symbolic of a different set of relations (relations on the map) which relate to (translate) a different set of relations (the alphabetical ordering of the streets of Manhattan). There are layers of symbol here, none of which are themselves disrupted in a Language-style poetics, yet the first impression of the poem is of an abstract presentation similar to extreme Language poems. While the lesson from Bernstein's poem is that significance is like a weed that pops up no matter how long you've spent in your garden picking and snipping and protecting, Acconici's work arranges signs that translate and spatialize an initial act of reading and organizing; not only does significance arise, but this significance relates to other systems of significance.

David Antin's "A List of the Delusions of the Insane: What They Are Afraid Of" illustrates how a source-mined project can instead be used to resignify the body. Antin's work is a 68-entry list of "actual examples of delusions of about 100 female melancholic patients" from a footnote in William James' *The Principles of Psychology* (Against Expression, 43-45). There are no capital letters in the list and no punctuation. The entries are loosely anaphoric, lumping together like beginnings like "being

poisoned/being killed/being alone” and “that it is immoral to eat/that they are in hell/that they hear people screaming,” but not exclusively so, and there is no alphabetization or other evident means of organization other than the frequent similarities or affinities between adjacent entries like “that evil chemicals have been placed in the earth/that evil chemicals have entered the air” or “that houses are burning around them/that people are burning around them/that children are burning around them/that houses are burning” (Against Expression, 44, 45). Reading the list is a harrowing experience, with each line representing a person’s most overwhelming fear, whether social, familial, economic, existential, religious, or corporeal. Encountering them, one after another, is like witnessing a nightmare of the collective unconscious. Because of the affinities between entries and some of the patterns in the list, it is easy to forget that this is a clinical composition on a gendered and diagnosed population. The “melancholic” individuals who experienced these “delusions” are effaced in preference to a homogenizing and pluralizing “they” or “them,” their identities made negligible and interchangeable under the exemplariness of their symptoms. Antin’s poem reads like an Artaudian scream, with the caveat that the readers are made aware of their clinical use, which renders the scream less screamlike than the before picture of an idealized treatment course.

The body in this piece is a little like Acconci’s grid labels, a representation of a representation of something which is encountered as a lived experience. Just as the architecture, the sights and sounds of a Manhattan street are coded in the street names that are then fragmented into gridded plots on a map, giving the readers an alternative sense, due to the many numerical streets in Manhattan, of the way a city grows, Antin’s

poem/list takes us several steps away from intense experiences to clinical attributions/distancing and rearrangement into patterns and motifs whose sources may have never been in contact with each other. The body, not of the “melancholic females” and not of the clinician with his discipline’s focus on the human as organic, but of the work of writing, of the arrangement of language, gives another sense. One of the nuances of the poem is that the first 18 lines highlights no subject or sufferer, merely objects like “the police” or gerund phrases like “being lost in a crowd” or “being unable to close the door” (Against Expression 43). From line 19 one of the words “they,” “their,” and “them” are used on every line. This is an important shift—for those first 18 lines, it is as if each line is a testament, a response to a question (What are you so afraid of? “being poisoned”). Alternatively the lack of any subject represents the total clinical subjugation of the psychiatric patient. The shift to the plural third person enacts a distancing, a lack of direct address to the population being described. The fear, just after the work’s halfway point, that “they have no identity,” is especially poignant and intense given the situation of the patient, clinician, and work.

Because the subject is only ever null or pluralized into a homogeneity, the body in the poem is monstrous. The monstrosity of the body in Antin’s poem is not chimerical in the sense of having nonhuman parts in recombination, like a centicore or a sphinx or even Frankensteinian in the sense of composing a coherent analog human with decomposed human parts. Instead the monster of the poem is what “they” might become, what might be inflicted upon “them.” This monstrous body is hollowed out, “having no stomach/having no insides,” having “no brain.” It is altered, changing its sex,

foul smelling, incinerated, insect-infested, vermin-covered, starving, glutted, boiling, decapitated, disgusted, disgusting, and murdered. The body is a declension of itself, a declension into what may not even constitute a body, and a declension intersecting different times and tenses (“that their blood *has turned* to water,” “that they *give* off a bad smell,” “that they *will be* murdered when they sleep,” my emphases). A body that is less than a body—but a body that is *profusely less than a body*.

Antonin Artaud, in his 1948 radiophonic work, “Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu” (To Have Finished With God’s Judgment), introduced the concept of the *corps sans organes*, the body-without-organs that would later be theorized by Deleuze and Guattari. Artaud’s work ended with a commentary which included the following:

L’homme est malade parce qu’il est mal construit.

Il faut se décider à le mettre à nu pour lui gratter cet animalcule qui le démange mortellement,

dieu,

et avec dieu

ses organes.

Car liez-moi si vous voulez,

mais il n’y a rien de plus inutile qu’un organe.

Lorsque vous lui aurez fait un corps sans organes, alors vous l’aurez délivré de tous ses

automatismes et rendu à sa véritable liberté.

[Man is ill because he is ill-constructed. /It is necessary to put him nude in order to scratch those microbes that fatally itch him./god/and with god/his organs/because, tie me up if you want,/but there is nothing more useless than an organ//When you will have made a body without organs, then you will have delivered it from all its automatismes and rendered it truly free. *my translation*] (Artaud)

The body, as envisioned here by Artaud, is beset with two ostensible problems. Firstly, its composition, which he envisions as an “animalcule” à la Leeuwenhoeck, particles with some sort of agency, if only an animated material process through which the particle is maintained and propagated, which, taken *en masse* makes the entire organism a site of irritation--a sort of mob whose individuals are such irritants that the crowd as a coherent unit cannot exist-- rather than an integral body. Secondly, there is God. God is introduced both as problem and as ineluctably linked to organs. The idea here is of absolute authority and teleology; whereas the animalcules, on the one hand, disturb the body from their uncanny particles that will not resolve into a unified whole, on the other hand there is power and reason which treats the body as rational, as fulfilling functions and therefore situating the body not as conscious and free but as *useful*, which is to say, in this conception, *used*. The body is used because these ends are fulfilled without volition, without respect, without participation. The *corps sans organes* is a vision for an authentic freedom for the self, which can only be achieved, in Artaud’s psychocosmology, if the body is not separate from the mind because of physical, conceptual, or spiritual forces, as microbiology, and as physics would have it. Deleuze and Guattari translate this to a more philosophic *métier*, considering what I call the *deinstrumentalized* (un-tooled, stripped of uses and usage) body as one in which all of the predications of ideology have been excised.

Antin’s body, and many bodies in conceptual poems, get to a vision of a new kind of body that is similar to the *corps sans organes* but, rather than achieving this “liberation” through *ectomic* (from the suffix -ectomy, meaning the removing of an

organ) means, they do it via aggregations, as if a Bataillean excess, multiplying the significations and contexts of the body, can achieve similar results to Artaud, Deleuze, and Guattari. A work like Nada Gordon's poem from *The Abuse of Mercury* exemplifies such an excess of signification. The poem consists almost exclusively of bodily states, sensations, and excreta. The lack of elaboration of time, person, or source makes for a defocalized body, yet one made entirely of specifics. Stool is one of the recurring motifs:

Stools green, like chopped spinach. [entry 7]

Stools watery and offensive. [entry 18]

Even solid stool passes almost unnoticed. [entry 25]

Stool watery, jelly-like, with great amount of flatus. [entry 26]

Stool accumulates in the rectum because of lack of desire (and inability) to expel it. [entry 29]

Stools hard, knotty, covered with mucus, followed by bleeding and cutting pain in anus. [entry 30]

Constipation of hard, crumbling stool, covered with mucus; after stool, smarting and soreness in the rectum. [entry 35]

Diarrhoea of green, mucous stools (occur also during menses). [entry 36]

. . . (I'll Drown My Book, 147-152)

Similar compendiums attend cravings, discharges, pustules and excrescences, and more. What an excess such as this gets at is a body in surfeit of significations, a body which bears simultaneous mutually-exclusive states, but also a simultaneity of determinations made upon it, including commentaries ("lack of desire") and references ("occur also during menses"). Artaud's God hovers over this work, functionalizing the body, sensations, and its products in the way that any symptomology necessarily produces the

norm, which is often not a specific state, to which the symptoms deviate. If Artaud thinks organs are at fault because they encode an ideology of reason and use, then Nada Gordon's body shows that a body made up of flaws encodes the identical ideology, reinforcing the normalized body through a suspect but overwhelming apophasis. Yet the presentation of Gordon's poem shows this process to be unstable; it can only be propagated—it can only be maintained—by a process of repetition, replication, amplification, translation, rewording—yet this process of necessitated excess itself undoes, as Gordon shows, the process to which it attempts to sustain itself.

Peter Manson's *Adjunct: an Undigest*, performs a similar operation of corporeal excess. Yet in his work, unlike the work of Antin or Gordon, the body is not situated primarily in a clinical setting. There is an alimentary thread running through the poem, an ingestion of foods, liquids, and drugs, a registration of metabolization, digestion, secretion, and excretion; there are also pains, pleasures, stimuli, states, conditions, and illnesses that coordinate the body in a way that, taken as a whole, compares to Antin and Gordon. But these are situated within a complex of observations, notes, references, and materials gleaned from a variety of sources. Each sentence of *Adjunct* was distributed to its specific position on its specific page by a randomizing algorithm, meaning that structures like the anaphora and affinities exhibited by Antin and the “authorial manipulation and editing in the service of [a] sensation” employed by Gordon (*I'll Drown my Book*, 153) were not architectonic features of *Adjunct*'s composition. The body is thus not situated as a sole object of code but an element among many other elements. It is not signed in an easily deterministic fashion, since it is coded by a

computer code that is anti-hierarchical and, indeed, anti-organizational. The excess, then, of Manson's poem, does not resolve neatly into a mere critique of medicalization of the body and psyche. Its control is ceded, as if, if a critique à la Artaud on the problems of treating the body as teleological, rational, and utilitarian is to be successful, it cannot itself bear rationality, teleology, and viable use as part of the critique. This critique wouldn't even focus on the body exclusively, because such a focus would exemplify, to some extent, a conceptualizing of the object it means to empty of its shackling concepts. Manson's poem brings conceptual practices of mining and patching to a more stringent focus of critique, similar in this regard to much Language poetry, but, in a telling move, withdraws from the world of *techne* as one more overdetermining affront to the body. In order to achieve the *corps sans organes*, it is necessary to step away from all of the formal contingencies that such an operation, performed by a person, entails, all of the micro-determinations or even unconscious sublimations of reason's regime that attend any act of focusing on what has always been presided over by reason and use. *Le corps sans organes ne peut être réalisé que par une machine . . .*

Conceptual poetics uses a wide range of documents, works, codes, and contexts to craft its works. These lend themselves well to current digital technologies, where any work of literature can be scanned, and coded in a variety of formats, from images, to sound files, to various forms of text. The machine is central to this aesthetics, and algorithms are capable of modifying conceptual poetics in novel ways, from indefinite reproduction, modification, recursion, distribution, etc. One end of the "uncreative writing" project is for machines to take over from humans, compiling texts with rapidity,

complexity, and length beyond human capacities. Kenneth Goldsmith and others view this as a step to purely machinic literatures which likely would not be understood by humans, as if a 21<sup>st</sup> century of the aestheticist ideal *art for art's sake* would be a total dissolution of art from humanity, creator, curator, owner, and audience all external to the project of an art that has become *autonomously other*.

This extreme possibility broached—and sometimes essayed—by conceptual poetics need not be the only extreme possibility. The digital machine is distinguished by its layers of coding, its local environments of language translated, scale by scale, down to the binary rhythms of electric appearance and its lack. Christian Bök, however, in his work, *The Xenotext*, has singled out life as another domain and discourse in which recent technologies multiply semiotics and introduce possibilities that go beyond the historical human. While Artaud's anxiety considered animalcules as a compositional flaw in the design of people—particles with their own animus, irrespective of human consciousness or desire—contemporary genetics suffuses our composition with a language which affects us yet which we, unaided by technology, cannot speak. The genome is a discursive utterance that makes the animalcule, the cell with its cilia, membranes, and nuclei, not necessarily an autonomous mechanism but a phrase in a dialogue that will outlast the cell, relating similar phrases, developing into new phrases. Bök's *Xenotext* is an attempt to see this language for language and art. Machinic aesthetics as being *autonomously other* is one end to conceptual poetics, the end that disperses all signs to material and energetic flows for conservation, use, and development within those flows, whether of data or fabrication; Bök's vision, however, takes the extreme development of

art and locates it within the organism, *intimately other*, at that most central structure of life, the genome. This is not directly imprinted in the body, but is written with the language that helps construct bodies and as such is indissoluble from bodies.

The project of *The Xenotext* is translate a sonnet by Bök entitled “Orpheus” (to read, see Bök 22) into genetic code in order to insert it into the bacterium *Deinococcus radiodurans*, a so-called extremophile bacteria resistant to draught and low temperatures. Once there, replications of the gene will produce the sonnet “Eurydice” (Bök, 150). Because of the durable properties of *deinococcus radiodurans*, it is believed that the bacterium could survive mass catastrophe to the planet. Theoretically, *The Xenotext* could become the only plausible instance of an “eternal work of art,” due to its potential to survive catastrophes such as the eventual implosion of the sun.

The significance of *The Xenotext* for the body is manifold. Section IV, entitled “The Virelay of the Amino Acids,” is a series of short poems coded into amino acids, the basic building blocks of the proteins that genes encode. One such poem-code runs:

odalisques harken  
calling heavenly heroes –  
come home  
*(no hummingbirds have  
copied our opulent hymns)* (Bök 133)

This poem, in which individual molecules have linguistic equivalents, spells out the amino acid Serine (  $C_3H_7NO_3$  ). With the inclusion of a molecule to represent an odalisque, we find a culturally dissonant term for a type of woman who in a seraglio

would have been regarded as a maid but which in European representations was more often a concubine or sex slave. A person who ingested food or drink with the *d. radiodurans* bacteria encoded with “Orpheus” would thus embody such castes and subjugation allied to bodies that could potentially spread in the body or take part in the gut’s biome. The theoretical potential for this alone is wide-ranging. From being symbolic beings whose grasp on materialism is theorized to be constructive and symbolic, there can become parts of us that are in fact composed in symbols, symbols which can recombine in ways unknown to us, within us. Genetic writing could become a subtle form of tattooing—where a quote from Dowson may become, not just static and superficial but dynamic and constitutive. There could be an *écriture féminine* written not with codes handed down by the patriarchy but with homogametic gene *expression* in mind. RNA transcriptions and nutrient sufficiency could become to this language of combinations and iterations what the pen and paper had been to historical languages. And the semiology of the body could become bewilderingly nesting, a segment of genes coding an expressed body and an expression of a body, a sign and a signal. Where machinic poetics leads to an X-semy, where one (a human observer) doesn’t know what signs there are, how many, nor what they relate to, genetic polysemy would be intimately infinite, stretching back to the first minimal life forms, expressing multiply now, creating and reproducing simultaneously.

The mechanic and genetic semiology outline extreme for poetics and semiologies to come. Such visions, however, risk falling into a hardline stance in which language is a total sufficiency, ubiquitous, causal, and constitutive. The conceptual poetics’ end

visions of autonomous coding complicate this stance by presenting themselves as othering to humans and inaccessible unless by translation or mediation. The machines converse in ways humans would never be able to do. The genes mix and reproduce at a scale unobserved by us without mechanical intervention. If human consciousness and thought is only a matter of linguistic conditioning, response, and use, conceptual poetics can contextualize this as just a limited set of constraints or forms within a larger, perhaps illimited set of linguistic potentials, protocols, and processes.

Yet part of the success of conceptual poetics is that it causes a consideration of context. If Marcel Duchamp inverts a urinal and calls it a “Fountain,” we see how a simple formal process can take something which would appear to be tautological and give it new context; showing the convertibility between waste and sustenance, baseness and culture. Such an operation can be interpreted as linguistic in nature, but this code-switching only occurs because of some kind of inflection or hinge in practice, when something is performed or used differently. The act of removing the urinal from its cordoned-off space, taking it to an art gallery, inverting it, and signing it with a scurrilous signature *do something*, not merely say something. The saying accompanies the doing; perhaps the saying survives the doing, outlives it, evolves, but it is the act which performs the new situation of language.

So while conceptual poetics can alter and merge existing texts in a variety of ways or instigate protocols that take language from the merely human to an autonomy to which a human can merely access in mediated fashion, other conceptual poetry is aware of the situatedness of language, its relation to praxis and use. Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Fidget* is

one such work. *Fidget* takes place over a twelve hour period on Bloomsday, June 16, 1997 (Fidget 91). During the course of those twelve hours, Goldsmith described the bodily motions he was making aloud into a microphone which he had attached to his body. The book, then, is a transcription of this speech. The temporality is important; it structures the speech, segments the work, and provides a context for the events and language—these are not just linguistic utterances or appearances, but they belong to a given time, on a given day, to this body, so while the body is the stated “source” of the text, it is the situation which gives it its frame of reference that moves it out of anaphoric lists and catalogues or arrays of code and sign familiar to other conceptual texts.

A glimpse at the text shows that what it is doing is more than a description of the body’s movements, and less:

Eyes stare straight ahead. Forefingers push on eyelids. Red seen with streaks of green. Dots of many colors. Horizontal stripes appear in a field. Eyes ache from behind eyeballs. More pressure applied. Bluish ghostlike images of veins seen through closed eyelids. Eyes view retina and pupil. Press hard. Colors darken. Veins become white. Swirling red dots seen. Pain behind eyeball. Finger massages eyelids with great force. Hands cover eyes. Dots appear blue. Black field with bright blue veins. Sudden red shift. More light penetrates. Colored shapes appear, ending in center of pupil. Forefingers massage tear ducts. Blue seen. (Fidget 39)

There are bodily movements, pushing, pressure, massaging, and covering, but there is also reported sensation, vision, aches, and pains, illustrating that the book doesn’t simply focus on body acts but also delves into phenomenology. While a bodily motion or act may be thought of as rational (I pressed down; this motion consisted of an initial force and a terminal release; it was finite and discrete) and end-oriented, the phenomenological is notoriously labile, hazily-bounded, in flux, field- not object- oriented, and not

delimited with teleological structures, relating to language and the body but always as active as time. There is a curation involved in this, a sense of testimony that may seem somewhat arbitrary to anybody who has ever tried to describe in words what is seen when the eyes are closed.

Such a curation is evident with the masturbation scene that begins the section labelled “13:00.” It begins:

Thumb screws. Wrist flicks two hundred seventy degrees. Right hand moves toward body one hundred eighty degrees. Hand moves in clockwise semi-circular direction. Fingers release. Hand rests, grasps and lifts. Lips open. Head tilts backward. Swallow. Swallow. Mouth floods with saliva. Tip of finger scratches outside of nose. Hand grabs. Elbow lifts. Elbow lowers. Elbow out. Body stretches. Thumb and four fingers grasp. Elbow raises. Hand drops. Motion reverses. Right hand grasps. Lifts. Lips open. Head tilts backwards. Swallow. Swallow. Hand drops. Rests. Body moves backward. Hands simultaneously grasp and pull down. Back slumps. Left hand grasps penis. Squeezes at base. (Fidget 28)

There is a mixture of scales and resolution. We read quasi-precision with the “two hundred seventy degrees” and “one hundred eighty degrees” of the first lines, clean orthogonal numbers. Yet we are not shown everything—just what is being grasped and grabbed. In the sequence “Hand drops. Motion reverses. Right hand grasps,” is the hand that drops different or the same as the hand that grasps? If it is the same, what warrants its being singled out for grasping while not for dropping? Why in this scene of bodily manipulation is there no attendant sensory qualia like there were to the visualized streaks, dots, and veins of the eyelid-pressing scene?

Part of the fascination of this text is that it presents us with a level of detail, verbally, that goes beyond natural discourse. There is a sense of alienation in reading a text describing something like the drinking of coffee as:

Muscles tighten in arm. Coffee cup to lips. Tilt. Coffee swallowed and cup placed on table. Coffee cup to lips. Coffee swallowed. Cup placed on table. Draw mucus. Peristalsis. Cup to mouth. Coffee flows between teeth and gum inside cheek. Tip of tongue caresses inside of cheek. Tongue probes gully where cheek meets gum. Tongue muscles stretch, flex, and strain. Tongue runs along canal in front of teeth. Elbows lean against arms. Bones exact pressure. Cup to mouth. (Fidget 23)

The minute detailing sometimes erodes the sense of definiteness and performativity of tasks mediated with the body. While this detail ostensibly serves a level of authenticity or truth, it is merely a sort of magnification of the approximations, interpretations, and choices always at play in describing the body. Instead of the density of detail serving to render the body, as configured by language, as somehow more concrete, it emphasizes the patterned, conventional, and selective nature of corporeal description. Why, for instance, do “muscles tighten in arm” for the first sip but not any subsequent sip? What has the tongue been doing before it “probes gully where cheek meets gum”? The apparent accuracy of the text masks what is actually a problem for language in its depiction and relation to the body.

The text situates the body in language but does not reproduce it. *Fidget* shows how difficult that would be. This is for many reasons. The body is interior and exterior. Muscles, bones, and organs operate at the same time as lips, eyelids, hairs, fingernails, knuckles, knees, skin. Determining what the body is, by focusing on a part, always performs a limitation of some sort. I could say “Fingertip scratches,” which describes a corporeal event but fails to account for the totality of what goes on, a nerve impulse in the brain traveling down the spine into nerves that eventually make their way to the hand, a motion in the finger that coincidentally moves tendons in the hand, tendons connected to

muscles connected to the wrist, effectively rippling into small contractions of forearm muscles—all of which are dependent on metabolic and respiratory systems to provide energy, etc. While there are discrete bones, muscles, and tendons in the body, the parts are all interconnected such that nothing can be performed in isolation of other parts. To describe the body at all is to make assumptions, which, interpreted differently, is tantamount to admitting to Artaud's poorly-constructed and automatic body (parts beyond one's control, parts beyond immediate consciousness) on one hand or the influence of various discourses and conventions on the other. *Linguistically, the body is only ever produced. Linguistically, the body is only ever impossible, not totalizeable in any single utterance or document, always supplementary and intra-contingent in such a way to render the only possible whole the sum of the limitless combinations of parts, yet the parts to only have sufficient definition by their deduced relations.*

*Fidget* thus does what such extremes of conceptual poetics as *The Xenotext* and *Adjunct* fail to do: to take the failure of language as one of the most productive sources of language. While poets such as Caroline Bergvall examine the “glitch” of language, sites where language is disrupted, corrupted, or otherwise failed, *Fidget* does so with the situation of language, on the relationship between produced language and practice. *Fidget* makes obvious insights about the nature of our awareness of our own actions, the language by which we code or account for the physical acts we accomplish, and what vocabularies are associated with such a code. But if conceptual poetics ends with something like an *art for art's sake* that ends up in a discourse dissociated from the human into the mechanical or the genetic, *Fidget* shows that language is constrained to a

fraught relationship to practice, and that any such relationship to practice is selective rather than necessary. With endpoints of art tending towards the inhuman or posthuman, *selection* proves to be one of the central manners in which language becomes thought or even lived experience. The conceptual body, as much as it is coded, sourced, mixed, presided over by algorithms, is still a body that must be selected to be a body because of parameters that enable it to be recognized as a body.

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