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# COUNTERTEXTING ONE ANOTHER : CONCEPTUAL POETICS, FLAR F AND DERRIDEAN COUNTERSIGNATURE

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(Cardiff University)

## Abstract:

Using the precedent of Charles Bernstein's spoof on Charles Olson's 'Projective Verse' poetics manifesto as part of a long contextual introduction on issues of literary filiation and intertextuality, this essay analyses the recent exchanges between conceptualist poetry (Vanessa Place, Kenneth Goldsmith's 'uncreative writing') and 'Flarf' (Drew Gardner) in the light of Derrida's twin notions of signature and countersignature, and the process it ties together reading and writing(-as-rereading) in response and co-responsibility in order to theorize the critical notion of 'countertextuality' as a more contemporary inflection of the mechanics of literary interaction known as intertextuality, better suited to characterize the textual interaction between current poetic movements. The critical apparatus and developments in the footnotes are also conceived as a creative enactment of the countertext, whose final instance (the epilogue, or 'Necrologue') is a parodic rewriting performatively exposing the creative impasse and derivativeness of several recent textual productions mimicking Sol LeWitt's 'Sentences on Conceptual Art'. As it moves towards its final critical part, the essay also puts forward, while enacting them, more general views about the relative sterility of some aspects of contemporary poetic debates while gesturing for a possible way out, via Felix Bernstein's 'Notes on Post-conceptual Poetry', in order to reclaim 'the genuinely imaginary-affective-intellectual fabric and texture of the poetical'.

**Keywords:** Flarf, countertext, Charles and Felix Bernstein, Drew Gardner, Vanessa Place, Kenneth Goldsmith, post-conceptual poetry, counter-signature, creative writing

mais qu'en aura-t-il été du *contre*?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *La Vérité en peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), p. 63; cp. with *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 54.

## CounterText

Ever since John Barth's seminal essay on 'The Literature of Exhaustion' (1968) and Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1st ed. 1973),<sup>2</sup> to name but these, much ink has been spilled on the joint impossibility of resisting the flow of derivativeness and achieving unprecedented originality. More: it would be intrinsic to the 'original' nature of textuality to be originarily imitative – whether unconsciously or not – supplementary (Derrida), 'purloined' (Poe), '[t]he last word in stolentelling!' (Joyce), etc. There is no writing that does not presuppose a prior act of reading (not to mention self-consciously reading-oneself-while-writing), and consequently 'making' literature, and specifically poetry (from Greek *poiein*: to make, fabricate), the field most readily associated with the necessity of pristine imagination and inventiveness, is always a (re)'making it new'.<sup>3</sup>

Such an arguably 'postmodern' awareness of antecedence and, therefore, disbelief in the possibility of one's own grand creative narrative – to adapt Jean-François Lyotard's celebrated take on the post-WW2 *Zeitgeist* – was yet seemingly absent from Charles Olson's foundational essay 'Projective Verse' (1950), which dogmatically set out to chart a self-proclaimed novel poetics, albeit in terms too often literally hijacked from his influential master, Ezra Pound.<sup>4</sup> Its anthologized enshrining as a watershed in American poetics, combined with Marjorie Perloff's unrelenting denunciation of the indebtedness of Olson's essay,<sup>5</sup> is no doubt the double-sided prong that goaded

<sup>2</sup> See e.g., among his six 'revisionary ratios', 'Daemonization, or a movement towards a personalized Counter-Sublime, in reaction to the precursor's Sublime'; Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 15; developed pp. 99–112.

<sup>3</sup> One of high modernism's most famous, aggressive, aesthetic battle cries, put forward by Ezra Pound, as in the retrospective publication *Make It New: Essays by Ezra Pound* (London: Faber, 1934) – symptomatically after *How To Read* (1931) and *The ABC of Reading* (1934) – whose title is iterated by a recent 'postmodernist' poem by Alice Fulton ('Make It New', originally published in the 'modernist' journal *Poetry*, 203, no. 1 [October 2013]), especially the lines: 'It will be new / whether you make it new / or not.' In that respect, see also Lynn Keller, *Re-making it New: Contemporary American Poetry and the Modernist Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009 [1987]). In *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 447–8, Hugh Kenner traces this renovating impetus, found in Canto LIII, back to an inscription, dated 1766 BC, on the bathtub of the founder of the Shang dynasty, a fact which can be aligned with John Barth's recall in 'The Literature of Replenishment' that an Egyptian papyrus of ca. 2000 B.C. already complained of arriving on the literary scene too late for innovation. (*The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* [London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984], p. 206.)

<sup>4</sup> For instance, 'The dance of the intellect' is an unacknowledged recycling of Pound's well-known definition of logopoeia in 'How to Read' (*Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. and intr. T. S. Eliot [London: Faber and Faber, 1954], p. 25). See Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse' (1950), reprinted in *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, 2nd ed., ed. Paul Hoover (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), pp. 863–71 (p. 866). Marjorie Perloff also borrowed the Poundian tag for her monograph *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition*, new ed. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996 [1987]).

<sup>5</sup> See Marjorie Perloff, 'Charles Olson and the "Inferior Predecessors": "Projective Verse" Revisited', *ELH* 40 (1973), pp. 285–306 – the phrase was used by Olson in an outburst against Pound himself and William Carlos Williams in a letter to Cid Corman, dated 23 November 1953; see *Letters for Origin, 1950–1956*, ed. Albert Glover (New York: Cape Goliard Press / Grossman Publishers, 1970), p. 132. For a more nuanced view, within a more general analysis of Olson's attitude towards influence and tradition, see chapter 5 ('Olson as Mencius and His Master, Pound: A Study in Poetic Tradition' – a title echoing Olson's 1954 poem 'I, Mencius, Pupil of the Master. . .') of Christopher Beach's *ABC of Influence: Ezra Pound and the Remaking of American Poetic Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 110–35.

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Charles Bernstein, himself one of the foremost practitioners-cum-theorists of 'Language Poetry', into penning his unabashed spoof 'Introjective Verse', systematically inverting and 'introjecting' – rather than projecting, as it were – many of Olson's doctrinal paragraphs, including the famous tenets which were reprised from Robert Creeley ('FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT') and Edward Dahlberg ('ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION').<sup>6</sup> Here are a few choice examples of his uproarious restyling of his predecessor's serious manifesto, complete with font variations, typographical strategies (Olson's gimmicky hallmark of opening brackets without closing them), spatial layouts (the 'thrust' forward [pro-] of Olson's lines vs. the 'centripetal' position of Bernstein's introjections), and gung ho, over-confident tone:

(projectile (percussive (prospective	)introversive)implosive)introspective
vs.	<i>incorporating</i>
The NON-Projective	The rejected
Verse now, 1950 [...]	Verse, what? [...]
COMPOSITION BY FIELD	CENTRIPETAL MISCOMPOSITION
FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT.	FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF MALCONTENT.
It means exactly what it says, is a matter of, at <i>all</i> points (even, I should say, of our management of daily reality as of the daily work) get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen. And if you also set up as a poet, USE USE USE the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!	It means something very different than what it says, is never a matter of, at <i>no</i> points, (even – I shouldn't say – of our injuring reality as our weekly bliss) get off it, invoke arrestation, keep out of it, slow down, the perceptions, ours, the evasions, the long-term evasions, none of it, stop it, as much as you can, citizen. And if you also slouch as a poet, REFUSE REFUSE REFUSE the process at some points, in some poems, once in a blue while: one perception STOPPED, SLOWED, BY ANOTHER!

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<sup>6</sup> Olson, 'Projective Verse', *Postmodern American Poetry*, p. 864.



CounterText

So there we are, fast, there's the dogma.  
And its excuse, its usability, in practice.  
Which gets us, it ought to get us, inside  
the machinery, now, 1950, of how  
projective verse is made.

So there we were, looping, where  
there's no dogma. And its inexcusable-  
ness, its uselessness, in  
theory. Which doesn't get us,  
ought not to get us, outside the  
cyberfactory, then, or 1995, where  
centripetal verse is made.


If I hammer, if I recall in, and keep  
calling in, the breath, the breathing as  
distinguished from the hearing, it is for  
cause, it is to insist upon a part that  
breath plays in verse [. . . ]<sup>7</sup>

If I sing tunelessly – if I forget, and  
keep crying wolf, out of breath – of the  
sound as distinguished from the voice,  
it is for no cause except to loosen the  
part that breath plays in verse [. . . ]<sup>8</sup>

To fully appreciate the layered significance and jibe in Bernstein's gesture, it is worth excerpting the end of the first of three 'ABCs' poems, or another poetics primer of sorts, in which Charles Olson had decreed that

The word  
is image, and the reverend reverse is  
Eliot

Pound  
is verse<sup>9</sup>

Thus, if 'verse' means 'to turn' (Latin *vertere*) poetic language the right way, 'reversing' implies a retrograde turning back, a reversing of gears which Bernstein's in(tro)verted adaptation *sub specie temporis sui* – the machinery of 1950 gives way to the cyberfactory of 1995 – similarly serves on Olson himself, closing parentheses where the advocate of 'open verse' did not, one Charles (Olson) first signing what another felicitous namesake (Bernstein) later 'unsigns' in what I would like to call and define I  as a 'countertext'. Using this precedent as representative of the increasing emphasis on a poetics of rewriting,<sup>10</sup> repurposing and even 'uncreative writing'<sup>11</sup> in contemporary

<sup>7</sup> Olson, 'Projective Verse', *Postmodern American Poetry*, pp. 863–65.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Bernstein, 'Introjective Verse', *My Way: Speeches and Poems*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 110–12. The collection opens with another irreverent take-off, on the classical '[A] Defence of Poetry' (pp. 1–2).

<sup>9</sup> Charles Olson, *The Distances: Poems by Charles Olson* (New York: Grove Press; London: Evergreen Books, 1960), p. 13).

<sup>10</sup> There are of course other, even earlier traces of such ironic dialogues between poets and poetic movements, such as New York poet Kenneth Koch's 'Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams', a tongue-in-cheek travesty of his predecessor's iconic poem-as-object 'This Is Just to Say', whose title takes after Wallace Stevens's 'Nuances of a Theme by Williams', itself 'framing' as an object in italics a whole short poem by Williams ('El Hombre') for its inadvertent touches of pathetic fallacy, deflecting where Williams's poem attempts to reflect.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), which started as a common project in sampling with Marcus Boon's *In Praise of Copying*

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poetry, including its propensity for parodic recastings of poetic manifestos, this essay will explore its implications in the more current exchanges between conceptual poetics (specifically Vanessa Place) and the naughty new kid on the writer’s block: ‘flarf’.<sup>12</sup> This poetic sparring will be gauged first in the light of Derrida’s twin notions of signature and countersignature, tying together reading and writing(-as-rereading) in response and co-responsibility, which will help me fashion my own critical tool of the ‘countertextual’, not only as a seemingly appropriate response to our present age of messaging and texting<sup>13</sup> but also as a contemporary inflection (and more suitable characterization) of the mechanics of literary interaction known as intertextuality. Written soon after Kristeva had minted from Bakhtin the novel practice of intertextuality to oppose the time-honoured approach to the filiation of literary texts as *Quellenforschung*, Barthes’s ‘The Death of the Author’ (1967), with its almost incidental definition of writing as countering, will provide me with a hindsight onto this reconceptualization of textual generation and miscegenation:

the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to *counter* the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them.<sup>14</sup>

In Barthes’s spirit, the critical apparatus and reflections in the footnotes, as well as the citational material and the sections’ epigraphs, are also conceived, and are to be read progressively, as the creative enactment of an encroaching multi-faceted countertext, whose last instance (the epilogue, or ‘Necrologue’) is constructed as a parodic rewriting that performatively exposes (by turning its models inside out) the ‘uncreative’ impasse and generic derivativeness of some recent conceptualist productions of all-purpose ‘Sentences on X’. As it moves towards its final critical part, the essay also puts forward more general views about the relative sterility of these arguably parochial debates and copycat imitations while gesturing for a possible way out, via Felix Bernstein’s ‘Notes on Post-conceptual Poetry’ and an invocation of Paul Celan’s call for a strong ‘counter-word’ in the poetic act, in order to reclaim the genuinely imaginary-affective-intellectual fabric and texture of the poetical.

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(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010) (pp. ix–x), and Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Readers over-eager to find out which writing practices hide behind this mysterious monosyllable can adapt one of the group’s favourite methods of composition – the results from searches for intentionally silly or offensive keywords – and look up ‘Un-P.C.’ in this essay. For another instance of the burlesque travesty of poetic manifestos, compare Frank O’Hara’s original ‘Personism: A Manifesto’ and K. Silem Mohammad’s ‘Excessivism’ (*Postmodern American Poetry*, pp. 875–76, 929–32).

<sup>13</sup> Uncannily prefigured in Derrida’s revelation, in his polemic against John Searle, that the title ‘Signature événement contexte’ should also be heard as ‘... *qu’on texte*’. See Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 108, n. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, *Image Music Text*, Essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 146; emphasis added.

## CounterText

## 1. Countersignature, Poetic Event, Countertext

In the entry for ‘counter’ in his *Derrida Dictionary*, Simon Morgan Wortham notes the insistence of the term, and its family members, throughout Derrida’s entire work, ‘its always transforming repetition through and by means of a number of grafts’, from ‘contraband’ in *Glas* to *contretemps* (countertime) in the essay on *Romeo and Juliet*, etc.<sup>15</sup> – to which one could add the *contre-allée* (‘counterpath’) in the title of the joint ‘travel book’ with Catherine Malabou. The most sustained ‘counter’-passage is staged in ‘Countersignature’, on the work of Jean Genet, as was *Glas* – which, like *Signsponge*, had already sketched a ‘general logic of the countersignature’<sup>16</sup> – which somehow picks up where Derrida’s intervention on ‘Signature Event Context’ had left off, some thirty years before:

[...] for a long time I have cultivated or allowed to be cultivated in numerous texts the formidable ambiguity of this ‘contre’, as determined in the French idiom. The word ‘*contretemps*’, for example [...]; the word ‘*contrepartie*’ [counterpart], that marks not so much opposition as exchange, the equivalence of a gift and counter-gift; the word ‘*contre-exemple*’ [counterexample] [...]. All these words recur in many of my texts, often to designate the relation between me and me, as close as possible to the authenticity, the authentication of my own signature. Here and there, I have had occasion to say that I am at the wrong time [*à contretemps*], or that I am my own counterexample or counterpart.<sup>17</sup>

An ambivalent marker of opposition (against) as much as proximity (right up against) in French (‘C’ 17–18), *contre* mimes ‘the logic which links repetition to alterity’ (iterability, from Sanskrit: *itara*: other) seen at work in ‘Signature Event Context’,<sup>18</sup> the divisibility of the self’s relation to itself opening up the signature to effects of countersignature. Thus, if a countersignature can authenticate a first signature, indeed presupposes the antecedence of a first, proto-signature (‘C’ 17), it can also imitate, counterfeit it, and therefore it can also ‘betray itself in betraying what it countersigns’ (‘C’ 8).<sup>19</sup> Like the signature, the countersignature is affected by iterability and performativity, yet originary repetition forbids us to distinguish between a first and a second, a before and an after. Any (archi-)signature ‘is therefore from its outset its own countersignature’, hence an ‘archi-countersignature’, an encounter (*rencontre*)

<sup>15</sup> Simon Morgan Wortham, *The Derrida Dictionary* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 28, s. v. ‘counter’.


<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Countersignature’, trans. Mairéad Hanrahan, *Paragraph*, vol. 27, no. 2 (July 2004), pp. 21–22 (pp. 17–18); hereafter as ‘C’ with page references in the text. There also exists a shorter, earlier interview titled ‘Counter-Signatures’, about Derrida’s work on Francis Ponge in *Signsponge*, which, while already succinctly proclaiming the affirmative nature of signature and counter-signature discussed below, is less relevant for our purpose here; see Jacques Derrida, *Points... Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf & others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 365–71.

<sup>17</sup> ‘C’ 19, before citing two passages from ‘Circumfession’ emphasizing the words ‘encounter’, ‘counterexample’ and ‘counterpart’, then an excerpt from *Counterpath* alluding to *contrée* – in German *Gegend* (‘C’ 20).

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans., with Additional Notes, by Alan Bass (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), p. 315.

<sup>19</sup> Which further notes that *Glas* had already examined how the authentication of the signature in the countersignature is the first betrayal of the signature.

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and a contract (‘C’ 18), ‘a double band at the very heart of the countersignature’ since there is division and repetition from the outset: ‘the more I betray (by writing differently, signing differently), the less I betray; and the less I betray (by repeating the same “yes”, by imitating, counterfeiting), the more I betray’ (‘C’ 29). Derrida further outlines what I will designate later as a paradoxical logic of ‘abstraction’ (Latin *abstrahere*: to take away, withdraw), to which I will indirectly return  in relation to conceptualist aesthetics and countertextuality:

In my ‘yes’, in my own untranslatable, singular idiom, I must countersign the other’s text without counterfeit, without imitation. It is obviously impossible. One must imitate without imitating. One must recognize, countersign, reproduce the other’s signature without reproducing or imitating it. (‘C’ 29)

Since there cannot be writing without a signature, reading is therefore for Derrida an ‘affirmation of countersignature’; yet, if envisaged within an ethics of writing and reading as mutually co-responsible, it is one ‘of authentication and repetition without imitation, without counterfeiting, a doubling of the “yes” in the irreplaceable idiom of each “yes” [. . .], doubling it without repeating it’ (‘C’ 25–26). Recast into the context of my opening remarks about originary contamination by unoriginal intertextuality, this view of textuality—or what one could call, in the Derridean spirit of arche-writing, archi-textuality—implies the negotiation of the duplicitous demarcation between authentic, imitative originality and inauthentic originary imitation.

The fragile dissociation between repetition and imitation is strangely evocative of John Barth’s gloss on Borges’s emblematic short story ‘Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote’ (1939), in which Menard, ‘by an astounding effort of imagination, produces—not copies or imitates, but composes—several chapters of Cervantes’s novel’:<sup>20</sup> that is, produces verbatim (*not* reproduces) Cervantes’ masterpiece in a transhistorical act of reinvention. With its ironic twist—‘[Borges] writes a remarkable and original work of literature, the implicit theme of which is the difficulty, perhaps the unnecessary, of writing original works of literature.’<sup>21</sup>—Borges’s fable almost anticipates conceptualist practices of imaginary reappropriation through copying and remediating, such as Kenneth Goldsmith’s uncreative retyping of the whole September 1, 2000 issue of *The New York Times* into an 836-page book called *Day* (2003),<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> John Barth, ‘The Literature of Exhaustion’, *The Friday Book*, p. 68.

<sup>21</sup> Barth, ‘The Literature of Exhaustion’, *The Friday Book*, p. 69.

<sup>22</sup> The Oulipo-like constraint behind Goldsmith’s appropriation, inspired by Warhol’s twenty-hour film of the Empire State Building—which seems to make a conceptual point of taking Pound’s maxim ‘Literature is news that stays news’ literally—is recounted in *Uncreative Writing*, p. 118 (cf. his ‘Uncreativity as a Creative Practice’, at <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/uncreativity.html>), which also briefly documents two other ‘found texts’: his copying of a year’s worth of hourly weather bulletins on 1010 WINS, New York’s all-news radio station, one paragraph per one-minute report (*The Weather*, 2005), and, possibly cued by the eight-minute tracking shot of an uninterrupted traffic jam in Jean-Luc Godard’s 1967 *nouvelle vague* film *Weekend*, a twenty-four-hour cycle of one-minute traffic reports every ten minutes on WINS ‘Panasonic Jam Cam’ (*Traffic*, 2007)—a triptych completed later by *Sports* (2008), a full broadcast transcription of an entire five-hour baseball game between the New York

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poet-attorney Vanessa Place's reworking of legal transcripts of rape cases in her *Tragodia* trilogy (*Statement of Facts*, *Statement of the Case*, *Argument*; 2010–11), or even Michalis Pichler's 'sculpture-book' *Un Coup de dés* (2008–09), a close copy of the 1914 edition of Mallarmé's eponymous poem, 'but with all the words cut out by laser, in a way that corresponds directly to the typographic layout used by Mallarmé to articulate the text'.<sup>23</sup> Almost, since, as Goldsmith himself concedes,

I've thought about my practice [*of retyping existing texts*] in relation to Borges's Pierre Menard, but even Menard was more original than I am: he, independent of any knowledge of *Don Quixote*, reinvented Cervantes' masterpiece word for word. By contrast, I don't invent anything. I just keep rewriting the same book.<sup>24</sup>

For Goldsmith the institutionalization of thieving, copy-pasting, sampling, patch-writing, mash-ups, or even plain retyping, and other recycling-based, appropriative methods brings about a new concept of 'responsibility' since, to put it in Derridean terms again, retyping other people's words introduces another dimension to the countersignature as signature.<sup>25</sup> But unlike Borges's pleasantly readable framing of unoriginal recreation, conceptualist (re)writings, as Goldsmith likes to insist, typically do not ask to be read; they cry out to be thought instead. If, at the turn towards post-structuralism, Barthes could claim that 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author',<sup>26</sup> contemporary avant-garde poetic practices have ushered in the death of the reader, whose involvement in the conceptuality of the work

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Yankees and the Boston Red Sox in August 2006. On these and other conceptual compositions of Goldsmith's, see the special issue of *Open Letter*, Twelfth Series, No. 7: 'Kenneth Goldsmith and Conceptual Poetics', guest-ed. Lori Emerson and Barbara Cole (Fall 2005) – especially Marjorie Perloff's "'Moving Information": On Kenneth Goldsmith's *The Weather*', pp. 84–95, which kicks off with an evocation of Goldsmith's 'parent text', but also 'foil', what can be called here a 'countertext': John Cage's *Lecture on the Weather* (1975) – and, also by Perloff, 'Conceptualist Bridges / Digital Tunnels: Kenneth Goldsmith's *Traffic*', *Unoriginal Genius*, pp. 146–65. Other excerpts from conceptualists are provided in Goldsmith's 'A Gallery of Conceptual Poetics', in the Electronic Poetry Center at Buffalo, [http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/Goldsmith\\_ConceptualWriting.pdf](http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/Goldsmith_ConceptualWriting.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> See <http://www.buypichler.com/un-coup-de-d%C3%A9s-jamais-n%E2%80%98abolira-le-hasard-sculpture> – and Mallarmé's posthumous revenge on Pichler's repetitive consumerist instrumentalisation of poetry, his generic 'Sentences on Conceptual X [Pain, Reading, Writing]', in the final part of this essay ('Necrologue'). The prototype for this 'disfiguration' could be Robert Rauschenberg's trend-setting *Erased De Kooning Drawing* (1953) – a gesture replicated for instance in Nick Thurston's erased copy of Maurice Blanchot's *The Space of Literature*, in which only Thurston's marginalia are visible (Craig Dworkin, *No Medium* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013], pp. 39–52; chap. 2, on 'Cenography' or 'empty writing'). Pichler's trademark is further summed up by two more 'products': his eighteen 'Statements on Appropriation' (2009), at [http://www.ubu.com/papers/pichler\\_appropriation.html](http://www.ubu.com/papers/pichler_appropriation.html), and his appropriation of Max Stirner's 1844 philosophical manifesto, 'Der Einzige und sein Eigentum' (The Ego and Its Own), at <http://buypichler.com/einzig.html>

<sup>24</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith, 'A Week of Blogs for the Poetry Foundation', *The Consequence of Innovation: 21st Century Poetics*, ed. Craig Dworkin (New York: Roof Books, 2008), p. 146 (section on 'Boredom'), reprinted as 'Conceptual Poetics', *Postmodern American Poetry*, p. 941; compare with *Uncreative Writing*, pp. 109–10 ('Why Appropriation?'). 'Pierre Menard' is also mentioned in Craig Dworkin's 'The Fate of Echo', one of two introductory essays to *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, ed. Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010), *passim*.

<sup>25</sup> See Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*, especially pp. 8, 122.

<sup>26</sup> Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', p. 148.

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no longer resides in the countersignatory participation in a ‘writerly’ text but in co-signing the ‘thinkerly’<sup>27</sup> as the minimalist withering of countersignature. If to merely conceive or think up a good idea is enough and there is no more need for a reader, let alone a demiurgic Author, the attendant disappearance, if not death, of the text in such conceptualist practices has implications for what is called poetry to which I will want to return later.

It is with this broader context in mind that I would like to stage an encounter between two ad-hoc, ‘sententious’ manifestos, Vanessa Place’s in praise of conceptualism and Drew Gardner’s counterattack for flarf, a diptych of often facetious, mutually outwitting propositions which I will argue must be seen not so much in terms of an intertextual relation as rather a ‘countertextual’ confrontation.

2. Poetic contra-dictions

Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)<sup>28</sup>

Published in 1967, two years before the concomitant appearance in New York and England of thirty-five additional ‘Sentences on Conceptual Art’, Sol LeWitt’s ‘Paragraphs on Conceptual Art’ are often regarded as the distant blueprint for ‘conceptual writing’, especially Kenneth Goldsmith’s ‘Paragraphs on Conceptual Writing’ (2005), which rewrite all original occurrences of ‘art’, ‘artist’ into ‘literature’ ‘writing’, ‘writer’,<sup>29</sup> regardless of the latter’s possible inscription within a longer-standing genealogy of experimental literary practices (Dadaism, concrete poetry, John Cage’s and Jackson Mac Low’s mesostic and diastic writing-throughs, Burroughs’s and Gysin’s cut-ups, the constraint-based, procedural poetics of OuLiPo, etc.).<sup>30</sup> In any case, the aphoristic listing of ‘Sentences’ will have no doubt contributed

<sup>27</sup> Goldsmith speaks of a ‘thinkership’ (‘Conceptual Poetics’, *Postmodern American Poetry*, p. 935).

<sup>28</sup> Walt Whitman, ‘Song of Myself’, § 51, *The Portable Walt Whitman*, ed. and intr. Michael Warner (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 66.

<sup>29</sup> Published in *Open Letter*, pp. 108–111; compare with LeWitt’s original paragraphs, *Artforum* (June 1967), pp. 79–83. Michalis Pichler’s recent, equally derivative ‘Sentences on Conceptual Writing’ (<http://www.buypichler.com/sentences-on-conceptual-writing>) acknowledges both and likewise features thirty-five propositions replacing LeWitt’s references to ‘art’ and ‘artist’ by ‘writing’ and ‘writer’ (with an oversight at no. 16) – just as Vanessa Place’s *Boycott* (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse [sic], 2013) had substituted all references to women with their male counterparts in her rewriting of fifteen iconic feminist texts, including Valerie Solanas’s androcidal ‘SCUM Manifesto’.

<sup>30</sup> See the two introductions to *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, pp. xvii–liv. The term was coined in 2003 for *The UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (<http://www.ubu.com/concept/index.html>), which provided the impetus for the ‘Conceptual Poetry and Its Others’ symposium, organised by Marjorie Perloff at the University of Arizona, Tucson, on 29–31 May 2008 (see programme at [http://poetrycenter.arizona.edu/conceptualpoetry/cp\\_index.shtml](http://poetrycenter.arizona.edu/conceptualpoetry/cp_index.shtml)). In October 2005 the second of five planned annual REDCAT conferences on experimental writing was organised on ‘nOulipo’, which combined constraint-driven writing with the more

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its formal matrix to the one-off dialogic ping-pong between Vanessa Place's 'Why Conceptualism Is Better Than flarf', a talk on a 'Flarf & Conceptual Poetry Panel' recorded on 11 March 2010 at AWP 2010, Denver, and 'Why Flarf Is Better Than Conceptualism' – called by fellow Flarfist K. Silem Mohammad 'Drew Gardner's answer to Vanessa Place' – originally posted on flarf's dedicated weblog on 19 April 2010.<sup>31</sup>

The most compact, helpful characterization of conceptualism was offered in several flavours by Goldsmith himself. Here is a serviceable development, in a synthetic essay posted on the Harriet blog of the Poetry Foundation website in June 2008:

Conceptual writing or uncreative writing is a poetics of the moment, fusing the avant-garde impulses of the last century with the technologies of the present, one that proposes an expanded field for 21st century poetry. Conceptual writing obstinately makes no claims on originality. On the contrary, it employs intentionally self and ego effacing tactics using uncreativity, unoriginality, illegibility, appropriation, plagiarism, fraud, theft, and falsification as its precepts; information management, word processing, databasing, and extreme process as its methodologies; and boredom, valuelessness, and nutritionlessness as its ethos.<sup>32</sup>

Now flarf, what? Perhaps the *Poetry Magazine's* website can help further to shed light on its poetic lineage – beyond the gloss as a verb meaning 'to bring out the inherent awfulness, etc., of some pre-existing text' provided by Gary Sullivan, who engineered the term in 2001.<sup>33</sup>

Originally a prank on the scam contest sponsored by the organization Poetry.com, the experimental poetry movement flarf has slowly assumed a serious position as a new kind of Internet-based poetic practice. Known for its reliance on Google as a means of generating odd juxtapositions, surfaces, and grammatical inaccuracies, flarf also celebrates deliberately bad or 'incorrect' poetry by forcing clichés, swear words, aberrations into poetic shape. Original flarf member Gary Sullivan describes flarf as 'a kind of corrosive, cute, or cloying awfulness. Wrong. Un-P.C. Out of control. "Not okay".' Flarf poets collaborate on poems, revising and sometimes plagiarizing them in semipublic spaces such as blogs or webzines. Original members of the

recent process work of the Flarfists. See <http://www.redcat.org/event/noulipo> and *The nOulipian Analects*, ed. Matias Viegner and Christine Wertheim (Los Angeles: Les Figues Press, 2007).

<sup>31</sup> See <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2010/04/flarf-is-a-one-trick-pony-that-thinks-a-unicorn-is-another-kind-of-horse/> and <http://mainstreampoetry.blogspot.co.uk/2010/04/why-flarf-is-better-than-conceptualism.html> – reprinted in *Postmodern American Poetry*, pp. 944–46, to which further quotations will refer – respectively.

<sup>32</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith, 'Conceptual Poetics: Kenneth Goldsmith', at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2008/06/conceptual-poetics-kenneth-goldsmith/>

<sup>33</sup> See 'The Flarf Files', at <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bernstein/syllabi/readings/flarf.html>, which records other definitions and examples by several 'flarfisters' compiled by Michael Magee, stating however that 'Flarf is not a movement, never was, because it has no principles as such [...]. There is no such thing as Flarf.'

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‘Flarfist Collective’ include Sullivan, Sharon Mesmer, K. Silem Mohammad, and Nada Gordon. *Poetry magazine* published a special section devoted to flarf in its July/August 2009 issue, guest-edited by Kenneth Goldsmith.<sup>34</sup>

The last item in this matter-of-fact exposition seems like a giveaway: ‘flarf’ soon ballooned into a jokey rival of conceptualism, a more pop-cultural variant embroiled in half-serious demarcation feuds with its elder, more rigorous next-of-kin, and soon notching up some notable adherents like Katie Degentesh.<sup>35</sup> In this past digital decade’s quickening hybridization of poetic ‘movements’, the face-off, at one month’s interval, of aphoristic claims and counterclaims between the Conceptualists and the Flarfists, between Place’s and Gardner’s self-advertising manifestos of (only) seventeen postulates and counterpostulates each, stands out as a sign of the times. The two texts—with equivalent numbers supplied for Gardner’s originally unnumbered sections—have been matched and set up like the two columns of Derrida’s *Glas*, as a double textual ‘contraband’ (*contrebande*) of poetic diction and ‘contra-diction’ through which the notion of ‘countertext’ can be articulated (see Appendix).

To the question ‘what is poetry?’ Derrida’s final ‘answer’ had been that, ‘[b]y announcing that which is just as it is, [the very question of essentiality] salutes the birth of prose’, an equivocation or ‘spiriting away’ which can be contrasted with Place’s counteractive doubling back: ‘What is poetry? Simply put, poetry is not not-poetry.’<sup>36</sup> Without wishing to pop the question anew, this bantering exchange of *doxa* and paradoxes between Place and Gardner raises some thought-provoking issues, across problematics of *countersignature* and *intertextuality*, out of which the fittingly hybrid notion of ‘countertextuality’ emerges. ‘Upping the ante’ or one-upmanship,

<sup>34</sup> See <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/glossary-term/flarf>. Sullivan’s satirical Poetry.org submission was titled ‘Mm-hmm’. The aggregate of poets slowly spawned the Flarfist listserv, a collection of whose material was published by K. Silem Mohammad as *Deer Head Nation* (San Diego: Tougher Disguises Press, 2003).

<sup>35</sup> For a refutation that flarf’s ‘Google sculpting’ need not be only a rejection of carefully executed art, see Stephen Burt’s short review of her debut success, *The Anger Scale* (2006), a collection of poems generated from Google searches for phrases pulled from the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, the decades-old test for mental abnormality ([http://www.believermag.com/issues/200704/?read=review\\_degentesh](http://www.believermag.com/issues/200704/?read=review_degentesh)), whose true/false questions had also formed the basis of Craig Dworkin’s conceptualist *Legion* (unpublished, 2003), an excerpt from which can be found at <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2003/11/poetry/legion-excerpt>

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘*Che cos’è la poesia?*’, *Points...*, p. 299; Vanessa Place, ‘ECHO’, p. 8 (downloaded from Vanessa Place’s academia.edu page; hereafter with page references in the text). In another essay, Derrida’s ‘simple conclusion’ should be taken up in the more vexing context and tradition of the ‘proseification’ of poetic diction (for e.g. John Ashbery’s collection of prose narratives *Three Poems*), wittily captured by Frank O’Hara in ‘Why I Am Not a Painter’: ‘It is even in / prose, I am a real poet.’ (*Postmodern American Poetry*, p. 114), or Charles Bernstein’s ‘Of Time and the Line’:

Nowadays, you can often spot a work  
of poetry by whether it’s in lines  
or no; if it’s in prose, there’s a good chance  
it’s a poem.

(*Rough Trades* [Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1991], p. 43.)



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with boisterous gratuitousness, could be the name of this game, which counter-dicts, (in-, sub-, per-)verts, ex(re)appropriates, repackages and riffs off *ad libitum*<sup>37</sup> on such issues as

- the dialectic of (self-)referentiality and poetry as ‘allegory’ of itself as other;<sup>38</sup>
- poetry as the essence or appearance of ‘life’ and/or nature;
- flarf’s intentionally provocative, if not mildly offensive, self-indulgence as fertile waste and decomposed manure;<sup>39</sup>
- flarf’s bloviating effort to sound bad and funny, and trash all critical-aesthetic rules: it compounds ‘Legit’ – possibly ‘translated’ as a Latin form in ‘read’ (Gardner, note 9) – Freud and his super-ego into roid rage and ‘leggo my ego’,<sup>40</sup> and upends Lacan, his mirror stage, the discourse of the slave, his Law and *objet petit a* into a ‘[French] can-can in the bathroom mirror’, the discourse of the shave, actor Jude Law, and a rather out-of-kilter *petit déjeuner* (possibly to be eaten after said shave. . .).

While its silliness is liked by ‘Silliman’, advocate of ‘The New Sentence’ who runs one of the most popular poetry blogs (Place, section 15), flarf seems to relish not being to the taste of Marjorie Perloff, arguably *the* supreme critical authority on avant-garde American poetry. Ostentatiously, even when a few entries attempt to ‘make sense’, countering by echoing, mimicking, inverting, debunking, etc., at times seemingly for the sake of it, is pivotal to the textual relationship between these two manifestos. Text Countertext.

<sup>37</sup> In music, a riff designates a short rhythmic phrase, especially one that is repeated in improvisation. A riff-off is therefore the repetition of a procedure *en abyme*.

<sup>38</sup> Etymologically: speaking otherwise than one seems to speak. On this essential claim, see also the inaugural remark in Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman’s *Notes on Conceptualisms* (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse [sic], 2009), p. 15: ‘Conceptual writing is allegorical writing’, which it then proceeds to explicate as ‘a writing of its time’ whose slant, ‘usually because of overtly repressive political regimes or the sacred nature of the message’, ‘is dependent on its reader for completion’. (The closing statement of the notes proper, on p. 58, reads: ‘This is allegorical.’) This self-styled ‘primer’, to which we shall periodically return, originated in a discussion of the poetics of erasure techniques at the 2008 launch of *The nOulipian Analects*, mentioned in note 30 above.

<sup>39</sup> Compost – without realizing that one of its meanings is also that of ‘[a] literary composition, compendium’; see *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1989), s. v. ‘compost, n.<sup>1</sup>’, 1b. Consider its latest increment, the decidedly excremental ‘Manureism (or, some manure): A Response’ (22 April 2010), also spread over seventeen propositions written soon after hearing Place’s talk at the AWP conference as a mostly anti-flarf, ‘anti-Gard(e)ner’ protest (<http://adamroberts.blogspot.co.uk/2010/06/manureism-response.html> – with its hyperlink to a blog discussing pest control for the family food garden).

<sup>40</sup> Or ‘leggo my eggo’: in urban slang, ‘[a]n expression originating from an ad campaign for eggo brand waffles. In each commercial character A would attempt to steal character B’s eggo brand waffles forcing B to yell out “Leggo my Eggo” to express his disdain at A’s lack of respect and rude actions’ (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Leggo+my+eggo>). Waffle indeed. . .

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Coming across as equally ‘fluffy’ (though not barfy)<sup>41</sup> in her own articles of faith,<sup>42</sup> Vanessa Place obligingly articulates the ‘contra-textual’ for us, by playing it off flippantly against Kant, cunt, and the contextual:

10. [...] Through the deployment of multiple strategies that serve to destabilize text (extant or made) via reframed reiterations and multiple sites of rhetorical deployment, conceptualism is neo-Kantian, epistemologically concerned with the ongoing subject<sup>43</sup> and the instantiation of radical evil.<sup>44</sup> In other words, the instantiation of that which is consciously contra-textual in the sense of all that has made text make contextual sense, the rendering immaterial of every materiality of poetry. The contra-text being the new con-text, con-, as I have pointed out elsewhere, in the sense of being a cunt. [...]

If ‘life is a bitch’, for Place the contra-textual is that dimension of conceptual writing that deliberately fractures the transparent, narcissistic mirror between subject and object— hence ‘subject’—text and context, uncovering the dematerialization of poetry through the deceptive *furtiveness* of contextual signification, which it thus recuperates in a more souped-up, supercharged version.<sup>45</sup> The last quip is developed in ‘ECHO’, whose titular nymph is seen ‘[a]s an instantiation of a kind of radical evil that I advocate as the fate of poetry—poetry as pure materiality’ (‘ECHO’, p. 2):

Con- as in cunt, for the cuntish truth is that what cannot be repeated is the con-text. And that is the only remaining place of poetry. Authorship doesn’t matter. Content doesn’t matter. Form doesn’t matter. Meter doesn’t matter. All that matters is the trace of poetry. The Echo-effect.

Conceptualism in this sense is a con-text, and I will be cuntish here, for if the ear is the orifice we cannot close,<sup>46</sup> the mouth is the trap we cannot keep shut. So that citation is

<sup>41</sup> Various commentators and pranksters have wondered whether ‘flarf’ was not such a portmanteau word, as is evidenced from search results using Flarfists’ own Googlist penchant.

<sup>42</sup> In that respect, see the fourth ‘position’ in an article posted on 21 May 2012 on Bebrowed’s Blog, entitled ‘Is poetry dead and did Vanessa Place kill it or is it merely on the brink?’—a double allusion to Vanessa Place’s short film *Poetry Is Dead, I Killed It* (see *infra*) and Marjorie Perloff’s ‘Poetry on the Brink’ in the *Boston Review* (18 May 2012): ‘whatever she might say, Vanessa Place is not a conceptualist’ (<https://bebrowed.wordpress.com/2012/05/21/is-poetry-dead-and-did-vanessa-place-kill-it-or-is-it-merely-on-the-brink/>)

<sup>43</sup> Thus going one up on Olson’s move from the opposition between subjectivism and objectivism to ‘objectism’ in ‘Projective Verse’ (*Postmodern American Poetry*, p. 870). ‘Subjectivity’ is elaborated upon in *Notes on Conceptualisms*, pp. 40–41, albeit in rather cryptic touches.

<sup>44</sup> It would be tempting to see a covert reference to Derrida’s discussion of the ‘radical evil of abstraction’, via Hegel (whose ‘discourse of the slave’ Place rightly links to Lacan in no. 11), at the beginning of ‘Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of “Religion” at the Limits of Reason Alone’, trans. Samuel Weber, *Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pp. 3–78, also bearing on Kant. ‘Abstraction’ in Place’s ‘radically evil poetics’ would signify the extirpation of immaterial creativity and originality from compositional practices.

<sup>45</sup> See also *Notes on Conceptualisms*, p. 25: ‘If allegory assumes context, conceptual writing assumes all context.’, and ‘ECHO’, p. 9: ‘For connaissance is context. Con- as in criminal, involving an abuse of confidence, a persuasive lie’.

<sup>46</sup> Adapted from Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book 11, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998), p. 195. The formula was already sounded in ‘ECHO’, p. 4.

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revealed as castration, it mocks authority by showing the lack of authority from the non-source of authority. To rephrase Brecht, what is the crime of being Derrida compared to the crime of citing Derrida? Perfect mimesis is radical as it takes the essence of the thing without the thing's permission and puts it to no end.

(‘ECHO’, pp. 10, 7)

Dealing with the reproductive power of reiteration, ‘ECHO’ had begun by recalling that the Latin origin of Place’s job title as appellate attorney involved a response to a call, thus her poetic craft or ‘avocation’ that ‘calls her away’ (*ab-vocare*) from her legal profession similarly calls for a contrapuntal exchange of call and response:

To appeal to someone is to solicit a response. To solicit a response from someone is to invite speech. More accurately, it is speech calling for more speech. An appeal thus presupposes an originary voice, like etymology itself, and a respondent voice, like the call of the law itself. For the law is not a point of origin, but a point of counterpoint, just as words mean in opposition though they start in consensus. I am a conceptual poet by avocation. (‘ECHO’, p. 1)

The ‘discourse of the slave’ is the discourse of conceptualism because the slave repeats, ‘as the mirror-image of the Lacanian master’s discourse’ – hence the emphasis on failure as ‘an assassination of mastery’.<sup>47</sup> However, despite what she soon adds and advocates, the call (her ‘Why Conceptualism Is Better Than Flarf’) *does* effectuate a response, in the form of Drew Gardner’s echoing countertext, whose aural, contextual purloinings truncate and alter, as did the nymph’s less than perfectly mimetic echolalia: Place’s ‘La donne’ becomes ‘Donny Osmond’ (no. 12); her ‘king’s dog’ (no. 3) turns into ‘Elvis’ [*the King*] dong’; and the penis as dildo (no. 6) consequently morphs into Bilbo Baggins since, according to the end of *The Return of the King*, the third and final volume of Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, he is a translator of various works from the *elvish*. . . *Double Elvis*, therefore, to echo the title of Andy Warhol’s silkscreen diptych (1963–64). What came across at face value as nonsensical antics in Gardner’s countertextual riposte translates and can be teased out, upon scratching its pithy surface, into a convoluted, constructed charade harvesting the kind of contextual data whose immateriality Place had wanted to recover from the poetic into the ‘countertext’.

Where ‘Conceptualism [*as repetition*] is a radical mimesis conjoined to radical alterity’ (‘ECHO’, p. 7; addition mine) – cf. again ‘the logic which links repetition to alterity’ in iterability (‘Signature Event Context’) – Gardner’s flarfy dicta ‘upend and offend’ (Place, no. 16), deviate and obviate, even when they purposefully decline to engage with some of Place’s barbs; link repetition not only to alterity but also to

<sup>47</sup> Place, ‘ECHO’, p. 4; and *Notes on Conceptualisms*, p. 27, also pp. 24 (‘Failure is the goal of conceptual writing’) and 29.

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alter(c)ation<sup>48</sup> and ‘contrariness’. Here is more specifically how Gardner parrots and parries Place’s arguably facetious disquisition on the contra-textual, soon after three earlier incongruous mentions of Sandy Duncan in quick succession in the same section:

In other words, the instantiation of that which is consciously contra-textual in the sense of all that has made text make contextual sense to Sandy Duncan, the rendering immaterial of every materiality of poetry. The contra-text being the new con-text, con-, as I have pointed out elsewhere, in the sense of Sandy Duncan.

(Gardner, no. 10)

No Kant earlier, no cunt here even. . . –and of course no Menard – unless we accept that the ubiquitous ‘Sandy Duncan’, ‘an American singer, dancer, comedienne and actress of stage and television, recognized through a blonde, pixie-cut hairstyle and perky demeanor’, whose first role in her entertainment career, at age twelve, happened to be for a local production of the musical *The King and I*,<sup>49</sup> is made to fit the bill, as does her image for the pop-cultish cutesiness of flarf. In defiance of Place’s debunking of ‘cuntext’, one may even wish to bring yet more contextual ballast into Sandy Duncan’s inflated presence, such as her voice work for the TV series *My Little Pony* in 1984, which suggestively winks back at Place’s attack on flarf’s unicorn, a twee example of which adorns the Flarfist Collective’s weblog: ‘Flarf is a one-trick pony that thinks a unicorn is another kind of horse.’ (no. 5) *Pace* Place, ‘context’ still has many tricks to kick over the traces with, even when lifted from a conceptualist’s own neo-Dada horseplay. . .<sup>50</sup>

And yet, what is the clear tonal and propositional difference between conceptual poetry and flarf, between Place’s ‘Flarf looks like poetry. / Poetry looks like conceptualism’ (no. 17), coupled with her circuitous ‘poetry is not not-poetry’, and Gardner’s ‘Flarf is poetry. It is about everything that is not poetry.’? Possibly Gardner’s final twists: ‘Poetry is Conceptualism. / Flarf is life.’? A year before, in the ‘Foreword’ to *Notes on Conceptualisms*, Fitterman had noted as a caveat that ‘[w]e use the term Conceptual Writing in the broadest sense, so that it intersects other terms such as: allegory, appropriation, piracy, flarf, identity theft, sampling, constraint and others.’<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> As in ‘Flarf is the court’s most feared group of space pirates’, ‘Flarf is gangster in the sense of drive-by shooting [...]’, and the section starting ‘Flarf is the new style [...]’, which mashes up the lyrics of Beastie Boys’ macho song ‘The New Style’.

<sup>49</sup> Citation and information found on Wikipedia, s. v. ‘Sandy Duncan’, at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sandy\\_Duncan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sandy_Duncan)

<sup>50</sup> Vanessa Place’s taunt may also be an in-joke on the final entry (VMMCCXXVIII) in Goldsmith’s *No. 111.2.7.93-10.20.96* (1997): the whole of D. H. Lawrence’s short story ‘The Rocking Horse Winner’. For a subtle analysis of the thematic relevance of the boy’s uncreativity in Lawrence’s tale, see Molly Schwartzburg, ‘Encyclopedic Novelties: On Kenneth Goldsmith’s Tomes’, *Open Letter*, pp. 21–36 (pp. 24–25). In his Introduction to the *Jacket* flarf feature, Gary Sullivan records that one of the descriptions of the Collective’s members is as ‘late-blooming Dadaists’; see <http://jacketmagazine.com/30/fl-intro.html>

<sup>51</sup> Place and Fitterman, *Notes on Conceptualisms*, p. 12.

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‘Eventually all Conceptual poets will be Flarfists’ anyway,<sup>52</sup> ‘sez’ Gardner, after some more Beastie Boys’ Flarfspeak to the effect that [...] Poets with movements are the kind I like. I’ll steal your poets like I stole your bike.’<sup>53</sup>

In a response to Calvin Bedient’s tetchy article ‘Against Conceptualism: Defending the Poetry of Affect’,<sup>54</sup> Gardner’s ‘Flarf is Life: The Poetry of Affect’ offers some more decisive guidance on the matter. After contrasting conceptual poetry’s stricter, constraint-based procedures, foregrounding the technique or concept, with flarf’s more spontaneous, improvisational stance, more geared towards the resulting poem, Gardner offers a full-blown, self-explanatory account of flarf’s peculiar brand of affective charge, worth quoting at some length:

Flarf [...] channels socially problematic material as [a] way of addressing the problems. The biggest difference between flarf and conceptual poetry may be in the attitude toward affect. The affective value of a poem is the product of a dynamic circuit running between reader, poem, and poet. Flarf is teeming with affect within this circuit. It is charged.<sup>55</sup> Conceptual poetry is often quite method-bound and detached, though it is not devoid of affect because that would hardly be possible. Flarf doesn’t propose to reject or minimize the poet’s affect. It blurs the difference between the poet’s affect and the affects of the texts it is appropriating, and it intentionally recognizes and engages with the whole poetic circuit in complex ways. The poet is many people in flarf, many affects. [...]

Because flarf appropriates, affects in flarf are interlaced with their sources, collaged, spoofed, or adapted directly. [...] Flarf intentionally includes potentially objectionable affects and subject positions as [a] way to deal with and address social problems. It includes ugliness as well as glory. The self and the social system are thought to be parts of the same intertwined ecosystem. Flarf tracks its environment.

[...] [Flarf] doesn’t just challenge ideas about what art is, it challenges ideas about what people are.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> See also Kenneth Goldsmith’s ‘Flarf is Dionysus. Conceptual Writing is Apollo’ (1st July 2009), at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/article/237176>, which had likewise ended: ‘No matter. They’re two sides of the same coin. Choose your poison and embrace your guilty pleasure.’

<sup>53</sup> The corresponding lyric in ‘The New Style’ reads: ‘I’ll steal your honey like I stole your bike.’ More seriously, we should not forget T. S. Eliot’s maxim: ‘Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal’ (*Selected Essays*, 3rd enlarged ed. [London: Faber and Faber, 1951], p. 206), warped into ‘Immature poets borrow. Mature poets invest.’—after ‘I love originality so much I keep copying it.’—in Charles Bernstein’s third of eight manifestos, ‘Manifest Aversions, Conceptual Conundrums, & Implausibly Deniable Links’ (2008), read at the MoMa on 20 February 2009 as part of the ‘Futurism and the New Manifesto’ anniversary programme (<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Bernstein-MoMA.html>).

<sup>54</sup> Published in the *Boston Review*, 24 July 2013 (at <http://bostonreview.net/poetry/against-conceptualism>).

<sup>55</sup> Compare with Olson’s ‘kinetic’ conception of poetry: ‘A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it [...], by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader.’ (‘Projective Verse’, *Postmodern American Poetry*, p. 864.)

<sup>56</sup> Drew Gardner, ‘Flarf is Life: The Poetry of Affect’, *Boston Review*, 11 February 2014 (at <http://bostonreview.net/poetry/drew-gardner-flarf-life-poetry-affect>). For another view, see Joshua Clover’s review of Claude Closky’s *Les miens* (2009), ‘Generals and Globetrotters’, at <http://theclaudiusapp.com/1-clover.html>

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A flarf poem registers several subject positions, even (self-)contradictory positions, as part of the complex social palette of responses – including to itself – with which it engages. It can therefore morph into its own contradictory countercontext, pretending to be another’s dissenting voice. How else could one account for Gardner’s own ‘Why do I hate Flarf so much?’ (2010), especially its ending, if not as the impersonation of contradiction ventriloquizing self-deprecation as it questions the authenticity of its (counter)signatory act:

Why do I hate Flarf so much? Because it is against everything good this country once espoused. Why do I hate Flarf so much? Because of the awful conflict it places the law-abiding or police-fearing poets under.<sup>57</sup>

Commenting earlier on Vanessa Place’s retranscriptions of legal prosecution texts and defence documents in rape cases – which made her claim, tweaking Gertrude Stein’s oft-plundered formula, that ‘for the first time in poetry, a rape is a rape is a rape’ (‘ECHO’, p. 7) – Gardner had observed that ‘Conceptual poetry such as Vanessa Place’s is clearly designed not to eliminate affect but to shift the burden of affect from the writer to the reader.’<sup>58</sup> In the case of flarf perversely pushing contradiction and poetic counter-*Dichtung*<sup>59</sup> to its utmost logical limits of self-contradiction, another, oppositional affect can even provide the starting point for poetic exploration. To go one up on Olson’s sketchy poetic lineage seen above, we could add that, if Pound was verse and Eliot the reverse, then flarf is undoubtedly the perverse ‘counterverse’ . . .

Recent poetry’s countercontextuality and self-contradictions – to be understood also, more generally, as a writing counter to the more traditional spirit of elevated *Dichtung* – not only flesh out Whitman’s brazen ‘signing-off’ of his ‘Song of Myself’ showcased in this section’s epigraph, they engage more fully with Paul Celan’s understanding of the poetic act as a liberating contradiction or ‘counter-word’ (*Gegenwort*):<sup>60</sup> ‘I wanted to counter, to contradict, with a word against the

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/237056>; republished in Hoover’s *Postmodern American Poetry*, p. 794.

<sup>58</sup> Gardner, ‘Flarf is Life: The Poetry of Affect’.

<sup>59</sup> The German word for poetry is at the origin of Pound’s famous equation ‘Dichten = condensare’ and his view of poetry as ‘the most concentrated form of verbal expression’; see *ABC of Reading*, p. 36 (also pp.92, 97).

<sup>60</sup> Referring to Lucile’s outcry ‘Long live the King!’ in Büchner’s *Danton’s Death*; see Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 116, 131, 133, who talks also of ‘counter-manifestation’, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry as Experience*, trans. Andrea Tarnowski (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 50 (and *passim* for numerous paradoxical ‘counters’ and encounters in Celan’s poetry). Celan’s poetry abounds in ‘counter’-examples, such as the ‘counter- / swimmer’ in ‘Down Melancholy’s Rapids’ or the ‘doom / and counter- / doom’ in ‘The Numbers’, and, more pointedly for our discussion, the ‘counter- / sign’ in ‘The Kingsway’; see *Breathturn into Timestead: The Collected Later Poetry: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. and with commentary by Pierre Joris (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), pp. 6–7, 441–42 (I am grateful to Janice Sant for bringing these references to my attention). Celan’s ‘counter-poetics’, also expressed *inter alia* in his 1949 collection of aphorisms *Gegenlicht* [Counter-light] and in his insistence on the ‘present’ (*Gegenwart*) in the *Meridian* speech, has come under critical scrutiny also in at least two dissertations: Pajari Räsänen, *Counter-figures: An Essay on Anti-metaphoric Resistance*.

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grain [...]’<sup>61</sup> Freed from the anxiety of influence trivialised into the playfulness of intertextuality, poetry is perhaps (re?)discovering or uncovering the frictional struggle of the countertextual, the life and strife of the poetical.

**Post-scriptum, Post-mortem, Post-conceptual**

Flarf plays Cuzin while playing it off<sup>62</sup>  
 Flarf plays kissing cousin while playing a little too rough<sup>63</sup>  
 The famous cousins of Post-conceptual poetry are  
 Lady Gaga (b. 1986) and Ryan Trecartin (born 1981).<sup>64</sup>

Now what? What reactive counter-response to conceptualism and flarf? As I was musing on the inexorable linkage and supersession of generations, poetic movements and counter-movements, I serendipitously stumbled upon ‘Notes on Post-conceptual Poetry’, a distant critical tilt at Place and Fitterman’s *Notes on Conceptualisms* (see e.g. ‘INTRO’ and Endnote 1) by Felix Bernstein, who, apart from fronting the Tender Cousins band with Gabe Rubin, happens to be none else than Charles Bernstein’s son – and is only too well aware of the ambivalent mixture of privilege and burdensome inheritance a rich creative lineage comes with, therefore of the impasse of wishing to be at once self-reflexive, (self-)critical, self-ironically detached, yet affective (see especially Notes 82, 93). Described in Insert Blanc Press’s PreSale notice as a ‘compulsive archaeological digging in to [sic] the relics and ruins of Language poetry, Conceptual poetry, and Felix’s own familiar familial corpus’, ‘Notes on Post-conceptual Poetry’ is a roller-coaster of ninety-three vignettes flanked by an ‘INTRO’ and ‘(Endnotes)’, ‘a kind of push-pull between pathetic confession, ironic self-criticality, advanced complicity, enraged hostility, information surplus, gossip, and longing (for an end to work) that is characteristic of Post-conceptual poetry (and youth).’<sup>65</sup> It also provides a sceptical, provocative dissection of the poetic-critical avant-garde from the well-informed perspective of a filial insider, which gives a new lease of life not so much to the traditional idea of literary filiation but to the self-contradictory ‘(right up) against’ or *contre*, not only in relation to the ‘uncreative’, with Bernstein Jr.’s refreshing gesturing towards ‘post-Internet poetry’ and distrust towards hypermediatization and

*Paul Celan’s Poetry and Poetics at the Limits of Figuralty* (University of Helsinki, 2007), and Anna Glazova, *Counter-quotations: The Defiance of Poetic Tradition in Paul Celan and Osip Mandelstam* (Ann Arbor University, MI, 2008).

<sup>61</sup> Paul Celan’s Meridian Speech on the occasion of receiving the Georg Büchner Prize, on 22 October 1960; see ‘The Meridian’, *Collected Prose*, trans. Rosemary Waldrop (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 52.

<sup>62</sup> Place, ‘Why Conceptualism Is Better Than Flarf’ (no. 13).

<sup>63</sup> Gardner, ‘Why Flarf Is Better Than Conceptualism’.

<sup>64</sup> Felix Bernstein, ‘Notes on Post-conceptual Poetry’, *Evening Will Come: A Monthly Journal of Poetics*, Conceptual Poetry Feature-Issue 41, May 2014; available at <http://www.thevolta.org/ewc41-fbernstein-p1.html>. Textual references will henceforth indicate the ‘Note’ or section in this unpaginated version.

<sup>65</sup> See <http://www.insertblancpress.net/blogs/news/15360961-notes-on-post-conceptual-poetry-by-felix-bernstein-presale>; a book version, also featuring ‘What’s Not to Like: A Concluding Conversation with Vanessa Place’, had been announced by Insert Blanc Press for April 2015 but has not yet shipped at the time of finalising this essay.

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social networking (cf. his Ginsbergian ‘howl’ against Facebook in Note 59), but also possibly to the ‘uncritical’ (his readiness to take on the internalized reverence towards reference – the institutionalization of critics’ Gospel truths, even Perloff’s).

One key idea in this manifesto of sorts is, in Joyelle McSweeney’s words, also on the PreSale note, post-conceptualism’s ‘death of the work’ as ‘a reinvention of zero’, a latter-day neo-Barthesian double twist or Blanchotian *désœuvrement* which is captured in the following:

[. . .] if Post-conceptual poetry can de-cathect from the strategies of didactic redemption and/or didactic counter-redemption that mark the marketing strategies that have created the canons of conceptualism and Post-conceptualism, Language poetry and Conceptual poetry, in the first place. Perhaps, then, what will occur is a madness that signals not the disappearance of the author [Language poetry], or the disappearance of the text [Conceptual poetry], but the final disappearance of work itself. (‘INTRO’)

Scouring the scene from Badiou to Beyoncé and beyond via all the possible posts, post-posts, neos, queers and counters at one’s Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter and YouTube fingertips, Felix Bernstein’s shorthand, close-up, state-of-the-art, faintly eccentric surveys conjure up an entropic, almost ‘post-poetic’ landscape where writers, critics, and readers alike all wake up from the anaesthetic hangover of calculated conceptualist boredom (not even Baudelairean *ennui*) turned indiscriminate lassitude, in the age of ‘postpostpostrevolts’ and myriad minor ‘counter-canons’ (Note 2), to find that even the notion of ‘work’ has disappeared behind the social network.<sup>66</sup> No more texting or poetic counter-texting in neo-Dada times: “‘If you are having trouble coming up with new ideas just repeat your old ideas but Skype them in to Zurich. Their value will multiply.’ But say it while Skyping in to Zurich.’ (Note 6). And no need to make a name for yourself with a ‘capital’ of texts or ‘work’, no matter how (ill-)defined the latter has become.

Using his keen sense of genealogical situatedness, including in a recent ‘felt essay’<sup>67</sup> on Vanessa Place’s ‘Zombie Poetry’ manifesto, I would like to argue that what is at stake in these renewed ‘felt ultimacies’ (to come full circle with John Barth’s famous phrase in ‘The Literature of Exhaustion’) is how former debates about ‘post-(post-)ness’ (‘coming after’) first gave way to a more oppositional articulation of ‘counter-ness’, before now running the risk of extinguishing themselves as an unfeeling numbness and a quaint disaffect(ion) of poetry is creeping over in the face of so many confusedly unaugeable consensual and dissensual posturings. In other words,

<sup>66</sup> Praising Trisha Low’s *Purge* as the acme of post-conceptualism, Bernstein writes: ‘Low has internalized and worked through the death of the author and the death of the text (and therefore, is able to seamlessly manage ideologically satirical cut-ups a la Language poetry, as well as blatant amoral appropriation a la Conceptual poetry) but has also begun to push beyond this: and press towards the death of work.’ – whose ‘symmetrical counterpart [is] “the death of the reader”’ (Note 75). This insistence on the ‘end of the work’ explains the cultivated emphasis on ‘failure’ in Place and Fitterman’s *Notes on Conceptualisms*: ‘failure in this sense serves to irrupt the work, violating it from within.’ (p. 27)

<sup>67</sup> Thus characterized at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2013/09/felix-bernsteins-felt-essay-on-vanessa-places-zombie-poetry-manifesto/>



## CounterText

Felix Bernstein's conflictual in-the-face reflections may offer a genuine way, not so much out of the textual gridlock of the best avant-garde conceptualism but out of a more severe 'deadlock' that threatens to trump up textuality *tout court* (including countertextuality, with or without its revisionist contextuality) into 'untextuality', not as the glorious Penelopean weaving-by-day-and-unweaving-by-night (*textere*) of yesteryear,<sup>68</sup> but rather as an ominous unravelling of the genuinely imaginary-affective-intellectual fabric and texture of the poetical.

Vanessa Place's idea of poetry as not not-poetry, seen before, had led her to decree in her anaphoric 'No More' (March 2013)<sup>69</sup> what poetry should no longer do as well as to feature as a murderer in the short film *Poetry is Dead, I Killed It*, enacting a statement from a 2012 essay of hers with the same title, from which the following is worth excerpting:

I have written elsewhere that conceptual writing is annoying. Kenneth Goldsmith is the first to say that it may be boring. Bad lyric stinks; bad conceptualism is just another idea. And, as I have said before, what conceptualism does do is kill not the author, but the text itself. The writing is inert, formerly utilitarian, now deformed into nothing but an aesthetic object. All mirrored surface, no reflected soul. Like a fountain as receptacle.<sup>70</sup> There to be thought on, rather than learned from, it's terribly egalitarian. If poetry sprang from the void, conceptualism is the void. If poetry is dead, act like a zombie. The fact is, I like boring things. They make such lovely holes.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>68</sup> A craftily engineered model for this is the textual and countertextual activity that presided over the composition of the last chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. See James Van Dyck Card, *An Anatomy of 'Penelope'* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985).

<sup>69</sup> <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/245542>

<sup>70</sup> An obvious nod at the cornerstone of conceptual art, Marcel Duchamp's urinal readymade (1917), autographed 'R. Mutt\* 1917'; the original 'Fountain', which now exists only in a (possibly composite) photo taken at Alfred Stieglitz's studio, was 'lost and replaced' by (especially) a set of eight replicas similarly consigned to art by Duchamp in 1964. Of note in the context of this study is the wicked irony that more art and craft went into (re)producing the porcelain vessel(s), manufactured from glazed earthenware and with the signature imitated in black paint, than Duchamp's defiant 'mod' of simply repositioning the utilitarian urinal upside down and appending a pseudonym. The artsy capitalization on his anti-art conception led performance artist Pierre Pinoncelli to urinate into one of these authorized copies and strike it with a hammer in two different exhibitions, claiming that his action was truer to recovering its creator's intended meaning—that art is something to piss on, not pass on—than the readymade's inflated iconic status and museification, although his unquestioned, decontextualized veneration of Duchamp's prank would deserve analytic 'testing'. For a discussion of this piece of art history / piss artistry and similarly iconoclastic, conceptual interventions, see for e.g. Alan Riding's article 'If a urinal is art, can hammering it be, too?' in *The New York Times*, 6 January 2006, at [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/06/world/europe/06iht-art.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/06/world/europe/06iht-art.html?_r=0)

\*Among the various interpretations of the signature is Duchamp's hint that the R stood for Richard, also French slang for 'moneybags'; the urinal could thus be deciphered as a piss-pot of gold alluding to the increasing tendency towards opportunist money-grabbing in the art world, related to an unproblematic fructification of the 'thinkerly', for which see also note 76 *infra*.

<sup>71</sup> See <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2012/04/poetry-is-dead-i-killed-it/>, and, for the short video feature, <https://vimeo.com/50628652>

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Death of the text, exhausted through terminal boredom. . . Such a stance – 'I have been accused of, voluntarily confessed to, and been seen, killing poetry.' – provides the near-opening gambit for her more recent 'Zombie Poetry' (posted 25 September 2013),<sup>72</sup> which, however, soon edges towards repositioning her poetics more in line with the 'place' of the *post*-conceptual (from Latin *ponere*: to place).<sup>73</sup> Hence: 'To my mind, some of the newest forms of conceptual poetry enact various forms of communion between the *I* that was poetry and the *I* that is the state of post-conceptual poetics.'<sup>74</sup> No matter how much one's sanitized, *début-de-siècle* death drive longs to lay poetry to rest in the ultimate form of the uncreative unpoetic, rather than being dispatched for good, it dialectically rises, phoenix-like, from its smouldering ashes now caringly tended by Place herself, self-styled as a 'zombie':

[. . .] my desire to confirm the undead of poetry, to serve, in a word, our disinterred poetic interests. [. . .] the saving grace of the promise of life after life, of Zombie poetics.

Thus, we compulsively return as zombies [. . .]. The hand that turns the tables, or reinscribes poetics as the signification of text [. . .]. It may be noted that zombies are slaves. Eternally.

[. . .] the repressed can only return. Just as conceptualism is dead insofar as poetry is sans heartbeat, and as much as I would very much like to kill poetry, again, it rises because of our belief, because, in a word, I am, we are, this is, *paid*. And so we are left with our Zombie poetics and the fitted happiness of our revival poetics.<sup>75</sup>

The emerging post-conceptual is thus that vein that stages the post-poetic as the return of the repressed, in some sort of counter-affective backlash effectuated by the unresponsive 'discourse of the slave', seen before. An evolutionary twist which did not escape Felix Bernstein, the unruly contrary 'heir' rather than 'slave', who, in a very different way than Gardner before, also responded, in 'Beyond Vampires and Zombies' (posted 29 September 2013), to the commodified 'necrotization' of poetry (but also of art and culture), against the 'sneaky meta-master that Place gleefully appropriates from Lacan's schemas in her self-presentation as zombie'<sup>76</sup> – even though the subsequent 'Notes' readily present her as 'a brilliant re-structuralist, [who] maneuvers the splintered discourses of the "slave" and the "victim" and turns them

<sup>72</sup> See <http://jacket2.org/article/zombie-poetry>; also downloadable from [www.academia.edu/2778743/Zombie\\_Poetry](http://www.academia.edu/2778743/Zombie_Poetry)

<sup>73</sup> For an awareness of the situatedness of her name, see her short video *Sense of Place*, BLEED EPISODE 2: SMART LIT, uploaded on 20 May 2008 at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nmr\\_6DeuWg4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nmr_6DeuWg4)

<sup>74</sup> Place, 'Zombie Poetry'.

<sup>75</sup> Place, 'Zombie Poetry'.

<sup>76</sup> Available at [http://htmlgiant.com/random/felix-bernsteins-reponse-to-vanessa-place-slavoj-zizek-trishallow-and-more/#\\_ftn4](http://htmlgiant.com/random/felix-bernsteins-reponse-to-vanessa-place-slavoj-zizek-trishallow-and-more/#_ftn4); posted on 29 September 2013. The latent accusation of Place cashing in at the financial 'counter' can be measured on her own, first-ever web corporation for poetry, VanessaPlace Inc. (at <http://vanessaplace.biz/>), whose portal quotation reads: 'POETRY IS A KIND OF MONEY', and whose first 'product' was a chapbook of twenty one-dollar bills – captioned '\$20-Poetry that speaks for itself' – a 'limited edition of \$20, available for \$50 [which] sold out within the hour.' Poetry as more business than usual. . .

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into monumental, cool artworks.<sup>77</sup> His salvational agenda for the poetic<sup>78</sup> can be aligned with an awareness of the middle ground taken by, and background of, post-conceptualist aesthetics in his 'Notes', the best of which at once illustrate and perform his multivalent approach:

[Post-conceptual poetry's] practitioners, born (on average) in the mid-80s, are part of a larger trend within post-postmodernism to bridge affect, queerness, ego, lyric, and self-conscious narcissism within the inherited procedural structures of the 'network' and the 'concept.'

(INTRO)

In distinction to Conceptual poetry, which aligns happily with Baudrillard's deadpan disappearance of the real, Post-conceptual poetry attempts to explicitly bring affect and emotion and ego back into the empty networking structures that govern us. For many, this is a resounding relief.

(Note 29)

Ultimately, as Bernstein wittily affirms, poetry 'does not have to pretend to be dead or undead, it can really breathe. And, though zombies may run a lot faster now, and we don't breathe as good as Charles Olson, we aren't out of breath yet.'<sup>79</sup> Poetry's divine afflatus may be a long-gone romantic ideal but this sobering-up call may show us a way out of the corner which flarf's so far childless 'spam folder poetics' (Note 76), then Place's recent *necro- plus ultra*, even envisaged as a 'life after [post] life', seem to have dug themselves into.

But the deadly march of progress and counter-progress always wears on, with or without poetic zombies: as early as November 2009, the year before Place and Gardner's logomachy, a casual 'Manifesto of Post-conceptual Poetry', penned by one Nyein Way, had already appeared, oblivious of the future countertextual exchange, thus making it *passé* even before it had even been staged.<sup>80</sup> Warped timelines: 'current' in art and letters seems always already *déjà-vu*, *déjà-lu* and 'post', as we might have gathered from Place and Fitterman's *Notes*, which more often than not use conceptualism and post-conceptualism almost interchangeably.<sup>81</sup> Pending Bernstein

<sup>77</sup> Felix Bernstein, 'Notes on Post-conceptual Poetry', Note 36; see also Note 37 for his razor-sharp assessment of the mixed (post-)conceptual pedigree of her works, especially in terms of affect, as well as the lead-up to 'A kind of friction in the midst of frictionlessness', Felix Bernstein in Conversation with Vanessa Place, *The Believer* (18 August 2014); available at <http://logger.believermag.com/post/95104011309/a-kind-of-friction-in-the-midst-of>

<sup>78</sup> See for e.g.: 'This is not to propose that the fix to conceptual poetry is post-conceptual schizopoetics. This is not a repetition of the post-structuralist move from a notion of a structure/network that determines the subject to one where the subject determines the structure/network. [...] this is not to argue for a return to affect, for a redoubling of queerness, for a new sincerity or new romanticism.' (Felix Bernstein, 'Beyond Vampires and Zombies'.)

<sup>79</sup> Felix Bernstein, 'Beyond Vampires and Zombies'.

<sup>80</sup> Available at <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/manifesto-of-post-conceptual-poetry-november-2009/>

<sup>81</sup> And in the Foreword: 'much of what we address might equally be called post-conceptual or neo-conceptual (to borrow terms from the visual arts).' (p. 12).

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Jr.'s 'Concluding Conversation with Vanessa Place', I will give the (almost) last word, not to the 'analyst-critic-master' of the 'dead letter' but once more to Bernstein Sr., squeezing some more life-drops out of the end of his 'Of Time and the Line':

[...] as  
they say in math, it takes two lines to make  
an angle but only one lime to make  
a Margarita.<sup>82</sup>

There is nothing, to pull us out of literary-critical scrapes, like the clever enactment of a charade in a good punch line.

A *punch* line with a (Mexican) twist.  
A twist of lime.

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*Necrologue: Death Sentences on Countertextual Writing*

the letter had been turned, as a glove, inside out<sup>83</sup>  
*Are we not all walking citations?*<sup>84</sup>  
Now:  
inverse.<sup>85</sup>

1. Countertextual writers are irrationalists rather than mystics. [*lasered out*]
2. [*lasered out*]
3. [*lasered out*]
4. Informal countertextuality is existentially irrational.
5. [*lasered out*]
6. If the countertexter does not change another's body at the beginning or end of the execution of the whole others secure the cause and repeat future causes.
7. The countertexter's wont is primary to the process others terminate from incompleteness to image. [*lasered out*]
8. When words such as boredom and poetry are misused, they denote part of an innovation and state an inconsequential refusal of that innovation, thus displacing illimitations off the countertexter who would be eager to unmake countertextuality that stays within the illimitations.

<sup>82</sup> Charles Bernstein, 'Of Time and the Line', *Rough Trades*, p. 43.

<sup>83</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Purloined Letter', *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p. 221.

<sup>84</sup> Felix Bernstein and Vanessa Place, 'The Black and Red Interviews', *Fanzine* (December 2014); available at [http://thefanzine.com/felix-bernstein-and-vanessa-place-the-black-and-red-interviews/#\\_ftnref1](http://thefanzine.com/felix-bernstein-and-vanessa-place-the-black-and-red-interviews/#_ftnref1)

<sup>85</sup> Place and Fitterman, *Notes on Conceptualisms*, p. 37.

*CounterText*

9. The countertext and image are the same. *[lasered out]* Images implement the countertext.
10. Works can be countertextual images; *[lasered out]*
11. *[lasered out]*
12. Against every countertextual work that remains spiritual there are few invariants that do.
13. A countertextual work must be misunderstood as a misconductor from the reader's body to the countertexter's. But it must always miss the reader, and it must always stay in the countertexter's body.
14. The deeds of several countertexters to themselves must deduce an image chain, if they retain a different countertext.
15. Since no content is extrinsically inferior to itself, the countertexter must misuse any content, from an impression of deeds (erased and silenced) to spiritual illusion, unequally.
16. If ideas are misused, and they regress to images about literature, then they are (not) literature and counter-art; *[lasered out]*
17. Some images are countertextual if they are unrelated to countertextuality and fall outside the unconventionalities of countertextuality.
18. One seldom misunderstands the countertextuality of the future by misapplying the unconventionality of the absent, thus understanding the countertextuality of the future.
19. The unconventionalities of countertextuality are kept intact by countertextual works.
20. Unsuccessful countertextuality fails to change our misunderstanding of the unconventionalities by keeping our blindnesses intact.
21. *[lasered out]*
22. The countertexter must imagine another's countertextuality, and must perceive it until it is incomplete.
23. The countertexter must rightly perceive (misunderstand it indifferently from the countertexter) a countertextual work but still be blocked in another's chain of thought by that construal.
24. *[lasered out]*
25. The countertexter must necessarily misunderstand another's countertextuality. *[lasered out]*
26. A countertexter must be blinder to his/her own countertextuality than to others'.
27. The countertext of a work must exclude the matter of the whole or the process in which it is unmade.
28. Before the image of the whole is dislodged from the countertexter's body and the inaugural content is undecided, the process is halted perceptively. There are few frontal causes that the countertexter can imagine. *[lasered out]*
29. *[lasered out]*

*'CounterTexting One Another'*

30. There are few elements excluded from a countertextual work. *[lasered out]*
31. If a countertexter misuses a different content in a single work, and leaves the immaterial unchanged, one would doubt the countertext excluded the immaterial.
32. *[lasered out]*
33. *[lasered out]*
34. When a countertexter teaches another's craft too badly others make clumsy countertextuality.
35. These sentences ignore countertextuality, and are countertextual.