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FROM “AVANT-GARDE” TO “EXPERIMENTAL”: READING POETRY AFTER THE 1960S

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

LITERATURE

by

Keegan Cook Finberg

June 2015

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Abstract

From “Avant-Garde” to “Experimental”: Reading Poetry After the 1960s

by

Keegan Cook Finberg

This dissertation rethinks contemporary notions of literacy by exploring how reading practices related to innovative poetry have shifted in the past sixty years. I argue that examining experimental poetry gives us unique insight into current scholarly interests in reading practices in the digital era, ethics in the age of globalization, and hyper-mediated everyday life. Increasingly populist, open and participatory work emerged at the mid-century, when genre distinctions weakened, and the events of daily life became creative aesthetic principles and tactics. Beginning at this crucial moment, my project examines inter-arts experiments produced in the U.S. and globally that question modernist and New Critical practices of reading poetry. These experiments propose alternative modes of thinking about reading that foster political action, performance, and active reconfiguration of everyday public spaces.

The contemporary experimental writing movement, “conceptual writing,” which often reproduces or appropriates literary texts into a new frame, takes up the larger discussion about reading practices and contemporary culture, and serves as the impetus for the dissertation. The first chapter considers Fluxus “event scores” to argue that the importance of this 1960s transition in reading was informed by a reconfiguration of the experience and meaning of genre and media. The second
chapter focuses on the poetry of the New York School to consider a mode of reading akin to urban spatial practice that offers alternatives to nationalism and corporate culture within a Cold War setting. The third chapter discusses mid-century constraint-based literature written by Oulipo members, feminist body art of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the work of architect-poets Madeline Gins and Shusaku Arakawa. Putting these works in conversation for the first time under the category of “constraint-based work” proposes that constraint is not only an authorial preoccupation but also an embodied practice, and a reading method. The argument politicizes procedural methods and points to modes of reading that are closer to modes of activism. The last chapter focuses on conceptual writing, a present-day category of poetry that often highlights how and even whether a given text is meant to be read.
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* 

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Introduction

For the last seven years, the New York Times has printed a series of articles entitled “The Future of Reading.” From a seemingly groundbreaking claim in 2008 that the Internet has created a “new kind of reading” to articles deploring ubiquitous “skimming,” and the end of “deep reading,” the question of a change in reading practice is on the public’s mind. With the introduction of new media, reading means something new now; as the Times puts it, “Online: R U Really Reading?” At the same time, the scholarly community is consumed by defining the nature, forms, and importance of reading in the midst of a “crisis” in the Humanities. Both the humanities crisis and the newfound interest in reading are to some extent related to increased digitization, monetization, hypercommodification, and ideological shifts under late capitalism. This dissertation will show that reading did not change suddenly in our current moment, but rather has changed often and over time. Further, I argue that these pervasive questions about the “crisis” of reading in our moment may be addressed not only by studies in education, cognitive science, psychology and

1 “The Future of Reading,” a series looked “at how the Internet and other technological and social forces are changing the way people read” (Rich, “A New Assignment”; Rich, “Literacy Debate”; Rich, “Further Reading on Reading”). For another example of this popular discussion, see a 2013 Time article that discusses recent research to suggest that “deep reading” is important and “endangered” (Paul).

2 Recent scholarship with a focus on current reading practices includes the Stanford Arcade Colloquy “We, Reading, Now” earlier in 2015; the Winter 2013 PMLA forum on “Reading in a Digital Age”; Fall 2009 special issue of Representations “The Way We Read Now”; the 2011 English Institute conference on the theme “Reading,” and the 2004 conference “Polemic: Critical or Uncritical.” Heather Love’s 2010 “Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” and Eve K. Sedgwick’s “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You” (2003) are important for this conversation.

3 Many others have shown this as well. See Barron, Collins, and Hayles in the PMLA forum, “Reading in a Digital Age” for a brief summation of these arguments.
sociology, but also by literary studies, from a seemingly improbable perspective: that of experimental writing, especially poetry. This is a dissertation about reading; it explores the way that reading has changed in the contemporary era. From “Avant-Garde” to “Experimental” investigates the place of reading experimental poetry over the last sixty years in order to shed light on a major shift in the way aesthetic and cultural production participates in politics, perception, and everyday life.

This work is crucial, not just for the discipline of literature and the study of poetry, but also for the way we situate ourselves and our communities in relation to texts in an increasingly globalized digital era. Our current relations with and to text saturate much of our lives—perhaps more than ever before, reading texts inflects and even at times dictates relationships with others, notions of labor, movements through space, modes of perception, and ways of understanding prevailing systems. Whether through our social networks, home finances, dealings with legal systems, or news consumption, a good portion of our lives is spent performing different kinds of reading. However, despite the interest in reading practices, these types of reading are for the most part unremarked upon in literary studies, and methods of discussing reading have not caught up with the discourse concerning these other aspects of our lives. My aspiration here is to bring the discussion of reading up to date with other fields that address the politics and aesthetic practices of our contemporary moment. This aspiration is based on the wager that literary reading, and specifically reading poetry, is relevant to other areas of our contemporary lives—and, in fact, defines much of our experience of late capitalism since the 1960s.
The introduction that follows tells a story. It is a story about history; in a sense, this is a story about the changing aesthetic and political investments of postwar art. And it necessarily includes a plotline about the ways in which we are able to read these art movements now. In other words, this introduction will tell the story of how we are only now—in the last 15 years—able to fathom a major shift in reading that happened in the mid-century, a time not too distant from our own. Most of the dissertation will not be concerned with narrative, plot, or story. Instead, after the introduction, the dissertation takes a series of “singular examples,” or, the accumulation of poetic events as its structure. Indeed, this introductory story lays out the necessary history, methods, and commitments of the dissertation and also signals the dissertation’s primary argument—this mid-century shift—through its form.

Though its primary setting is the United States of America, this is also a global story. The long postwar period in the Unites States is characterized by conformity, deindustrialization, and the advancement of white-collar capitalism. Yet the immediate post-war period was an economic boom, the height of industrial America, and the peak of the labor movement. The 1960s, the period with which I begin this project, was a time of especially intense optimism, both in the U.S. and globally. Nearly simultaneous cultural and political revolutions across the globe in the

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4 This term, “singular examples,” is borrowed from the title and primary method of Tyrus Miller’s book about neo-avant-gardes or the works of “latter day modernists” (T. Miller 4–14). I will show that the works I discuss in each chapter are political, ideological, and theoretical interventions into practices that make up today’s category of reading.
long Sixties reveal this hopeful connectivity. Unlike any period of modernity, the global sixties created “the awakening sense of global possibility, of a different future” through revolutions, eruptions, and fissures (Connery 78). Global political concerns and likeminded uprisings, accompanied by increased wealth, meant that a sense of global art world became possible at this period as well. For example, the Fluxus group traveled to Europe, Asia, and through the Americas for expectation-thwarting performances. Fluxus also experimented with “mail art,” a global network of interactive communication, which would become a major art form. Movement, linkage, and travel characterizes how their artworks appeared, circulated, and were perceived. The flare of the political left also characterizes Fluxus art; these artworks suggested alternative modes of perception, and anti-institutional investments. Because of this moment of global connectivity, with Fluxus artists’ attempts to disrupt major institutions and ideologies in a global sense, they also covered much actual ground. This aspect of the moment is illustrated by a brief look at Fluxus member Mieko Shiomi’s Spatial Poem (1965-1975), in which the artist mailed instructions to other artists throughout the world and plotted their responses onto images and maps (figure 1). The instructions she mailed required a type of participatory reading and communal world making that created alternative networks as well as critiqued dominant

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5 See Fedric Jameson’s “Periodizing the Sixties” for a discussion of decolonization, the rise of the New Left, and a global narrative of 1960s revolutions that end in the mid-1970s. A chronology begins with the Battle of Algiers and the Independence of Ghana (1957) and ends with the death of Mao and the Soweto rebellion.

6 Fluxus is historically international with members from all over the globe. However in the early 1960s, its network of locations included primarily New York City, Tokyo, and large cities in Germany and France.
paradigms of both spatial and reading practices. In a sense, this introduction is a story about Shiomi’s *Spatial Poem*—about the many ways that artists engaged in aesthetic production that questioned prevailing systems and institutions on a global scale. Of course, the historical frame of global possibility, engagement, and critique will become less optimistic as the story continues; it will shift through the height of the Cold War and then mutate during a period of deindustrialization and the move to white collar labor in the West, and finally change again under neoliberalism. By the dissertation’s end, series of maps like Shiomi’s might be read as something else “globalized” entirely. Indeed, in early Fluxus experiments, there is often a critique of future-oriented optimism as well. These works show that the global history of capital is manifest in art, poetry, and the way we read it. Since the 1960s, a major change in the way we read has taken place, and because of contemporary “crises” of print culture and reading, we are just now able to realize the extent of this mid-century shift.

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7 I use the term “global” in a self-consciously limited sense, aware that it leaves out large swaths of the world population and spaces. Following the networks of conversation and circulation from this period allows me to explore several regions at once. Yet I am also cognizant that artwork was not shared with many of the world’s poorer or developing countries.
A Shift from “Avant-garde” to “Experimental”

And so the story begins with a shift in aesthetic practice and criticism, what Jacques Rancière describes as a change in “regime.” For Rancière, history and ways of reading are imbricated through the sensible order that artworks allow or disallow. In other words “aesthetic acts” (poems, for example) work “as configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity” (Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics 9). Artworks can usher in the way we read, the way we sense the world, and how we configure media and genre. To reflect changes in the “sensible,” Rancière divides history into major regimes, each of which describes the way that society views the role of art within its specific time period. Furthermore, the regime indicates ways in which society decides what art is made of; how we relate to it, and also the way that we are able to comprehend, or
read past aesthetic acts. His model places us currently under the “aesthetic regime” which began in the West in the eighteenth century (Rancière, *Aisthesis* ix). For Rancière, the “aesthetic regime” is a different word for “modernity,” and also includes the modernist avant-gardes (Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* 29). This current regime is characterized by an emphasis on the art product in the way we perceive art, rather than the doing or the making of the product, or the ethos or truth-value of the product, which characterized earlier regimes. Yet in the shift on which my dissertation focuses, which I have so far described as a shift in reading, that began in 1960, artworks turned away from “product” to instead emphasize process, journey, or even something as immaterial as failure, or failed attempts. For example, Shiomi’s maps are crucially multiple and idiosyncratic. The artwork exists in the actions of artists and friends across the globe, not in any singular map or collection of maps. In fact, we could read Shiomi’s project as hinting at the impossibility of any singular aesthetic representation in art or in life. This mode of art making, of which Shiomi is a part, requires new modes of perception, categorization and strategies of interpretation that are not based on product, but rather based on enactment, creation of spaces, embodiment practices and ultimately textual interaction.

What is this mode? The mid-century ushered in a change from the category of the avant-garde (or, in Rancière’s model, the aesthetic regime, which for Rancière encompasses the avant-gardes), to the category of the experimental. We can most readily see this change by examining art that first falls outside of the mainstream—that pushed the boundaries of its medium of genre—and that was previously
considered “avant-garde.” At the mid-century in the U.S., with increasing globalization and the advancement of capitalist markets, the role of the avant-garde changed as well. Instead of militantly asserting new possibilities or temporal presents (as modernist avant-gardes are often theorized to do), cutting-edge arts began to test hypotheses of new ways of living and perceiving through the use of everyday materials. Works that pushed the boundaries of their media were no longer “avant-garde” in the earlier sense of the term. As Adorno wrote in the early sixties, “the concept of the avant-garde,” with its air of militant tragedy and its “isms” had become comic (Adorno 23). It was clear, by any account, that something deep had shifted within the purpose of fringe art. The works that emerge from this shift and that characterize the new way of reading are “experimental,” asserting a poetics of encounter. Whereas modernist avant-garde movements pushed against institutions in opposition—shocking audiences at the Cabaret Voltaire (Dada), insisting on automatic writing as societal cure (Surrealism), lacing seats with pepper spray (Futurism)—in the late 50s and 60s, rituals like cleaning the street with solvents (Hi Red Center) were meant to coincide with an aspect of everyday life. Think of Shiomi’s mailed “scores” that invited friends, strangers, or acquaintances to participate in an art project by enacting something specific in their home environment and recording it.

The fact of an aesthetic and political change has been widely theorized by scholars of modernism and the avant-garde. In Farewell to an Idea T.J. Clark argues that modernism is tied directly to the accumulation of capital and the spread of
capitalist markets. Capitalism is an uneven and tragic sort of “progress,” and for this reason, socialism is also part of the definition of modernism. Socialism is the necessary shadowy opposition to the accumulation of capital—with every capitalist advancement, socialism is proposed (Clark 7). For Clark, this cycle has created and defined Western history since the French revolution. It is in this vein that he argues that every modernist movement attempted to make art and literature die, or, each had to create “its own proximate black square” in order to exist (373). For Clark, this is the true meaning of the avant-garde: an ending, so as to attempt to begin again, a militant and desperate attempt to break with existing politics and aesthetic practices. He explains that this is closely tied to Hegel’s sense in the 1820s that art as we know it could not continue; Hegel wrote, “art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past” (Hegel 10).

However, Clark agrees that this aesthetic cycle changed at the mid-century. He explains that in the late 50s, abstract expressionism failed to create this feeling of

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8 In chapter one, I will describe at some length a similar theory from Alain Badiou. Badiou argues that all avant-gardes conceive art with “an element of violent aesthetic militancy” because they “only think of art in the present and want to force the recognition of this present” (134). In other words: “The tendency of twentieth-century art is to revolve around the act rather than the work, because the act, as the intense power of beginning, can only be thought of in the present” (Badiou 136).

9 Much of the critical writing about twentieth- and twenty-first-century art moments is ensnared in Hegel’s “end of art” thesis, which morphs into the notion that art ends with modern aesthetics. This view of progressive or linear time for artworks is exemplified at the mid-century with Clement Greenberg’s argument that the avant-gardes are a reaction, an attempt to continue historical progress in the midst of the horrors of history (“Avant-Garde and Kitsch” 5). Correctives to this mode of thinking come from Rosalind Krauss’s notion of “repetition” as the secret that modernism would like to keep hidden in order to continue (Krauss 160–170) and from Catherine Malabou’s method of reading time in Hegel’s writing as plastic concept that is both built and builds, comes together and differentiates itself through material realities (Malabou 6).
an ending and instead affirmed its own movement. In this affirmation, abstract expressionism thereby ends a type of modernist myth, the myth of endings and new beginnings. Clark considers this “affirmative” moment of change in artistic practices as tied to commodity culture; as the avant-garde’s militancy was increasingly absorbed into the art institution, it no longer attempted to negate the institution or to work against culture and cultural norms. For Clark, this affirmation is most clearly seen in the U.S. in Abstract Expressionist paintings shown in fashion magazines, as part of a nationalist Cold War effort, or displayed in corporate spaces. This moment of cultural affirmation is crystalized with Pop Art—Andy Warhol’s vibrant photos of Marilyn Monroe, for example, call up a tragic, quintessentially American story as they also decorate our homes. Other important theorizations of the avant-garde—its beginnings and endings—include Peter Bürger’s famous (and famously contradicted), argument that a paradigmatic shift at the mid-century is about the “failure” of the avant-garde. He claims that avant-gardes of the 1920s failed to bring life-praxis into art practice, and their form of abstract aestheticism was absorbed into the institution and into bourgeois society as a whole. Thus, according to Bürger, the later (or neo) avant-gardes of the mid-century repeat the same negative movements in a seemingly nonsensical, or at least “inauthentic” way, as part of the institution, necessarily failing to change it (Bürger 53).

Though they did not name it as such, both Clark and Bürger noticed the shift to the experimental paradigm through their assertion that the mid-century introduced a major change in aesthetics. Though Bürger’s framework is important for thinking
about a mid-century change, as many have pointed out, it is also short sighted. As to the first part of the argument, many actions of historical avant-gardes were not absorbed into the art institution, and more important for my work here, as Clark asserts, many of the mid-century movements do not base themselves on negation of the status quo. Compelling arguments against Bürger’s framework come from critics like Hannah Higgins. Higgins shows that Fluxus was not based on negative critique, but rather on affirmation of everyday experience; it was not autonomous and did not critique a system. Other critics have pointed out that participatory works are not necessarily “affirmative” (either in the Higgins sense, or in the Clark sense) for many reasons. For example, in discussing happenings, Judith Rodenbeck argues that our focus on the “participatory” nature of these works makes us lose sight of the fact that they are not affirmative at all. She writes that happenings “not only inaugurated a participatory form and ethos in art; they also exacted a radical critique on that participation” (xiii). Rodenbeck argues that the relational and collaborative aspects of happenings did exist, but that a focus only on these aspects makes it impossible to see the work of critique that the happening also introduces (Rodenbeck 11). At the same time, just because participation became a common trope does not mean that all of these works were political in any sense of the word. Along with Rodenbeck, Claire Bishop provides a useful corrective for the assumption that if a work is participatory, it is radically political; Bishop explains that participation can be used as a business “tool for improving efficiency and workforce morale,” for example (Bishop 11). In Fluxus projects especially, we can see the way that aesthetics shift to concentrate on
interrelation and interaction, rather than representation or cause and effect. Yet, this interaction does not always ensure community, but rather at times discourages it, and points out that there is no possibility of full participation. When Fluxus artist Yoko Ono asks her reader to “use your blood to paint” and to “paint until you die,” our possibilities for connecting, or carrying out the artwork, are slim.

Instead of emphasizing “participation,” I locate this change to the experimental paradigm in a focus on encounter. In the early 1960s, artworks began to take on thematics of interaction and enactment that suggest a set of philosophical questions about relation. Clark’s portrait of affirmation is part of this model, as are Rodenbeck and Bishop’s important checks on notions of inclusivity. With experimental artworks, we are invited “in.” This may mean that we are invited to critique any possibility of authentic participation, but at the very least we are called upon as readers toward an encounter with the work. This encounter suggests possibilities for ethical formation and for world making. For example, Ono’s “BLOOD PIECE” not only undermines the media-autonomy of modernism, signaling the death or impossibility of painting as a singular medium. It also asks us to “use” part of ourselves in order to think about women artists, menstrual blood, and importantly, about duration, differently. Ono suggests that our durational performance of living could be art. Hers is one among many artworks like this at the time. By becoming more oriented toward relation, art genres and media allowed a general sense of theatricality, enactment in the political sense and in the architectural sense,

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10 Other scores will be discussed at length in my first chapter. An Anthology (ed La Monte Young) and George Brecht’s Water Yam will serve as book-length examples.
or what Benjamin Buchloh calls “a reflection on public (architectural and domestic) space” which “thereby foreground[ed] the absence of a developed artistic reflection on the problematic of the contemporary publics” (Buchloh 120). As my dissertation will show, the new frame of interactivity that began around 1960 also implicated built, spatial environments. The change in vocabulary my dissertation title proposes (from ‘avant-garde’ to ‘experimental’) suggests that the importance of this moment of transition can be characterized as spatial change. The type of work that pushes boundaries moves from the “avant-garde,” a word connoting a singular and specific place, etymologically meaning before, or the foremost part of the army, to the “experimental,” which questions the notion of only one space, and comes from concepts of experience, action or trying. The term “experimentalism” places an emphasis on possibility and pluralism: with experimentation comes the possibility of shaping space to change experience, or, playing with space in order to affect experience, or, considering possible experiences and designing spaces to realize them. My use of the term suggests the radicalism of open design.

There have been many theories of the avant-garde (only a few of which I have mentioned, and only a few of which I will contend with in the pages that follow), yet there have been very few theories of the “experimental.” Critic Paul Stephens traces the history of the term “literary experimentalism,” which, he claims, was used relatively infrequently in the United States until the 1990s. Stephens suggests that, in a practical sense, the term arose in response to the decline of the term “postmodernism,” and that ultimately it is used to provide a “critique of scientific and
humanistic discourses and institutions.” Even more commonly in Stephens’s estimation, it offers a “critique of the subjective ego of the writer, and correspondingly requires the development of new forms and methods” (Stephens, “What Do We Mean by ‘Literary Experimentalism’?” 144, 148). He proposes some possible origins of literary experimentalism: ‘pataphysics and Oulipo; the American pragmatist tradition; one particular modernist journal entitled Transition: an international quarterly for creative experiment; and the scientific method and its relation to criticism (especially New Criticism). Stephens ultimately suggests that experimentalism’s foundations in notions of scientific experiment work both inside and outside of institutions to offer a critique. This critique is not based in upheaval or revolution (like the paradigmatic avant-garde). Experimentalism offers a critique that does not have to be negation. This notion works in tandem with how Christian Bök perceives the role of ‘pataphysics in postmodern thought in general. He ends his survey of the ways that ‘pataphysics, “the science of imaginary solutions and arbitrary exceptions,” is imbricated in postmodernism by discussing its political critique. He writes, “if ‘pataphysics is politically ineffective, perhaps it only seems so because it proposes a radical but illicit hypothesis, arguing that a revolution must paradoxically partake of the very discursive strategies that it opposes in order to be a revolution. The ‘pataphysician does not counteract science so much as exaggerate science, adopting it periodically and applying it excessively in order to destroy it by ultimately exhausting its imaginary potential” (Bök, ‘Pataphysics 102). This is a subtle revolution. Bök’s critique, by way of adoption and application, like the
détournement of the Internationale Situationiste, is made from the inside—it uses the materials at hand to unfold their logic. We can think of Shiomi’s project, which uses maps to expand the communicative possibility of maps, and also to point out their deficiency, or false logic systems, in this regard.

The work I discuss here is “experimental,” not ‘pataphysical, and it does not necessarily critique science at all. Nonetheless, Bök’s notion of partaking “of the very discursive strategies” that the work opposes in order to instigate revolution or critique, is critical for understanding this aesthetic shift. This dissertation will show how nationalism and Cold War corporate culture is exaggerated, or applied “excessively in order to destroy it” in the poetry of the New York School, for example (chapter two). In my chapters on Fluxus, constraint-based work, and conceptual writing (also called conceptual poetry or “conpo”), current trends in reading practices are stretched to their limit in order to bring readers into new levels of both political and sensorial understanding. This important aspect of the definition of “experimental,” which includes interactive critique, distinguishes it from work that characterizes the avant-garde tradition. An emphasis on critique also separates my usage of the term from contemporary genre labels or looser conceptions of the “experimental,” what Matais Viegner describes as “a grab bag” of texts, “methods and authors that generally fall outside of mainstream publishing” (Viegener 71).

In other words, we can characterize this change to the experimental paradigm as an emphasis on critique over assertion. If the avant-garde is about platforms, programs, and future arguments, what Rancière explains as “the invention of sensible
forms and material structures for a life to come” (Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* 29), the experimental is about the very absence of a platform. Anne Lauterbach puts it succinctly: “To experiment means you must put what you know at risk to what you do not yet know” (Lauterbach 10). These definitions of “experimental” build from Adorno, for whom the experimental and the avant-garde are also distinct categories. He points out that by the 1960s the term experimental came to mean, “that the artistic subject employs methods whose objective results cannot be foreseen” (Adorno 24). When Lauterbach proposes that experimental work creates what “you do not yet know” and Johanna Drucker argues that in the mode of the experimental, the artist must have the “permission to fail” built into her endeavor (Drucker, “Experimental Writing (or Poetry Lab)” 75), we can hear echoes of Adorno’s model. In all cases this is a relinquishment, on the part of the artist, of any knowing control over the end result, argument or claim. There must be an unforeseen effect, and this effect is an important quality of the way a reader or audience member approaches the work. Adorno explains this further: “Not only is the unforeseen an effect, it also has an objective dimension, which was transformed into a new quality” (Adorno 25). This “new quality,” requires that the reading subject also attempt to, in some crucial way, create the work. I have been referring to this new quality as a form of reading, and also as a form of encounter. Experimental artwork suggests a method of reading that draws us in and asks us to enact. In Shiomi’s case, for example, it asks us to create our own “orbit event” for spatial poem number six.
For Adorno, this privileging of process instead of product, or what he later calls a primary concern with means instead of ends, also has a negative effect: it “degrade[s] the concrete work into a mere example” (Adorno 37). This part of his philosophy stems from the limited frame for Adorno’s aesthetic theory. Adorno does not consider the audience or the reader in his theory of experimentation; the frame of his aesthetic theory ends with the object, thus it considers the object's relationship with the artist but not the reception of the object. For this reason, he writes, “In this transformation of the concept of experimentation, art becomes conscious of something that was always present in it…the artist's imagination scarcely ever completely encompassed what it brought forth” (38). For my argument, the artist's imagination is less interesting than the way we contend with the work in the world. If we focus on reading practices and hermeneutics—the ways these works create new perceptive modes through their material realities—we are more readily able to perceive their effect on political and aesthetic modes that define our contemporary moment. In other words, to do justice to this new mode of artistic practice, we must assume that it suggests new modes of interpreting and participating.

Affect studies provides a particularly convincing way to approach a number of these new modes of interpreting and participating. In the last ten years, affect studies has revealed the importance of inter-relational, sensorial categories in understanding politics, spaces, and systems. Many recent theories of affect rely on multiple bidirectional transfer points and interactions to define the term. As Patricia Clough points out, an understanding of “affect” includes capacities both “to affect and be
affected” (Clough 2). In other words, theories of affect importantly transfer sense, or feeling, outside the closed subject and into or across another place.\(^{11}\) The term affect is useful precisely because of this bidirectional quality, or lack of closed subjects and lack of unitary—or singularly mappable—space. Its definition includes a description of a subjective “state” as well as an “intention” (OED); the sense of the word rests somewhere between activity and passivity in an interactive or participatory zone. Many experimental works rely precisely on this participatory zone. Furthermore, some of the works I discuss actively create their own “event,” a concept under deep consideration in affect studies. Using Bergsonian theories of time and Deleuzian theories of movement, Brian Massumi takes an interest in space, or what he carefully calls “position,” a category that “arises out of movement” (Massumi 183). In the same way, “place arises from a dynamic of interference and accord between sense-dimensions” (Massumi 182). In Massumi's model, duration, experience, and relational movement are privileged before any attempt to understand matter by itself. This model that privileges movement and experience for space making is crucial for the way I understand experimental texts to create experiences, encounters, and situations. For example, in Frank O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems*, the speaker creates the sense of the city and the events that eventually disrupt it by walking through the city (chapter two). With *Eye/Body* Carolee Schneemann garners the ability to see and be seen through the creation of a multimedia art environment that includes the feeling body—her stillness highlights the formal intervention (chapter three).

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\(^{11}\) This is an important part of the definition of affect for many critics of affect; See Denise Riley, Kathleen Stewart and Rei Terada.
Recent critical work interested in literary ethics has also considered relationality in order to allow a new philosophical and hermeneutical frame for aesthetics. A renewed interest in Levinas and Derrida’s work on responsibility and ethics has helped critics realize the larger stakes for theorizing reading practices. For critics like Gayatri Spivak, J. Hillis Miller, Derek Attridge, and Paul de Man, reading literature involves ethical responsibility. In this frame, reading becomes a central activity for cultivation, relation, exploration, and exercise of the ethical dimension. This turn has to do with the importance of recognizing the role of literature apart from other forms of media in our contemporary lives. For example, in arguing that a turn to ethics in literary studies does not foreclose politics, John Guillory writes, “reading is the principal ethical practice of modernity, the site where a practice of the self has not been entirely or easily subordinated to the moral code, or rendered solely an instrument of power/knowledge” (Guillory 39). Here I widen the definition of “reading” beyond Guillory’s confines—he is considering the rise of casual or “lay reading,” and especially novel reading, in his argument about modernity—but I agree that our relationship to texts and to the event of reading uniquely creates selves and communities.

Spivak urges that the works we read teach us about ethical possibilities, our relationships to others, and the consequences of our actions. Like Spivak, Paul de Man, Derek Attridge and J. Hillis Miller argue that reading literature involves ethical responsibility. Each theorist studies a reader in order to fathom reading practices, but each chooses a different medium and mode of production in making this argument; Attridge, his own singular response to poems; de Man, the history of literary criticism; and Miller, writers reading their own work. Each concludes that re-reading and an open response to the unknown constitute an ethical reading practice. For Attridge, this unknown is defined as the “other;” for de Man, embodied in “blindness;” and for Miller, it is constituted by “failure.” They each argue that an ethical response to the unknown within the reading process has far-reaching consequences.
Similar to affect theorists’ suggestion that we do not see matter independent of organic shifts and flows, critics who focus on the ethics of reading want us to acknowledge our interdependent relationships with textual events. Here I argue that textual events give us new ways of thinking about spaces and ethics. Nigel Thrift calls this form of epistemology “non-representational theory” or the “geography of what happens” (Thrift 2). Thrift’s theory builds from affect theories—what Massumi considers “position,” Thrift calls “site”—in that he is interested in movement and flows in his understanding of spaces. Yet for Thrift, affect, ethics, and the everyday must be understood together within an active philosophical model that attends to event. He argues that keeping these categories in unison allows us to rethink notions of theory and practice, understand new types of matter, and lastly he argues that implementing non-representational theory makes it “possible to boost the content of bare life, making it more responsive, more inventive, and more open to ethical interventions” (Thrift 22). Building from Thrift’s work, I will argue that the concepts of place, affect, and ethics are inextricable. In chapter one, this shapes my attention to circulation that is crucial for understanding the emplacement of the Fluxus score as it seeks to change the categories of enactment and reading; in chapter two it means studying the signifiers of New York City and Paris as intervening in international politics; in chapter three it allows me to overhaul categories of “constraint-based” literature, performance art, and architecture to explore new horizons of perception; and in the last chapter it helps me uncouple the notion of reading a work “as poetry” from the category of poetry itself.
Poetry in General

This shift from “avant-garde” to “experimental” mirrors a change in the definition of poetry. Whereas mid-century modernism has been characterized by interdisciplinarity, multimedia genre exploration, or as a time of “arts in general,”13 I contend that the shift is best considered as a period of “poetry in general.” The modes of attention that poetry suggests can be seen to characterize both the art and the experience of our historical paradigm. The boundaries of poetry have become more flexible—the texts that make up literature are often not different from those that make up the foundations of economic systems, bureaucracy, and data. Conceptual writing, by appropriating these very elements, displays this flexibility clearly, and conceptual writing allows me to argue that increased economic abstraction calls for the importance of undoing the existing ontology of the category of poetry. In other words, a turn to the documents that make up our everyday lives—for example, emails in the case of Eli Gordon’s Inbox, credit card ads and statements in the case of Matthew Timmons’s Credit, courtroom and congressional transcripts in the case of NourbeSe Philip’s Zong! and Counterpath’s Let Her Speak—now merit slow, close literary scrutiny. These documents, when read as poetry, may enact ideological critique. Conceptual writing shows us that increased economic abstraction and globalization surprisingly make the category of literature less rarified, and more available for doing political work in the world.

13 This notion comes from De Duve’s argument in Kant After Duchamp. A thorough explanation of this argument and others like it frames dissertation chapter one.
My commitment to reading these texts “as poetry” is, in part, a response to what I see as the impoverishment of that category as it has been constructed since modernist formulations. In case it has not been clear in my discussion of Clark, Bürger, and others above, these critics are discussing what they perceive to be a change in the way we understand _art_ practice, making, and perceiving. Yet the current critical investment in reading practices allows me to maintain a focus on the text’s role in shaping and framing art movements as a whole. Many of the very works that others discuss as art I will read “as poetry” below. As Ellen Levy argues in _Criminal Ingenuity_, by the time “modernism” was codified at the mid-century, the visual arts had begun to gain ascendancy over literature in a totalizing aesthetic paradigm. She explores the two central components of modernism, the history of visual modernism and the history of literary modernism, as embodied by two figures: Clement Greenberg and T.S. Eliot (Levy 9). These two figures encapsulate arguments about media specificity on the one hand (Greenberg and the visual arts) and notions of poetry’s autonomy or New Critical ways of reading, on the other (T.S. Eliot and academic modernism). The works I discuss in the pages that follow were created with a model of active reading in mind; they draw from both of Levy’s categories but do not fit into either one. As a critical conversation about media-specificity and art practices of everyday life came to define modernism, experimental work became obsessed with legibility. In a basic sense, many of the works I discuss attempt to

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14 The concept of modernism was codified in the 1960s by theories from Greenberg (_Art and Culture_), Fried (“Art and Objecthood”), and Cavell (_Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy_). As Michael North shows, they each in different ways used experimentalism, or the scientific model, to explain their arguments (North 173).
configure the category of the “readable text.” In chapter one, I will show specifically how this interest in legibility emerged from the weakening of genre distinctions and arguments for media-specificity. Chapters two, three, and four complicate definitions of legibility under this new paradigm. Although these works maintain an interest in the hermeneutics of text-based work, their active and participatory practices diverge significantly from the New Critical model of reading.

The New Critical model, solidified at the mid-century, provided the definition of poetry as it is often understood today. The New Critics were responsible not only for setting the tastes of the canon—it is because of their pedagogy that we read many modernist texts in the classroom—but also for mapping the ontology of poetry.\textsuperscript{15} As Virginia Jackson argues, as criticism becomes increasingly professionalized and emplaced in the university because of New Critical engagements, the lyric becomes increasingly codified. This is because, “the lyric takes form through the development of reading practices in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that become the practice of literary criticism” (Jackson 8). In other words, poetry is a philosophy of lyric reading that dictates both the form of the lyric as well as its editing practices and circulation. By the mid-century, the idea “of the lyric as temporally self-present or unmediated” was solidified, and it became a genre. Jackson describes this genre, “modern lyric reading,” as “about fictive rather than historical persons, and, inevitably, about the historical pathos attached to those fictions” (Jackson 92). For

\textsuperscript{15} For an example of this New Critical definition of ontology that refers to it as such, see John Crowe Ransom’s “Wanted: An Ontological Critic” in \textit{The New Criticism} published in 1941 (Ransom).
example, New Critics do not examine poetry for who wrote it, when, or why, but rather for “the image of literary isolation” which is transferable to any time or place in which the reader may find herself (95). This is the famous ontological “poem on the page,” the “pudding or a machine” of modernism.\textsuperscript{16} In new critical reading, poems are meant to have one voice (where the novel, for example, is dialogic), which is the voice of the lyric subject. In this model, the reading practice of the work is bound to the work’s very definition. To read poetry closely for certain elements of good writing (paradox, ambiguity, etc.) is to be a literary critic. Jackson’s work is crucial for understanding the ways that poetry’s ontology is shaped by its reading and circulation practices. With a shift to an experimental regime, which, to recall, suggests enactment, the very ontology of poetry must change.

Experimental work cannot consist of poetic matter, or “lyric” in the New Critical sense. This is not because experimental poems are “against” a lyric subject but because they do not traffic in transferable images. They seek to make poetry emplaced and active, an event. The image of the Seagram Building under construction and a “handshake with LeRoi” in a Frank O’Hara poem, for example, cannot be transferred very easily to a different time or space (discussed in chapter two). Experimental poems are alive in the time and space of publics, as they make us rethink possibilities for these very categories. What unifies them “as poetry,” and as parts of my dissertation, is that they not only suggest these reading practices, but also

\textsuperscript{16} Wimsatt and Beardsley claim that a poem is like a “pudding or a machine” to show that it has autonomy or structure—it “works.” The “poem on the page” has become the rallying call for a pedagogy that asks students to comprehend the work itself with limited extra-textual context.
shape them. The works that follow are, for the most part, text-based. They are invested in the category of poetry; they seek to change our minds about what poetry is made of.

For this reason, poetry is not just one form or medium of many—alongside painting and music, for example—but can be assumed to be an event, the event of its reading. This event could (and most often does), include multiple media and forms. For example, Yoko Ono’s scores are poetry but also performance and wall hangings (discussed in chapter one); Wendy Davis’s transcript is a poem, a political appeal and a performance (discussed in chapter four). In chapter three, I will show that in order to be good readers of constraint-generated works, we must attend to the ways in which these works are also unseated from textual strategies, and in fact call up forms of political activism and embodied practices of defiance. While many arguments about modernism, and about the avant-gardes specifically, leave the category of reading impoverished after World War II, this dissertation takes the rise of participatory work as signaling a change in reading practice, rather than as a diminishment of reading in general. I do this by reconfiguring arguments about the end of media-specificity to signal the end of a sort of closed-genre poetry, codified by the New Critics. As genre distinctions melted “after” modernism, a new type of poetry was possible.

This possibility, or potential, was pointed out at the moment it emerged within the frame of plastic arts. Umberto Eco’s essay “The Open Work” (in the eponymous collection Opera Aperta, 1962) and Susan Sontag’s “Against Interpretation” and
“Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition” (1966) historicize the change in aesthetics that experimental works helped catalyze. Eco describes what he calls the “phenomenon of the ‘work in movement’” (Eco 12). These are works that, like Calder's mobiles or Boulez's music, “continuously create their own space and the shapes to fill it” (12). This artwork mirrors changes in science that have to do with space and place. For Eco, open works must have three qualities: they must be participatory, or, they are “characterized by the invitation to make the work together with the author”; they never seem finished, though they may be complete; and they must contain “a virtually unlimited range of possible readings, each of which causes the work to acquire new vitality in terms of one particular taste, or perspective, or personal performance” (Eco 21). Eco argues that this type of work is indicative of a large societal change: it “sets in motion a new cycle of relations between the artist and his audience, a new mechanics of aesthetic perception, a different status for the artistic product in contemporary society” (23). Though his definition of the “open work” may be utopian, it is important to note that, for Eco any sort of work can be participatory and infinite. Participation is a hermeneutic practice that is required to engage the text, as it also shapes it. Sontag’s check to this sort of positivity is apt; she considers happenings, and participatory work in general, an “abuse of audience.” For her, this openness was a violent act. For both Sontag and Eco, a new type of hermeneutics was necessary at this moment. They suggested that these new artworks urged a new way of reading that considers relation as part of the work itself. With the
help of the critical and historical role of reading in the contemporary moment, my dissertation takes this critical attention to the category of poetry.\textsuperscript{17}

The category of poetry must be remade as active, open, and political in order to account for experimental work. As Steve McCaffery writes about what he calls “parapoetics,” experimental writing is not only interdisciplinary, but it demands an interdisciplinary way of examining works, a way of understanding how separate disciplines and discourses connect and also break apart. Like McCaffery, I hope that disciplinary distinctions remain permeable in my analysis. This sometimes requires imaginative work. For example, in order to be attentive to the architectural theory of Gins and Arakawa, I suggest we also read it through constraint-based reading practices and feminist body art (chapter three). In order to comprehend the weight of the political statement in Frank O’Hara’s poetry, we must see the way it rewrites architectural intentions through described spatial practices (chapter two). As McCaffery suggests, we can “learn more about the discourse of the poem…through a purposeful displacement of poetics into architecture,” or, I would like to add, poetics into painting, performance, sculpture, political activism, and the movements of everyday life. To do this, we must be attentive to the ways these disciplines connect but also the way they conflict. Though my focus here is on poetry, the examples in the chapters that follow reach across institutions and fields, showing how several categories of media engage questions about reading put forward by a newfound interest—shown by both literary texts and criticism—in reading practices.

\textsuperscript{17} Eco’s theory was also shaped by his engagement with literature; he discusses James Joyce’s \textit{Finnegan’s Wake} and the work of Grupo ’63.
Methodology and Chapters, or, Why This Is and Is Not a Dissertation about Conpo

This dissertation is not a survey. I could not examine all the experimental work that was produced between 1960 and the present, and I do not try to do so. Instead, I follow Tyrus Miller’s assertion that the post-war period of the twentieth century is characterized by the importance of a method that attends to “exemplary interventions” (T. Miller). Each chapter will consider an exemplary reading encounter—between reader and text, source text and object, object and participant—and its political implications. Here in the introduction, I have explained the shift itself, and the last chapter—in addition to studying the reading encounter of conceptual writing, a contemporary category of literature characterized by changing reading practices—will explain why we can see this shift now. In other words, part of the methodology of the dissertation is to read backward from our contemporary moment. The chapters unfold a historical narrative, but they also unfold an important theoretical focus, each chapter engaging a particular aspect of the shift in reading in some depth. Chapters one, two, and three provide a crucial path to the last chapter. Chapter four then allows the reader to turn around after her travels and view the full scenery that was only partially available on the journey.

In the dissertation that follows, I will argue that Fluxus event scores, poetry of the New York School, and constraint-based works were forerunners to an engagement with an interactive, ethical framework that continues into contemporary experimental work through conceptual practices. Thus, in a sense, From “Avant-garde” to
“Experimental” excavates a historical definition of conceptual writing, or so-called “conceptual poetry.” A reader with considerable knowledge of contemporary experimental categories may glean that I am providing a theory that conceptual writing began at the mid-century. She will insist that this dissertation outlines a suppressed history of the form of conceptual writing, despite the fact that the term “conceptual writing” was recently coined. She sees my work as providing evidence that conceptual writing begins in the 1960s when reading became a more active undertaking, and art became more participatory. Likewise, it follows that there is an emphasis on poetry in this dissertation because the category of the experimental created a new poetry, conceptual poetry. Conceptual writing is often described as invested in notions of event, architectural publics, and constraint—each chapter of the dissertation is likewise devoted to one of these themes. The work of Fluxus connects reading to the temporal and spatial oriented “event score”; the chapter about the New York School of poets shows the way attention to built public space can work as a score or a performance, allowing poetry to claim a politically active category; the constraint chapter argues that contortion can be a theory of poetics as well as usher in a new world view; the final chapter studies a few examples of recent conceptual poetry to discuss how its central question today is about reading and legibility. “You see,” this reader will beam, “it could have been called From ‘Avant-garde’ to ‘Conceptual’!” I do not want to discourage this attentive reader, or her reading. She

18 Conceptual writing, as first identified on UbuWeb, included conceptual artworks, procedural poetry and event scores. As Dworkin describes, these works “hint at the range of alternatives and challenges that have been presented to the Romantic lineage of expressive poetry” (Dworkin, “The UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing”).

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has a strong theory of the historical trajectory that follows. However, in the mode of “weak theory”\(^\text{19}\) I urge this reader to take heed: my driving interest in *From ‘Avant-Garde’ to ‘Experimental’* is about the way we read; I hope to shed light on how our reading practices are connected to the way we view spaces and publics. This is not a work that simply traces a lineage of a contemporary form. It is a story of a major paradigm shift in the way we read in general, and the way we define poetry more specifically. Conceptual writing—alongside new media and recent interest in reading practices—has offered us the lens by which I can make these observations, but it is not the “end” of the story.

My first chapter, “The Fluxus Event Score: ‘You will decide to read or not to read this instruction,’” examines textual “scores” published between 1959 and 1964. These scores are rarely read outside the disciplines of art history, music, or performance studies, and my intervention is to engage them “as poetry.” When read as poetry, they deepen our reflections on the boundaries of the arts, and between performance and visual art in particular. Focusing on the scores of George Brecht, Yoko Ono and La Monte Young’s *An Anthology*, I argue that the importance of this

\(^{19}\) In urging us to be less “paranoid” in our reading practices, Eve Sedgwick ask us to notice that weak theories and strong theories are “actually being practiced by the same theorists as part of the same projects,” or, “there are important phenomenological and theoretical tasks that can be accomplished only through local theories and nonce taxonomies; the potentially innumerable mechanisms of their relation to stronger theories remain matters of art and speculative thought” (Sedgwick 144–145). I hope both modes of theory are present in my dissertation, but in order to see the descriptive, phenomenological, and sometimes local arguments about reading, we must put the more totalizing taxonomy for conceptual poetry aside. For more on the importance of “weak theory,” and working between genres, see also “Weak Theory: Henry James, Colm Tóibín, and W. B. Yeats” (Dimock). The “Weak Theory Roundtable” at the 2015 Modernist Studies Association Conference was also helpful in regard to providing a definition of this type of work (Organizer: Paul Saint-Amour, David Ayers, Jennifer Cooke, Sara Crangle, Eric Hayot, Joseph Lavery, Mena Mitrano).
1960s transition in reading was informed by a change in the way we think about the experience and meaning of genres. As questions of media autonomy are brought to the fore, reading becomes more theatrical, or tied to spatial practices and enactment. This change is geographically far-flung as well as multi-disciplinary; George Brecht’s work was published in Germany and Yoko Ono’s in Japan, and they were both important in the New York art scene.

Chapter two, “I do this, I do that: Cold War Poetries of Event,” argues that the urban poetry of the New York School of Poets engages with a critical, even radical politics of urban spaces. The chapter focuses on several key architectural sites in New York City and Paris to consider alternative possibilities for our understanding of nationalism, corporate culture, and urban practices within a Cold War political setting. Through an examination of Locus Solus, a journal edited by John Ashbery, James Schulyer, Kenneth Koch, and Harry Matthews and published in Paris in the early sixties, as well as a reading of Frank O’Hara’s Lunch Poems (1964), I argue that the New York School of Poets use public signs and known referents (for example, the Seagram Building), to engage in a transnational activism meant to widen the boundaries of public spaces. These poems do not mirror the quotidian, or use pieces of the city to make something outside of it—as it is often argued—but make familiar urban structures, “vibrate with a new intensity,” as Deleuze and Guattari remark about the making of a minor literature (Deleuze 19).

My third chapter, “How to Read Constraint-Based Work,” argues that attending to bodies and methods of embodiment provides the crucial third term in
theorizing the relation between space-making and reading. I discuss mid-century constraint-based literature written by Oulipo members (abbreviated from “Ouvroir de littérature potentielle,” or potential literature workshop) alongside feminist body art of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the work of architect poets Madeline Gins and Shusaku Arakawa, which spanned from the 1960s to the 1990s.20 Putting these works in conversation for the first time under the category of “constraint-based work” allows me to reorient the discussion around constraint-based literature. I consider constraint not only as a textual, authorial preoccupation but as an embodied practice, and, importantly, as a reading method. In works by feminist body artists Eleanor Antin and Carolee Schneemann, constraints are performed on the artist—whose body serves as artwork as well—in order to expose the unlivable societal constraints of patriarchy. Gins and Arawaka provide a method of active reading, a “procedural architecture,” that can be read as an embodied, every-day, constraint-based practice. I argue that, when read alongside traditional constraint-based literary works like Oulipo’s N+7, these experimental constraint-based works readily show the ways that bodies are implicated and formed by the spaces and methods of reading. Ultimately, my argument politicizes constraint and procedural methods and brings modes of reading closer to modes of activism.

The last chapter of the dissertation, “Reading, not Appropriating: The Encounter of Conceptual Poetry,” argues that contemporary reading practices are

20 The proper name is OuLiPo, which is short for Ouvroir de littérature potentielle, most commonly translated as “workshop of potential literature.” It is now commonplace to refer to the group as Oulipo, as I will throughout the dissertation.
critiqued through the recently proposed category of “conceptual writing.” I closely examine several book-length examples of conceptual poetry, including NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*, a rewriting of the 1783 English legal case involving the murder of 150 enslaved people onboard the Zong ship; *Let Her Speak: Transcript of Texas State Senator Wendy Davis’s June 25, 2013, Filibuster of the Texas State Senate*, a rewriting of the dialogue of an 11-hour filibuster to thwart anti-choice legislation; Matthew Timmons’s *Credit*, which documents credit offers from the 2007 economic bubble and rejections from the 2009 crash; and Kenneth Goldsmith’s *LABOR*, a project to “print out the internet,” reframing open information as waste. Often critics claim that conceptual writing is important for the way it appropriates other texts, and for resisting the idea that authorship is the expression of a singular voice. I intervene to suggest that conceptual writing primarily and most importantly interrogates our reading practices, rather than our perception of authorship practices. Conceptual writing comments on reading practices through techniques of transmediation, the movement of text from one medium into another. Transmediation opens new sets of political questions as the material work changes, ultimately revealing alternative ways to read historical documents and to understand contemporary literacies.

In other words, I argue that contemporary large-scale experiments in conceptual writing are best read as theories of reading. These theories show us that in order to read any singular document in our contemporary landscape, we must attend not only to a constellation of media practices from which that document emerges, but also the media practices that surround readership today. This is an active, embodied
practice that makes and unmakes the spaces around us. It can look like activism—it is the urgent writing of the Occupy movement. It can look like skimming new media—it is the exposure of possibilities in reading elements of the everyday as conceptual writing. The reading practice itself is experimental because we do not know what we may find. The important aspect is that, as conceptual writing and the interest in reading practices have taught us, this practice I discuss is reading. It is literary reading. It can be reading as poetry. For this reason, I closely examine each set of examples to follow with a practice akin to “close reading.” As I will argue in the chapters to come, “close reading” can be appropriately severed from the lyric, and from New Critical doctrines at large. Our current moment allows us to see that we can read “as poetry” no matter what we are reading. When we do this, we notice that the shift to the experimental was also asserting this possibility in the late 1950s and 1960s.

Ultimately, I argue that reading “as poetry” can be enacted not only with poems, scores, body art, emails, and court documents, but also with text messages, instructions, websites and billboards. It encompasses the reading of our current paradigms and the making, or unmaking—the writing or rewriting—of these paradigms. If we can accept the shift to the experimental category as a shift to “poetry in general,” we can answer the question posed to us by the New York Times: Ys we r lry reading.
Chapter One

The Fluxus Event Score: “You will decide to read or not to read this instruction”

The focus of this chapter is the moment in the early 1960s that critics have called the era of “arts in general,” or sometimes the “deskilling of the artist.” This condition of “arts in general” is most apparent in action-based and participatory art of the period. Dance, theater, street art, protest-based art, and performance art boomed at this time. For this reason, as many have theorized, the notion of “arts in general” ultimately ushered in newfound powers of enactment or theatricality in the arts. As Thierry De Duve writes about the reception history of the readymade in the sixties, “to me it is still startling that you could be an artist without being either a painter or a sculptor or a musician or a poet or an architect or a playwright or whatever. An artist in general. ‘What is your profession?’ ‘Oh, I'm an artist’” (Buchloh et al. 141). De Duve’s imagined conversation is an important part of his explanation. The gesture or the presentation of being an artist is general, theatrical, and it involves participation. De Duve pretends to be talking to someone. It is helpful to think of the convergence of media itself as a performance or an event.

The slow creep of all art genres into the category of enactment was not isolated to the mid-century, but it reached a crucial moment in the early 1960s when cutting edge arts—previously perhaps understood as avant-garde arts—in particular began to include work that was more populist and participatory. “Happenings” emerged in New York City and then continued as part of a thriving international
scene. Fluxus scores like George Brecht’s “WORD EVENT” that read simply “• EXIT” and Alison Knowles’s “Make a Salad” forced audiences to wonder where and when the art may be—is it being performed now? Or, did I already do the art earlier this afternoon? Alain Badiou would consider a work like this as falling under the category of “generalized theatricality” (Badiou 156). He writes, “ideally, the twentieth-century artwork is nothing other than the visibility of its own act” (159). In other words, Badiou recognizes the importance of enactment itself as an independent art medium. Although Badiou does not discuss post-war experimentalism, in the late 50s and 60s, “generalized theatricality” saturated a large array of linguistic and material arts, not just the avant-garde. By this time, the lessons of the historic avant-gardes, and of Duchamp specifically, were broad reaching. The deskillling of the artist[^1] included a process of art becoming “art in general” through theatrical gesture, statement, and media convergence. Street art, protest-based art, and performance poetry became ubiquitous as spaces and objects intermingled with the idea of art in general.

In this chapter, I focus on the broad category of “generalized theatricality” or “art in general,” as a crucial moment to consider the connection between these arts and the practice of reading poetry. As genre distinctions weakened with new types of action-based work, the notion of reading poetry was problematized as well. This is because many of the artworks produced in this era, though dissimilar, called into

[^1]: By deskillling of the artist, I mean that other relative forces, such as expression or gesture, eclipsed virtuosity when it came to an artist’s achievements. See Buchloh et al, Lippard (Six Years), and John Roberts for important accounts.
question the previously assumed difference between enacting and reading. Suddenly, enactment was based on reading in many cases. The works I examine in this chapter radically changed the meaning of reader participation as they all suggest (if not require) an event to occur in real time and space. Furthermore, by the end of the 1960s, visual art and music became more language oriented—with conceptual art hitting the museums, word scores beginning to be shown in galleries and music performance spaces—just as the academy plunged into the “linguistic turn” at large. Does this “generalized theatricality” attend to language? Or more precisely, how does the vibrant space of “art in general” shape reading? Notions of mid-century reading are usually constructed around ideas of a private, even anti-theatrical activity, yet reading is an integral part of experimental arts in the twentieth century. At its largest, this attention to the convergence of enactment and reading at the midcentury can help to redefine modernist reading practices. This problematic is addressed most clearly

2 Conceptual art immediately followed Fluxus (here I examine Fluxus from 1958-1964), and owes much to its Fluxus origins. The most visible difference between the two is that conceptual art engages a direct critique of the art world and of language systems, which Fluxus does only sometimes. For more on their differences, see Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972 (Lippard, Six Years) and “Conceptual Art and the Reception of Duchamp” (Buchloh et al.).

3 For a careful history of the word score, see “Proliferating Scores and the Autonomy of Writing” (Kotz, Words to Be Looked at).

4 Here the “linguistic turn” refers to the influence of French structuralism and post-structuralism on the humanities. Influenced by thinkers such as Saussure, Derrida, Kristeva, and Foucault, the philosophy of language became a topic for study across many fields.

5 Of course, this notion that reading was silent and private is relatively new. Despite Augustine discussing Ambrose’s silent reading in The Confessions (400 AD), the popular turn arrived when, in the 17th and 18th centuries, the word of god became a personal interpretation issue with Protestantism and reading started happening in solitude. In the 18th century, reading for pleasure was widespread and it becomes a commercial and individualist enterprise. See Theories of Reading: Books, Bodies, and Bibliomania for a sweeping history of embodiment and reading (Littau). In the mid-twentieth century New Critical practices and notions of media autonomy shaped what I here consider “modernist reading.”
when examining “Fluxus scores,” or short texts written by a group inspired by John Cage, that read like performance instructions. In this chapter, I address the convergence of enactment and reading by attending to reading as event, or, the event of reading. For example, to return to the issues surrounding Alison Knowles’s score—we must read “Make a Salad” to know that it is a score, or to understand that it is artwork. But by reading it, what does it tell us about artworks? Does it shed light on categories of art? Or rather, does it shed light on the process of making salads? I will show that scores like Knowles’s hint at the expansiveness of the category of reading and illustrate that reading, in this case, has the ability to trouble multiple modes of art and action.

This chapter’s title comes from Ken Friedman’s “Mandatory Happening” (1966), which reads in full:

You will decide to read or not to read this instruction.

Having made your decision, the happening is over.

This Fluxus event score, here called a “happening,” shows that the work of event scores occurs with or alongside the reader. Initially the score forcefully points to the

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6 A “happening” was in fact a different work entirely in the 1960s. The term was used by Allan Kaprow to indicate a long non-linear performance. These performances were much longer than “events” and not reading-based. See A Primer of Happenings & Time/Space Art for insider notes on the genre (Hansen). Hansen writes that “I would accept as a concise definition of happenings the fact that they are theater pieces in the manner of collage and that each action or situation or event that occurs within their framework is related in the same way as each part of an abstract expressionist painting, i.e., not that it depicts a tree or nature of a book or a famous event in history but that this paint is doing this at this time, at this place. The happening is a collage of situations and events occurring over a period of time in space” (24). See Sontag’s “Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition” for a contemporaneous
reader—the very first word is the shifter “you”—as participant; the reader will “decide” and this deciding allows for the happening. By calling the first two lines an “instruction” the happening points to the score itself as a mode of participation through reading. It also comments on the duration of the reading practice by claiming that “the happening is over” once the decision is made. Happening, in this case, only exists when a reader (as opposed to a writer) exists. In sum, this score shows us that the “happening” has to exist not in the text itself, not in the performance of the text—in this case that might be a show of decision making, a performance of silent or verbal reading—but in the type of readerly participation that the text evokes.

“Mandatory Happening” is an interrogation of reading as “event,” something that happens in time and space. And this is the joke of the “happening”: that it is only meant to be read. Thus the event captures something crucial about the temporality of reading and discovery—the reader has already read the word mandatory when she finds out that what she is doing is mandatory. Furthermore, she has no chance to decide because by the time the reader has read that there is a decision to be made, the decision has been made.

Event scores have a theatrical element—they are based on action and on interest in the viewer. By using the term “theatricality,” for work of this period I mean to not only cite Badiou, but also to invoke Michael Fried’s polemical account of the midcentury trend toward minimalism, or “literalist art” as Fried calls it. For Fried,
this type of art is degraded by his concept of “theatricality,” which derives from concern with the artwork’s direct effect on the viewer’s experience (Fried, “Art and Objecthood”). Fried claims that this undesirable intrusion of theatricality into contemporary art polarized the arts at the midcentury because any authentic painting must now be based on the exclusion and defeat of theatricality. Years later Fried developed his notion of theatricality in opposition to “absorption,” or the pictorial representation of people who were “oblivious to the beholder's presence” (Fried, Absorption and Theatricality 66). Whereas theatricality of the genre of painting is the painting’s subject’s “presentation of himself or herself to be beheld,” absorbed figures do not notice that anyone is painting them. They are often reading or sleeping, uninvolved in other actions going on around them in the painting. Fluxus scores, to use Fried’s terminology, are both theatrical and absorbing. These works require reading, the very model of absorptive activity. Fried’s model that pits theatricality and absorption against each other is exploded when it comes to these scores. Yet we can only see how truly exploded this model is when we let the scores be fully absorbing, when we do honor to the fact they are read.

In order to see the ethical dimensions and political possibilities of Fluxus scores, we have to adhere to what Friedman’s score shows us is the thrust of all event scores—that the “event” is the event of reading. While many scholars of art history and performance have focused on Fluxus festivals and events that enact these scores,\(^7\)

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\(^7\) See Oren Smith, Kristine Stiles, David T. Doris, and Hannah Higgins, for example. John Hendricks takes a different tactic by publishing *Fluxus Scores and Instructions: The*
here I read several book-like publications of scores as poetry. With the focus on the reading of these scores, it becomes clear that they hold issues of the medium, genre, and speech act in suspension. Furthermore, situating Fluxus scores as poetry opens up new possibilities for thinking about reading poetry during this era.

By initially framing my use of the terms theatricality and enactment with a reading of the work of Alain Badiou—rather than Fried’s, for example— I emphasize the radical political dimension of the terms. For Badiou, De Duve and others, theatricality means a coming together of the arts; for Fried, it means an eventual entrenchment of the arts into their defining phenomenological categories (Fried, “Art and Objecthood” 164). For Fried, the action of minimalist sculpture is meant to startle and end in experience; for Badiou, the action affords political possibility that leads to political change. When it comes to Fluxus scores, I would like to move this notion of political possibility into the category of reading poetry. This active dimension of poetic activity is increasingly definitive in a number of key strains of experimental poetry; as art becomes more of an act, so too does reading poetry.

I describe these works as “poetry,” a term which has a long history. “Poetry” today usually denotes a certain type of form, or at least a formalized, if not conventionally metrical, quality to a written piece. Here I am not interested in pointing out the formal similarities between these scores and more traditional poetry (though, this could be easily done). Rather, I am interested in what reading these scores with the methods and intentions that we use to read poems can yield. In other

*Transformative Years*, where he examines the scores as conceptual art in and of themselves (Hendricks).
words, I designate them as poetry as a practical measure to help read them as such. As
discussed in the introduction, there is a New Critical inheritance that comes with any
task of “reading a poem” after the 1950s. Despite the fact that these scores would
never be considered poetry under a New Critical lens, our inherited method of
attention allows the scores to show us a larger change in reading in general at this
time.

Yet this yield comes only by extracting certain critical elements of the method
of “close reading.” Here “reading scores as poetry” means that I am attentive to these
works as written documents. On the one hand this requires some attention to their
formal devices, and it means suspending for a moment the notions of viewers,
listeners and even audiences for these scores. Accordingly, I emphasize the reading
of these scores, and the ways that the scores are in fact, despite their unconventional
appearance and indeterminate genre, engaged with and “about” reading. On the other
hand, I do not study the event scores on the page as themselves total and complete,
which is an important divergence both from the inherited method of the New Critics
and from recent critical practice. For example, in her important study of the event
score and other notational methods of this period, Liz Kotz argues that these scores
are born out of a crisis in notation. She examines individual scores as one art practice
of many during this period that uses language as a vast field of “language in general,”
rather than to mean something per se (Kotz, *Words to Be Looked at* 7). Though
indebted to her work, I take a different tactic by examining the scores in their
published form; I am attentive to the modes of circulation in which the event scores
take part as an element of my classification of them as poetry. Importantly, I also study the ways in which they are published, disseminated, and received.

Fluxus work exhibits a move toward “experimental” modes of art making because it emphasizes central aspects of inter-arts experiments participating in the rise of late capitalism and a turn to globalism. Global mapping by mailing (the main means of circulation for Fluxus members) and international small Fluxus presses like Beau Geste and Something Else Press are part of a larger trend in expanding notions of readership into new connecting networks and through spaces that were not previously connected. These networks show the way circulation and reading practice are inextricable—these seemingly performative public pieces are interpersonal and quiet when they are mailed or printed in a book. The scores then expand outward again when displayed or performed. By bringing methods from literary studies into the discourse surrounding event scores, this chapter demonstrates a type of reading practice that they offer us. For example, in Friedman’s “Mandatory Happening,” comprehension is enactment. And comprehension here is a first order level of comprehension—a didactic element that aims (to go back very far into the tradition of poetry) to “teach and delight” upon first reading. It is absorbing and theatrical—it enacts something with its reading. The active element of the scores tell us much about reading poetry in general, and reading poetry today.

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8 This is the central goal in Sir Philip Sidney’s definition of poetry written in the sixteenth century (Sidney 11). The ludic aspect of the scores is important, though they often “instruct” in the ways that participation, community, or action is not possible. In other words, though a reader may delight in the game, there is not always a positive or affirmative element of the score.
This chapter is divided into four sections: first, I give a short history of the frame of reference and context for Fluxus scores. This history illustrates how Fluxus, as a movement, created experimental networks of reading and performance that shaped new possibilities for reading. I then examine examples of event scores in several modes of circulation. I focus on two single-author anthologies of events: George Brecht’s *Water Yam* (first published in 1963 in Germany), and Yoko Ono’s *Grapefruit* (first published in 1964 in Tokyo), and to connect these parts I examine La Monte Young’s *An Anthology* (published in 1960 in New York City), a collection of scores that helped define both Fluxus and event. There are many Fluxus works that bend genres, shift between media, and display unique reading practices reliant on enactment. In this chapter, I show that a focused examination of several examples can provide key principles of reading practices in this moment. A close reading of George Brecht’s book-like *Water Yam* can illustrate the ways in which a book of poetry becomes an experience, or an event, and ultimately serves to update earlier forms of avant-garde reading practices. A look at La Monte Young’s *An Anthology* asks questions about new philosophies of interdisciplinarity and inter-arts. And lastly, an examination of Yoko Ono’s scores of the early 1960s can help us see a particular change in bodily perception that comes from media shifting and convergence.
Historicizing Fluxus: Which Scores Are Read When and Why

What is Fluxus? Fluxus has come to mean a group of artists and artworks whose reputation rests just outside the recognized avant-gardes of the art world, just outside “experimental music,” and just outside of anything we could refer to without caveat as “literature.” Even within the confines of the art world, for a long time, Fluxus was considered a less serious precursor to conceptual art, or an awkward and poorly-dressed version of Pop Art (Kellein, *Fluxus*).\(^9\) In music, there are a few exceptions but for the most part, Fluxus artists are only thought to be John Cage’s group of sycophants.\(^10\) These notions about the role of Fluxus in the art world are shifting as Fluxus work becomes part of major exhibitions, and international organizations are increasingly dedicated to Fluxus study.\(^11\) In order to situate “event

\(^9\) In the 1980s and 1990s, Fluxus made its way into gallery spaces and museums it continues to become more recognized as “art” as years go by. Beginning in the 1990s, there have been many museum retrospectives. “There Will Never Be Silence,” an exhibition that examined John Cage’s influence on scores throughout the twentieth century was recently on view at the Museum of Modern Art. Curators David Platzker and Jon Hendricks have included many framed Fluxus scores (in print) in the show. *Yoko Ono: One Woman Show 1960–1971* is scheduled to open at MoMA in May 2015. Likewise, only moments before the finishing of this dissertation (April 2015), University of Iowa has launched the *Fluxus Digital Collection*, which is bound to change the scholarship and influence of the group (http://thestudio.uiowa.edu/fluxus). For commentary on the outsider status of Fluxus, see *Beyond the Dream Syndicate*. Branden Joseph considers Fluxus, along with minimalism to be a “minor” figure from Deleuze and Guattari’s theory. For Joseph, Fluxus illuminates movements like Pop Art and Conceptualism by standing outside of them. He writes, “appearing at the fringes of major movements of styles, their relation to them is one of deterritorialization, opening these categories up to heterological connections and interactions” (Branden Wayne Joseph 51).

\(^10\) LaMonte Young, who was considered a fluxus artist and who later distanced himself from Fluxus, was an exception—he had a long and productive career. Gyorgy Ligeti, also associated with Fluxus is another exception.

\(^11\) New York’s Museum of Modern Art’s purchase of the Lila and Gilbert Silverman Foundation collection has helped facilitate this newfound respect and popularity. Major Fluxus organizations and scholarly societies include the Fluxus Foundation, the Walker Art Center, and many Fluxus collections and holdings including collections at the Tate Modern,
scores,” as literary texts within their cultural and historical milieu, I begin with an abbreviated history of Fluxus itself and why the “event score” has come to be its emblem. Despite the fact that George Maciunas wrote a short manifesto, Fluxus artists had no central program, thus the way that their work intersects through iterations of the event score is crucial for grasping any larger Fluxus project, just as understanding Fluxus is important for grasping the full effect or definition of the “event score.”

In the late 1950s, John Cage began teaching classes at the New School for Social Research. Several of his students from classes in 1958 and 1959—in particular George Maciunas, George Brecht, Jackson Mac Low, Dick Higgins, and Allan Kaprow—became essential Fluxus members. In this class, the artists got to know each other’s work, and became part of a circle that attended and participated in performances at Yoko Ono’s loft in New York City. If there is any shared Fluxus aesthetic (many Fluxus artists dispute this very fact), it developed in this class and its surrounding social network. Following Cage, the students in the class attempted methods of writing music that relied on objects rather than instruments and ways to score this music with words, or by means other than notes.

The other central aspect of Fluxus work is the Fluxkit. Like event scores, Fluxkits are participatory, but unlike scores, they are object-based. For a thorough treatment of fluxkits, see Hannah Higgins’s *Fluxus Experience*. About Larry Miller’s *Orifice Flux Plugs*, Hannah Higgins points out that, “The tactility of these orifice plugs suggests how the users of fluxkits are linked to their physical environment through a sensory encounter with it” (H. Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* 36). Since the audience must touch the work, the audience is a participant in the art, he or she experiences it to complete the operation.
Yet prior to this meeting of the minds in New York City, artists like George Brecht and Yoko Ono had been working on “events,” short, written possibilities for performance, since the early 1950s (Brecht and Daniels; Ono and Lennon). Brecht’s work in Cage’s class was a continuation of ideas he had been thinking through while employed as a chemist at Johnson and Johnson’s, and while making chance-based, abstract expressionist art. In Cage’s class, the notion of the score developed as Brecht first increased and then decreased the number of props and extras in his “events.” For example, “Motor Vehicle Sundown Event” which was dedicated to John Cage in the spring/summer of 1960, includes cars and large sets of cards for performers (L. M. Young). The later scores are much more minimal. Previously Brecht’s definition of “event” had been scientific and somewhat mathematical, but in the community of Cage’s class, it became first “music” and then art. In an interview to preface Brecht’s notebooks, Deiter Daniels writes, “[in the notebooks] the concept of ‘event’ takes a very interesting development. It is mentioned the first time in a quotation of John Cage in sound space (Brecht Notebooks 1:4) and you use the word ‘event’ according to its sense in the dictionary and then slowly and almost unremarked the word ‘event’ gets more and more specific until it is finally the word ‘Event’ with a big E” (Brecht and Daniels). The event goes from sound-space to time-space in this trajectory. Brecht enigmatically avoids interpreting its development by referring to his first real show of event scores, “Toward Events” at the Reuben Gallery, leaving the trajectory and definition of “event” open to multiple possibilities. Similarly, in every question
that relates to how to perform or realize a score, Brecht defers to the interviewer, often asking how he would realize it.

Yoko Ono was not in Cage’s class, though critical literature often cites the New School class as an inspiration for her work. Like Brecht, she had been working with notions of event before the 60s. In fact, she can be credited with the very first “event” as artwork. Her “Lighting Piece,” written and performed in 1955, consisted of the following instructions: “Light a match and watch it till it goes out.” Her “Secret Piece” was written even earlier; it is dated 1953. Working within a community of artists doing this type of work changed the audience and the legibility of Ono’s work, but it also added legitimacy to previously completed artwork through the association with John Cage. Art critic David Bourdon has stated, “Her approach to art was only made acceptable when white men like Kosuth and Weiner came in and did virtually the same things as Yoko [sic], but made them respectable and collectible” (David Bourdon quoted in Taylor). Bourdon’s comment shows not only that Ono, as a woman of color, had a lesser place in the art world, but also that it is generally accepted that an international and multi-racial group of Fluxus artists did the “virtually same things” long before conceptual art took over the New York art scene.

In other words, these artists were brought together by their interest in events and event notation through John Cage’s work, though many of them were already working under different paradigms of the score. They officially became Fluxus in the early 1960s when George Maciunas, a Lithuanian immigrant, artist, and Cage’s

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13 Toshi Ichiyanagi, Ono’s husband until 1962, was in the class so she was privy to the ideas discussed there.
student, began to organize festivals for himself and his artist friends to perform for audiences in Europe. The first festival that was publicized under the name “Fluxus” took place in Wiesbaden, Germany in 1962. As Fluxus member Dick Higgins recalls in 1998 about the Fluxus debut in 1962, “the festival caused great notoriety, was on German television, and was repeated in various cities beside Wiesbaden... If we were to be identified publicly as a group, should we become one?” (D. Higgins, “Fluxus: Theory and Reception” 221). At this point, the group began to develop a collective identity, even if only by accident. As Higgins’s language shows, questions of group identity and ownership were linked to language, reading, and recognition from the very inception. The name “Fluxus” on flyers and programs created an audience, which in turn created a group identity.

Between 1962 and 1964, Fluxus was the most cohesive it would ever be—and this was when it was the most global as well. Maciunas, the self-elected “chairman” of Fluxus, organized performances and planned publications (many of which failed for lack of funds) for artists including Allison Knowles, George Brecht, Wolf Vostell, Robert Watts, Ben Patterson and Dick Higgins. By the beginning of 1963 these same artists had performed in many European cities—Amsterdam, London, Copenhagen, Paris, and Stockholm—under the name Fluxus. As they brought their work, unified under the name Fluxus, to these cities, they also worked with local artists there. George Brecht and La Monte Young did not accompany the group, but many of their scores were shown or performed. As Brecht reflected years later, in his “Origin of Events,” a one-page, typed, mimeographed statement in MoMA's artist file: “Later on,
rather to my surprise, I learned that George Maciunas in Germany and France, Cornelius Cardew and Robin Page in England, Kosugi, Kubota, Shimoni in Japan, and others had made public realizations of pieces I had always waited to notice occurring” (quoted in Kotz 76). In other words, scores like “WORD EVENT” were realized on stage, in addition to in everyday life.

The performances were variable in length and enthusiasm, but were all “event” based. The Weisbaden tour lasted a month with three or four performances each weekend, and as Dick Higgins wrote a couple of years after the event, “it was a beautiful mess” (D. Higgins, Jefferson’s Birthday; Postface 69). The performances looked like mayhem: eggs were thrown, heads were shaved, pianos were chopped to pieces, pans were banged on for hours. Reading about these performances now, it seems to me that the audience members could have had no idea that there were written “scores” to dictate the wild, seemingly spontaneous events that appeared at these festivals. Dorothée Brill begins her chapter, “Shock and the Senseless in Fluxus,” by comparing Fluxus directly to Dada through the way each group’s performances looked. Like Dada, the Fluxus work had a messy, clowning aspect to its aesthetic. Many Fluxus members cite Dada as a major influence, and as Brill points out, Dada historical materials were first being widely circulated in the 50s (Brill 103). Yet their similarity stops at aesthetics. Whereas Dada aimed to shock audiences with the absurdity of their performances, Fluxus festivals operated as heightened enactments of the events of everyday life. Of course there is at least one crucial difference

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14 For example, Robert Motherwell’s anthology, The Dada Painters and Poets, was first published in 1951.
between an event performance and everyday life: Fluxus events had a script, or a score.\footnote{Dada performances, on the other hand, as exemplified by Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich in the 1910s, were either \textit{depictions} of a written piece, or impromptu pranks.}

In other words, this seeming mayhem was based on readings—the mayhem itself was a sort of reading practice. This reading practice was not the same each time. As Brecht’s earlier quote about waiting to notice scores versus performing them reveals, the performers at the festival would sometimes realize, or perform, their own scores or scores written by Fluxus artists not present. For example, a letter from George Maciunas to LaMonte Young informed Young that “we [Fluxus artists] had just about performed every piece-composition of yours in the festivals” (Silverman Fluxus Archives V.A.49, MoMA Archives, NY). Despite Kotz’s claim that the scores were rarely read aloud, events like “WORD EVENT,” which reads “Exit,” were necessarily realized by language. For example, the pictures from “Neo-Dada in der Musik,” a 1962 performance in Dusseldorf just before the Wiesbaden festival, show a chalk board with the word EXIT on it (Silverman Fluxus Archives IV.B.13, MoMA Archives, NY). The theatricality of this performance came from both the reading and the writing of the piece. Crucially, the scores exist both inside and outside their performances, troubling the very difference between reading and enacting.

The political beliefs, aspirations, and disagreements of the group are also important to understanding this complicated area between reading and enacting. After this European tour, the artists came back to the U.S. and continued to work together under the name Fluxus. Yet the performances and the ethos changed somewhat on re-
entry. While Maciunas had traveled through Europe doing spectacle-like performances, Brecht and Robert Watts organized the more genteel Yam Festival in New York. It included experimental music concerts by artists barely associated with Fluxus, as well as other varied acts. The event was calmer and more highbrow and it did not have any overtones of Dada or anti-art mayhem. Art critic and Fluxus historian Owen Smith points out a difference in the program between the U.S. and Europe: “many of the artists in Europe, notably Paik, Higgs, Vostell, Schmit and Maciunas, were not only aware of, but specifically interested in, the political and social implications of their work. When Maciunas tried to extend this developing identity into America in 1963, however, he came face to face with conflicting views” (O. Smith 12). Smith claims that under Cage, artists like Brecht and Watts had no political interest or allegiance.16 Likewise, many years later, Dick Higgins claimed that Fluxus is political only in a metaphorical sense (D. Higgins, “Fluxus: Theory and Reception” 229).

The more overtly political side of the group stemmed from Maciunas’s Soviet allegiance and from Henry Flynt’s radical politics. Maciunas was very keen on creating a concrete collective and he wanted Fluxus to be art for the masses in a Marxist-Leninist sense. He saw Fluxus, improbably, as a special fit for audiences in

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16 Cage himself has a complex relationship to politics that ultimately lands his thinking as anarchist. See “John Cage’s Approach to the Global,” which distinguishes Cage’s ethics and politics from Kant’s, ultimately showing that Cage’s work engages the world through a commitment to community and anarchic play (Herwitz).
Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union for this reason. Thus he wrote to the Chairman of the Presidium in the Soviet Union asking for a Fluxus tour and summarizing the political platform of Fluxus as the desire to “purge the sickness of the bourgeois world... [desire] towards concretism-realism and... unity between concretist artists of the world and the concretist society which exists in the USSR” (quoted in Smith 62. At the Archiv Schom). Despite the apolitical and anarchist stance of many members, Maciunas continued to push for Fluxus to be aligned with the Communist Party. He later wrote to Nikita Khrushchev, secretary of the Soviet Community Party, to share Fluxus artworks with him and explain the group’s project (Brill 119). Likewise, Henry Flynt took a strong anti-art stance. He was against bourgeois institutionalism and was the first to use the term “concept art” in an essay published in An Anthology. Flynt writes, “concept art is a kind of art of which the material is language” (MoMA Archives, NY Artists Books Anthology). He also wrote word scores, but they were in a different vein from Fluxus members, having more to do with mathematic principles (Branden Wayne Joseph 160–169). In other words, he was associated with Fluxus primarily because Maciunas sympathized with his politics.

17 Meanwhile, a politically active Eastern European Fluxus contingent was developing. For example, a large Fluxus festival took place in Prague in 1966. Milan Knizak, very involved with Maciunas, was an important cultural figure for the Prague Spring of 1968.
18 Maciunas’s reasons for kicking Emmett Williams out of the group for an “anti-collectivist attitude” may be because of his reluctance to communism. Emmett Williams tells a slightly different story in My Life in Flux.
19 Maciunas listed Flynt as doing the first work of this kind. For a thorough treatment of the relation between Flynt and the Fluxus group, see Beyond the Dream Syndicate, especially Joseph’s chapter, “Concept Art” (Branden Wayne Joseph).
Another political divide in the group had to do with private property. Also in 1961 and 1962, Maciunas angered many of the Fluxus artists by requesting sole copyright authority to their work and attempting to require that they stop using their own names and publish under “Fluxus,” and with a set of codes that stood in for their identity.\(^{20}\) In line with these political aims, Maciunas was staunchly against any sort of self-promotion and he felt that in order to be a collective, the artists had to forgo personal ambition and careerism. Of course, many of the artists disagreed with this idea, which along with several similar disagreements, resulted in Maciunas denouncing Mac Low, Schmit, Nam June Paik, Williams, Dick Higgins, and Kosugi for “anti-collective attitude, excessive individualism, desire for personal glory, prima donna [sic] complex.”\(^{21}\)

The irony of enforcing collectivity through copyright aside, even if it was acceptable for the fluxkits, the objects, or the games, Maciunas’s attempt to erase individual authorship and replace it with corporate authorship is against the nature of the scores. A score which reads “Make a Salad” or “WORD EVENT/ • EXIT” is, in

\[^{20}\text{See Owen Smith's “Early Fluxus in Europe from 1962 through 1963” for the full history of these events with quotes from Maciunas's letters held at the Archiv Sohm in Stuttgart (O. F. Smith 88–89).}\]

\[^{21}\text{See Maciunas’s famous chart, “Fluxus (its historical development and relationship to avant-garde movements)” 1966 [Silverman Fluxus Archive, V.A.1.1, MoMA Archives, NY] which lists this information as well as the names of other members kicked out for different reasons. Maciunas was nervous about Dick Higgins and Allison Higgins’s \textit{Something Else Press} being a self-promotional side project. Indeed, listed on Maciunas’s chart is a section called “Competitive attitude, forming rival operations,” which includes Knowles, Higgins and Paik, clearly because of the press. Maciunas also tried to talk George Brecht, Robert Watts and Ben Patterson out of doing a series of events and performances called YAM in May of 1963. Maciunas was against it because he felt that it would take something away from the Fluxus festival planned for the fall. They had an argument about it in letters that Smith narrated and chronicles (O. F. Smith 118–120).}\]
effect, authored by *everyone*. We have all exited something at some time. Furthermore, the copyright would place limitations on artists’ ability to perform the score for audiences if they had to obtain performance permissions to enact the score. Brecht, for example, thought a copyright was absurd, since he imagined his scores to be performed by everyone, every day (Brecht et al.). The ability of the score is to put everyday actions into poetry—or to realize that everyday actions are poetic events. If we imagine the scores as authored poetry, this law would be a sort of limitation on reading the piece as well as reproducing it. The scores would lose some impact. The failed imposition of these rules shows how these scores work within a sort of anarchy of form, or genre.

Despite this infighting, Fluxus first publicly ruptured, and first publicly distinguished itself from the category of the “avant-garde,” in 1964 at Charlotte Moormans's Annual New York Festival of the Avant-Garde in New York City. The members had been divided about performing alongside the composer Karlheinz Stockhausen. The more political members did not want to be associated with what they felt to be a bourgeois, white sensibility that came with his increasingly famous, upper class, but “experimental” music. Only siding with the political members halfway in this case, Maciunas disliked Stockhausen’s “professional ambition” but felt indebted to him because of past collaborations. At the performance of his opera *Originale* at the festival, half of the Fluxus artists appeared as exhibitors on the program and the other half protested the festival. The artists protesting called their initiative “Action Against Cultural Imperialism,” asking the public to boycott the
festival because it did not include African American music and it represented a white, bourgeois avant-garde. They formed a picket line and held signs claiming that the exhibition was for wealthy “snobs.” Art critic and Fluxus historian Hannah Higgins argues that this public break also shows Fluxus’s multiplicity—while June Paik, Jackson Mac Low, Joe Jones and George Brecht performed, Ben Vautier, Takako Saito, George Maciunas, Tony Conrad, and Henry Flynt protested, and lastly Dick Higgins and Alan Kaprow both exhibited and protested (H. Higgins, “Fluxus Fortuna:” 33). Higgins argues that the three choices available about how to “be” Fluxus make it revelatory for its pluralism. In other words, Fluxus asserts multiple possible present moments, opening the avant-garde lineage to experimental possibility.

The event scores I examine closely in this chapter make up the published collections produced between John Cage’s class at the New School and the Stockhausen protest. After the Stockhausen protest, previously obscured individual political aims became more visible. In addition, the events became even more spectacular in nature after this point, the scores of the late 60s events were often written after the performances, and the money was tighter so there were fewer publications. For all of these reasons, the later scores would be more difficult to read as poetry, and I will not examine them here. For the texts I examine in this chapter, the medium and the circulation of each piece is important. Each text plays with a likeness to printed forms with which we are familiar: books and anthologies.
The Poetry of George Brecht’s *Water Yam*

The cards of George Brecht’s artist book *Water Yam* call attention to interaction through reading, while also suggesting that further interaction is possible through performance or enactment. For example, “WORD EVENT •EXIT” suggests myriad possible experiences. If the reader wanted to “perform” the work, there are many ways this could be done. As Hannah Higgins points out, “realizations range from looking at an exit sign or acting on it, to having a performative or theatrical relation with others observing the sign, to using this piece as a means by which artists might leave a performance,” and she only mentions a few of the possibilities (H. Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* 93). The card could also be about the banishment of the subject, about a character named Exit, about the everydayness of performance (each time we walk out of a room we perform this event). These possibilities exist somewhere between actions and objects. Yet these possibilities are not the work itself—the work comes alive through reading. “WORD EVENT” implies audience interaction, but it gives only the concept, which is enacted in words, in *word event*. By calling it “WORD EVENT,” the score points to “Exit’s” inability to move, act, or create without being read—and this is the event. These notions of indeterminacy and enactment are crucial for reading poetry of the time, and they crucially reshape earlier avant-garde traditions.
For the next couple of paragraphs, allow me to break academic convention. Experience is a large part of my argument, and a large part of my work here. Yet it is impossible to allow each reader to experience Water Yam from the confines of this chapter. So I will describe several of my own experiences with the artist’s book. My first encounter with Water Yam was in the special collections of the McHenry Library at University of California at Santa Cruz. I picked up a 5”x7” plastic box with a clasp
and opened it. Inside there were different sized papers turned every which way. I sifted through the cards, reading and beginning to ponder those that drew special interest—there were hundreds and I couldn’t possibly read them all at once. The organization required me to happen upon each card, a conceptual break from a normative reading experience with a book. A later encounter with the original edition of *Water Yam* in the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection at MoMA Archives, NY, found me holding the top corner of several cards and leafing through at a fast rate—I was skimming. At the Special Collections room at the Getty Research Institute, I puzzled over many editions, I ran my fingers across the 1963, polished, dark wood case, opening it by its metal hooks. I fumbled over the trick side-opening in a later wood edition. I learned that the 1972 box has brown paper covering the outside. Once, enthralled by a 1986 reprinting, I laid all the cards out on a giant table as I read. They didn’t quite fit so I layered them and put some on the floor. I read across images and objects and I grouped the cards into categories. The smaller cards fell out of my hands. There was text everywhere.

There are no page numbers. The writing on the cards refers to ideas, performances, and actions. Some of the cards appear to be performance directions, others contain lists of objects. But if they are directions, they cannot be performed by the participant, or performed at all. At some point in my encounters with *Water Yam*, I realized that the cards are irrational, and began to interact with the language on the cards in terms of affect and poiesis—feelings and the world-making possibility that comes from them.
The original idea for George Brecht’s *Water Yam* was not in fact Brecht’s, but George Maciunas’s. Maciunas wanted to produce a kind of special Fluxus edition containing the complete works of George Brecht (Hendricks and Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection 216; H. Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* 143). *Water Yam* was part of what Maciunas referred to as “a kind of Faust-manifesto, cage-peters agreement” wherein he offered to make individual artist anthologies for each Fluxus artist in exchange for exclusive rights to publish all their works, and as Maciunas said in several letters to Fluxus artists, “AND ALL YOUR FUTURE WORKS”

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22 He designed the cover, and also took credit for the design of the book in a 1978 interview with Larry Miller (Kotz, “Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the ‘Event’ Score” 35).
(12/10/1962 letter to La Monte Young; Silverman Fluxus Archives, V.A.1.44, MoMA Archives, NY). Many artists did not agree to this pact or to Maciunas’s other schemes, and likewise not very many complete works came to fruition. George Brecht, however, stayed on Maciunas’s good side and they moved forward with the collection. Maciunas and Brecht agreed that *Water Yam* should be mass producible and sold cheaply; the earlier editions sold for $2 each. Before this compilation, Brecht’s event scores were handwritten and sent in the mail to friends. Later *Water Yam* was displayed in galleries and each edition included some changes (wood, cardboard or plastic casings, different colors and shades and weights of stock). Thus, despite it not being referred to as a book at any point during its making, *Water Yam* carries the ideology of a book from its inception.\(^{23}\) It is multiple, printed, and text based.\(^{24}\)

Three years before *Water Yam* was produced, Umberto Eco published *The Open Work*, in which he argued that there is a new trend in contemporary artwork, music, and literature, a trend toward openness and radical world making. “Open works,” Eco explains, are in movement; they “continuously create their own space

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\(^{23}\) Of course, now *Water Yam* is a reified historical art object—sold for thousands of dollars and in shown galleries and museums—and it is an artist’s book, held in special collections and archives. *The Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, Brecht’s collection of objects and images, despite “book” in the title, is less of a book. It is in pieces across the globe in many museums and galleries.

\(^{24}\) In 1965, David Antin and Jerome Rothenberg published parts of Brecht's *Water Yam* in their magazine *some/thing*. The magazine featured only poetry, and they called the section of Brecht's work, “Dances, Events & Other Poems” implying that all the text was indeed poetry. In “The Stranger at the Door,” Antin discusses this choice as a sort of political decision: “So for *some/thing*, consideration of George Brecht's poems appeared to connect and open up a tradition of poetry that acts primarily as an instigation of mind to the solicitation of experience” (Antin 254). This motivation is similar to my own in this chapter.
and the shapes to fill it” (Eco 12). In the case of *Water Yam*, the book form is questioned through participatory movement, or as Eco would say, through “the invitation to make the work together with the author” (Eco 21).25 The words here are literally objects to be touched and manipulated—to be moved around and laid in order of interest, preference or relation to each other. We must touch the piece, organize it, and form it ourselves. Yet no matter how we manipulate the artwork, it seems to happen somewhere else, in the open possibilities of how to “make” the score (how does one make “suitcase/ black suitcase”?). The score happens in the reading and the making of the score. The score is not the work; it is an image or a blueprint of the work, but only insomuch as all text is a blueprint. Yet unlike other text-based artworks, this work needs a participant to organize it, manipulate it, make sense of it. This need to make sense mirrors the trend in critical theory and reception as well; it summons both participation (“make”) and sensation (“sense”).

Along with Umberto Eco’s *The Open Work* (Opera aperta 1962), Susan Sontag’s “Against Interpretation” (1964) historicizes the change in aesthetics that

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25 I am not the first to notice a resonance between Eco’s theories and Brecht’s works of this time. For example, Kotz points out that the scores, “in their direct invitation to enactment and performed response... seem like almost absurd literalizations of 1960s’ crucial claims for reading and as an ‘activity of production.’”’ She briefly discusses Barthes and Eco in relation to what she calls the “transitivity” of the scores (Kotz, *Words to Be Looked at 62*). Anna Dezeuze writes about Brecht’s scores, “It is difficult to find other works that come closer to both Umberto Eco’s theory of the ‘open work’ and Roland Barthes’s celebration of the ‘death of the author’: Brecht...extended the groundbreaking lessons of both Duchamp and Cage” (Brecht et al. 3). Bringing Barthes into the equation shows that Dezeuze in some sense reads Brecht like a work of literature; Dezeuze and many other critics stop here. She brings in Duchamp and Cage to illustrate the way that this moment concretely solidified a convergence of the arts (here, visual and audible). Yet importantly, one of the reasons the arts were converging was a change in the way people thought about reading and a change in the way people thought about literature.
experimental works helped catalyze. While Eco argued that *making* and movement created open work, Sontag suggested that *sense* be the new critical apparatus. She points out that works of the time also suggest this critical mode by working against the current critical trends of her age which are characterized by an “aggressiveness” and an “overt contempt for appearances” (Sontag, “Against Interpretation” 6). She argues that works can fight this aggressive critical mode by excising content all together. Sontag suggests that both abstract painting and pop art are against interpretation; abstraction by being void of content, pop art by having nothing other than pure content. In turn, in order to read this material, critics must pay “more attention to form in art” and “recover our senses.” She writes, “we need to learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more” (Sontag, “Against Interpretation” 14) Despite the fact that Sontag writes about painting and Eco is inspired mostly by music, the notion of sense as an interpretive frame is crucial to the literary mode at the time. The modernist reading practice of aggressively digging for deeper meanings in poetry is superseded by a theatrical “poetics of necessity” to be open to multiple readings and to call on the body for any possible understanding. These published event scores respond to the call for reading practices that rely on the senses.

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We can group the major themes of *Water Yam* into the following areas: 1) household objects and furniture 2) musical instruments 3) philosophically-inflected experiments 4) nature and spectral colors and 5) cards that pull together several
categories. These themes show themselves as groupings of types of cards and
because there are types of cards, there is a string of associations—almost a set of
narratives that weave their way through the piece. For example, in the case of the
cards about household objects and furniture, the image of a stool develops through the
following sequence:

STOOL
on (or near a stool)

STOOL
on a stool
a cane
and a package or bag of

STOOL
on a white stool
a black-and-white-striped cane
oranges in a paper bag

It’s unlikely that these cards would be grouped together, or that they would be read in
this order right out of the box. However, any reader would notice a doubling (and in
this case a tripling) of the same card title. The cards above grow in size as they
include more words, which echoes other sequences like this one that grows in

26 As far as I know, no one has grouped the areas of Water Yam into themes before. A
beautiful exchange can be found in an interview with Michael Nyman (Martin). Nyman notes
that John Tilbury, a pianist who often interpreted experimental music, said that reading Water
Yam is like reading a book. Brecht’s answer shows that he thought carefully about the size of
the cards and the spacing on the cards. For the most part, the cards are sparse and include a
lot of purposeful white space. In the cases in which they are denser, (“Motor Vehicle
Sundown” and “Two Definitions”) it was purposeful. In relation to the themes, we find this
exchange:

MN: I mentioned this sort of consistent iconography in Water Yam-- there are certain
constants, household figures like chairs, tables, stools...
GB: Yes, but that has to do with ordinariness, that doesn't have to do with a special
love for chairs. (Martin 111)
intricacy as the cards get bigger. This sequence also shows that the word at the top of the card in the place of a title—usually in all capital letters—functions in interplay with the rest of the text. The household furniture item “stool” is the subject of these short poems, but is also related through interweaving in the first line. The relation between “STOOL” and the words beneath it is fairly clear: something is “on” it. This relationship is much clearer, for example, than in the card “TWO CLOCKS,” which reads “TWO CLOCKS/ clothes hooks/ bird flight.” In a different vein, “2 UMBRELLAS”:

- 2 UMBRELLAS
  - umbrella
  - umbrella

In the case of “TWO CLOCKS,” the title designates an object near the “clothes hooks” and in an associational relation to the “bird flight.” In the case of “2 UMBRELLAS,” the card’s text below the title turns a numerical sign (“2”) into concrete representation by listing the object twice. Thus we are shown, through example, that the title in each case may have a different relation to its text.

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27 For example, in this sequence, the cards almost double in size:

TABLE

- table

TABLE

- on a white table

TABLE

- On a white table
  - glasses
  - a puzzle
  - and
  - (having to do with smoking)
To return to the stool sequence: the first card is too cryptic to include many possibilities, though the excremental multi-va

cence of this word is more present here. The second card opens up several meanings through the conjunction “or” and the preposition “of.” The reader is unsure if she is imagining a package or a bag—and less sure what is inside. The third card answers these questions. The bag is paper; it is holding oranges, and the furniture and cane are black and white.28

What is important here in the case of stools, as in many other household object themed cards, are the prepositions. Having seen the piece interpreted by several galleries and many catalogues, I know that the first “STOOL” above is not usually enacted by placing a stool on or near another stool.29 Instead, there is an assumption that the “on (or near” refers to an event that we have not been able to read quite yet. The other cards illuminate this event in a fluid and participatory manner. As we pick up each card (in a mixture of other cards), we see that a space is being filled

28 Critic Julia Robinson's theory on Brecht's long-time interest in spectral colors is convincing. She writes, “from the outset, the light spectrum had been crucial to Brecht's efforts to underscore an equivalence of vision, time and ambient space and to try to register them in a simultaneous presentness, the kind they actually have in normal life without our noticing...These unobtrusive spectra were representatives of all light, the light that permits ocular perception in the first place, and they were there to soften the hard and fast finitude that we habitually attribute to objects” (64). For the realizations or physical manifestations of the scores, Robinson likens this technique to Malevich's efforts to "have paint transcend itself." Yet, in the textual scores, the mentioning of color seems to have an opposite effect. 29 See Brecht’s Heterospective. The staging of scores can be idiosyncratic as well. For example, a 2012 exhibition at The Serpentine Gallery in London shows Ono’s event “PAINTING TO BE STEPPED ON”—which consists of “Leave a piece of canvas or finished painting on the floor or in the street. 1960 winter”—by a plaque on the wall and by a canvas on the floor that museum goers are welcome and encouraged to trample on. Currently at the Pompidou in Paris, Brecht’s work “Three Arrangements,” which reads, “On the shelf; on a hat stand; a black object/ white chair,” is depicted with brightly colored shellacked raincoats and a shiny black bowling ball--- the didactic tells us that the event was “created” this way in 1973. Of course there are some performative aspects of any realization of an event, but this display of “original” objects proposes the fallacy that the written notation is somehow incomplete without objects.
out and inhabited—as we experience *Water Yam* as a whole, “STOOL” is developing. The stool narrative is braided through the narratives of many other objects and events. Furthermore, the syntactic ambiguity throughout the sequence makes it such that the line “on a stool” or “on a white stool” or even “on (or near a stool)” could fall anywhere in the poem. The poems chronicle the possibilities of the stool without closing those possibilities off. They point to the noun through an abundance of prepositions.

The series of household objects and furniture in *Water Yam* recalls Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, and helps to fix it as sort of ur-text for postwar experimentalism.³⁰ In other words, it remakes Stein’s text to craft a selective tradition for experimental works. In 1912, more than 40 years earlier, Stein, also an American working with a group abroad, was creating a book of poems that acted as lists, actions, and events. Stein herself said that with this work she was trying to rid herself of nouns (Stein 406). Claire Marie Press published it as a folio book in 1914; at Stein’s request it contained no images or remarkable design (Schuster, “The Making of Tender Buttons: Gertrude Stein’s Subjects, Objects and the Illegible”). Despite the fact that it was not printed again in full on its own legitimately in the U.S. until the 1990 Sun and Moon edition, Gertrude Stein’s reception in the US in the 50s and 60s

³⁰ Despite the clarity of this connection, to my knowledge, the only other critic to point it out is David Antin. Thinking of *Water Yam* as poetry, Antin compares Brecht’s pieces to several haiku, Frances Densmore’s translations of Chippewa songs, and Gertrude Stein’s, “A WHITE HUNTER,” which appears in *Tender Buttons* (Antin). John Cage, of course, is thought of as the major influence for all the Fluxus scores, and Cage’s most important influence (as well as the biggest influence that Brecht sites) was Marcel Duchamp. See “‘A duchamp unto my self’: ‘Writing through’ Marcel” for a discussion of the Cage-Duchamp lineage (Perloff, “‘A Duchamp unto My Self’: ‘Writing through’ Marcel”).
was fairly robust. Furthermore, Stein’s influence was important to Brecht’s circle of companions. Something Else Press, run by Dick Higgins, a key Fluxus member and prime collaborator with Brecht, published several US editions of early works by Stein including *The Making of the Americans* (1966) and *Geography and Plays* (1968) and *Lucy Church Amiably* (1969). Something Else Press was also responsible for publishing Brecht’s Great Bear Pamphlet, *Chance Imagery* (1957) and *Games at the Cedilla, or the Cedilla* (1967), which Brecht co-wrote with Robert Filliou. Later Dick Higgins would say that much of the writing the press published was in “the Stein spirit” (D. Higgins, “Why Gertrude Stein” 123). It seems Stein’s work was all around Brecht at the time he was creating and publishing the scores. Jackson Mac Low, another Fluxus member, was famously interested in Stein, claiming her as a strong influence for his poetry, creating altered texts from her work, and reading and explicating parts of *Tender Buttons* at gatherings as early as the 70s and as late as the 1990s (“PennSound: Jackson Mac Low”).

Stein’s book is divided into three sections—“Objects,” “Food,” and “Rooms.” The first two sections are in appearance very similar to *Water Yam*; they feature titles above short prose-like lists. Similarly, in *Tender Buttons*, the same title can appear

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31 *Tender Buttons* had been pirated by Haskell House in New York in the 1960s and illegal copies had been sold throughout the city (Wilson 3). In addition, Random House’s *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein* printed the entirety of *Tender Buttons* in 1946. The same year, The Modern Library and Vintage Books published selected works with the same table of contents (Wilson 52–53). Then by the 1950s, Yale University Press was steadily releasing volumes of her unpublished work, making it very likely that Brecht would be familiar with *Tender Buttons*.

32 In this 1972 essay, Higgins also claims that Stein is “the most important writer between Matthew Arnold and Bertolt Brecht” (121). He praises her work's difficulty, everydayness, and its political sense, which is achieved without being involved in politics. (D. Higgins, “Why Gertrude Stein”).
twice or three times in one section, and the lists often end in prepositions. For example, this sequence in “Food” looks like Brecht’s work:

POTATOES.
Real potatoes cut in between.
POTATOES.
In the preparation of cheese, in the preparation of crackers, in the preparation of butter, in it.
ROAST POTATOES.
Roast potatoes for.

(Stein 434)

In the first “POTATOES” above, the presence of “real” potatoes points to the possibility of something that is absent or at least inauthentic. In the second “POTATOES,” the title indicates the subject of the lines that follow. We see what is used “in the preparation of cheese,” for example. The last title represents a tautology and a secret—it is repeated like steps the process of potato’s preparation but the “for” shows us that there is something we are not (yet?) privy to in the scene. Stein’s “Objects,” “Food” and the parts of Brecht’s Water Yam, which focus on furniture and household objects use mostly nouns and prepositions. In his article, “The Making of Tender Buttons,” Joshua Schuster points out that a table appears in all three sections, and can be the trope we use to read the work as whole (Schuster, “The Making of

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33 “A BOX” is repeated in the “Objects” section. In “Food,” “MILK” “POTATOES” “CHICKEN,” “SALAD AND AN ARTICHOKE” and “ORANGE” are repeated. There are also many variations throughout, like “DINNER” and “DINING.”
Tender Buttons: Gertrude Stein’s Subjects, Objects and the Illegible”). Likewise, the
table, in different colors, with different settings and accents, is one of the reoccurring
objects and thus main narratives of Brecht’s piece.

Unlike “Objects” or “Foods,” Stein’s “Rooms” is one long prose piece that
models a way of moving through enclosures; the words embody actions rather than
locations or descriptions. For example, this section famously begins with a strong
differentiation between action and place: “Act so that there is no use in a centre. A
wide action is not width” (147). “Rooms” allows certain qualities of household decor
to come into focus (such as “a little lingering lion and a Chinese chair”) but it is
constantly shifting; the rest of that sentence reads, “all the handsome cheese which is
stone, all of it and a choice, a choice of a blotter” (147). We see a reluctance to fix
things or to allow them to be static here—in the opposite mode of the object-based
earlier sections, here there is a fear that description will put rooms into stasis. The
fight against this closure or stasis is apparent in lines like, “The care with which the
rain is wrong and the green is wrong and the white is wrong, the care with which
there is a chair and plenty of breathing. The care with which there is incredible
justice and likeness, all this makes a magnificent asparagus, and also a fountain”
(153). The boundary between subject and object is traversed in the movement from
internal subjective truths (“care” and “wrong”) into the objects, “asparagus” and
“fountain.” This part of Tender Buttons is more akin to the active experience of
encountering Water Yam itself.
In “Stein Talks,” Lyn Hejinian argues that Stein’s writing works as a sort of dialogue between a fluid or liquid understanding of experience, and the still, fragmented or concurrent aspects of everyday life. Because of this duality, Stein uses fewer nouns than other words—nouns, presenting a static name for things, do not allow us to experience the phenomenology of objects. Although, as we have seen with “stool,” even nouns can be ambiguous; they can be decidedly not static. Hejinian writes, “Stein wanted to understand things not in isolated rigidity, which falsified and monumentalized conditions which were fluid, but as present participants in ongoing living—outpouring, fountainous living” (Hejinian 101). By using the name of the object only, the thing is present—Stein said that she felt “in me the need of making it be a thing that could be named without using its name” (Quoted in Hejinian, 96). In the same vein, but with a different emphasis, Elizabeth Frost’s chapter, “Replacing the Noun,” argues that Stein parodies male fetishism (as theorized by Freud) by her usage of nouns (E. A. Frost 19). Stein parodies the idea of “object love” through Tender Button’s abundance of objects that are shifting and fluid (E. A. Frost 20).

Stein’s contrast of stasis and flow hints at spatial understandings and reading practices that are picked up and transformed by Brecht. The varying language and grammar of each section create new systems: whereas the earlier sections depict cubic surfaces and lists, in “Rooms,” Stein uses movement through language to create an understanding of subjectivity in space. At the most basic level, the sections show us that a room is performed, or brought into existence, by acting in it, an object is performed by naming but not necessarily by naming the thing. Brecht’s Water Yam,
by authorizing its reader to act on or perform nouns, constitutes an updating of the avant-garde into a new experimental mode. Like Stein, there is a resonance between the language of concrete household objects and otherness; he defamiliarizes these common objects. Here are two very different cards from *Water Yam* that nonetheless speak to each other:

**ANOTHER WEAVING**

fingers between fingers

**AIR CONDITIONING**

( move through the place )

The eroticism of the first card is dulled by the banality of the second, and yet everyday household objects are made erotic and musical in the second card as well—the sound resonance between “another weaving” and “air conditioning” is striking; they have the same number of syllables and similar stresses. Are “another weaving” and “air conditioning” objects, or actions? Or both? These cards are meant to be physically manipulated, to be read quickly, and to make the reader think about the possibility of *doing* something. It is this emphasis on action that differentiates *Water Yam* from *Tender Buttons*. While Stein may be making fun of a sort of object love in her poem—we read about the possibility of a different mode, for example—Brecht allows the object and its performance to function in his. Fluid assemblages now involve people and the possibility of performance. Critics studying Brecht, a comfortable middle-class white man living in New Jersey, do not consider that interaction between objects and action through a personally heightened consciousness may be a critique or intervention; Brecht’s subject position is so expansive as not to
be questioned or even specified—in this case, as in many others, the white male subject is a universal subject. He writes about event scores, “rather than an image of a concrete moment in life, it is a signal preparing one for the moment itself. Event scores prepare one for an event to happen in one’s own now” (George Brecht, “Events (Assembled Notes)” unpublished manuscript; George Brecht Notebook VII, March-June 1961). This is, of course, the “now” of comfort and relative peace; the “one” is surrounded by household objects to be manipulated.34

These readings of Brecht’s cards show that a work like Water Yam illustrates not only an unfamiliar conception of the book and of reading, but also an unfamiliar artistic paradigm that is an updating of an earlier avant-garde moment. In her insightful reading of Brecht’s language art in the 1960s, Liz Kotz writes about the experimental aesthetic of Water Yam:

In these cards, the implicit reference is not so much to the linear sequential structure of the line or sentence but to the gridded two-dimensionality of the ad, poster, or flyer, the printed instruction card, sales ticket, or receipt, which inserts condensed snippets of text into a visually defined field. This is not the textual spacing of the book or the bodily pause of poetic breath but the space of modern graphic design in its complete interpenetration of visual and textual materials—a space that programmatically invades poetry since Mallarme. And reminiscent of the elaborate Mallarmean protocols for reading, Brecht’s scores

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34 Gertrude Stein, as a lesbian American Jew living in Paris for much of her life, is often read in terms of otherness. See Juliana Spahr’s essay in the corrected centennial edition of Tender Buttons for a critical history (Spahr).
would go out into the world in a series of boxes whose idiosyncratic format (and silly name) would claim a ludic domain of esoteric ‘play’ while refusing any reinsertion into instrumental forms of culture. (Kotz, *Words to Be Looked at 95*)

In this mode, Brecht’s work becomes a poem of a referential form—it ignores the English and American tradition of the 30s, 40s and 50s in favor of an earlier European modernist ethos. In other words, these cards directly draw upon modernist aesthetics and reading techniques from a lineage that excludes New Critical models for depth reading, in favor of ludic play. The reference to *Tender Buttons* at this important juncture in terms of enactment, critical response, and performance is not accidental. In Brecht’s work, we can see the modes of avant-gardism being manipulated and remade. It is as though Brecht answers Sontag and Eco by saying, we need to look to the avant-garde, but with a difference. I argue that *Water Yam* critiques, through sensual reader enactment and participation, what Kotz calls the “Mallarmean protocols for reading,” even while drawing on them. *Water Yam* offers a new avant-garde—an experimental, participatory worldview—to answer the questions that Eco, Barthes and Sontag are asking at this critical moment. In *Water Yam*, the reader participates in space making and world making through reading; and, I would like to add to Kotz’s analysis, the reader participates with poetic tradition, and the tradition of the codex.

Despite being a reference to the “two dimensionality of the ad,” Brecht’s work is importantly simultaneous, multiple and physical. Leo Steinberg, arguing that art in
the U.S. has been on a “corporate model” since the 1920s, famously introduced the term “flatbed picture plane” to “describe the characteristic picture plane of the 1960s—a pictorial surface whose angulation with respect to the human posture is the precondition of its changed content” (Steinberg 82). Instead of trying to simulate nature around us, these works—he discusses Rauschenberg and Dubuffet’s artworks—simulate data planes and hard surfaces; Steinberg reads the flatbed picture plane as revolutionary work, which for the first time was meant “for the consciousness immersed in the brain of the city” (90). By referencing previous avant-gardes in their book form, Brecht took what was thought to be a silent, sensationless experience of self-reading and opened it up to the simultaneity of action-filled multiple presents or events. This work was for the “consciousness immersed in the brain of the city,” inundated by slogans and lists, perhaps; but it required that consciousness to perform an event in the street of that very city’s brain.

An Anthology of Chance Operations: An Experiment in Media and Genre

In keeping with experimental methods, An Anthology, as we know it now, was not exactly as it was planned to be. Rather, the publication was almost an accident. It is the result of a failed project; Chester Anderson, the editor of the San Francisco Beat culture and literature magazine Beatitude, asked La Monte Young to edit what was to be a special issue of the magazine for the East Coast. After Young had already gathered an enormous amount of material from friends and colleagues for Beatitude East, the entire magazine folded. Young then published the work he compiled for the
magazine, and with Maciunas’s help and with his iconic design, published it as a book in 1963. The lead-up to the publication was long and fraught with issues. Between 1960 and 1963, Maciunas badgered Young with many letters asking for material for the collection. And during that period, the collection itself morphed. For example, Robert Morris was initially involved in *An Anthology* but then distanced himself from Fluxus and in 1964 he asked for his texts to be deleted from the 1963 version (Kellein, *Fluxus* 12).

Despite the more fluid or experimental aspects of its history, the book was rigidly and conventionally organized by artist with a one-page marker in the beginning of each artist’s section. The page shows the artist’s name written in Maciunas’s iconic design, as well as a formal delineation for each piece that the anthology includes. The collection, though elegantly printed with pullout flaps and artistic flourishes, was meant to be affordable—the cover lists the price as $2.98 before publication, $3.98 after publication. Showing the colors of small coterie and the importance of mail circulation, La Monte Young provides his address on the inside flap for those who wish to obtain copies. *An Anthology* was important to the development of Fluxus into the mid and late 1960s. Many of the scores remain exactly the same through performances and later festivals as they were first printed in the anthology and the artists included later became Fluxus “members” (O. F. Smith 38–39). In other words, it was a sort of source book, codifying much of the work that had come before (The full title of the collection is a list of media and genres; the book is called *An Anthology of Chance Operations Concept Art Anti-Art Indeterminacy Improvisation*
Meaningless work Natural Disasters Plans of Action Stories Diagrams Music Poetry

Essays Dance Constructions Mathematics Compositions.) It is as though the anthology itself consists of the very act of attempting to categorize.

Figure 4: George Maciunas’s 1963 cover design for An Anthology.

My central question of this section is about categorization, and specifically about genre, or media. In the height of the “death of the author” and the fervor of the “open work,” in the midst of the coming together of all the arts, An Anthology, created by leaders of these movements, organized artwork by author and genre. The pieces in the collection were organized this way despite the fact that the work by each artist barely resembled the genre it named. Why? This section opens the question and its implications by examining several sections of the anthology. In this section I explore the ways that An Anthology’s presentation of multimedia as event performs a new
understanding of multiple authors, media, and genres, not as weakening each independent element, or ending media autonomy, but actually as enacting, and informing new ways of reading. The next section, which focuses on Yoko Ono’s *Grapefruit* will return to notions of reading as poetry with this newfound element of enactment through media to show its implication on perception.

With *An Anthology*, naming the media for each piece reveals the way that a coming together of the arts, or a “crisis” in terms of medium or genre, could yield possibility through experiment. In other words, we can see a sort of Steinian tactic at work to address the “crisis” of the moment. As critic Branden Joseph argues about what he calls “Cagean theater (especially as taken up around Fluxus)”:

…the disciplinary status of the aesthetic object (even that it was necessarily “aesthetic”) was effectively dissolved. This did not imply that there was, magically, no longer any such thing as a painting or a sculpture, or that the institutions of concert hall, gallery, and museum were no longer relevant or recognizable. What it did imply…was that the disciplinary and medium based distinctions traditionally handed down could no longer be received as ontological facts, or even mutually accepted conventions, but had to be reiterated in each instance. (Branden W. Joseph 63)

In other words, genres still denote specific attributes. However, by reiterating the media in each instance, attention goes to the media as much as it does the “content.” In fact, the reiteration shows that the media itself carries content. And this media-content interacts with the content that the piece itself contains to make a larger and
richer work of literature. The artists listed as solely doing “poetry” are Claus Bremer, whose work in the collection consists of two short works in German that emphasize democratized language through repetition and arbitrary line breaks; Joseph Byrd, whose work includes “A Ballet for Woodwinds,” a sort of chance performance set of instructions, and an essay of instructions about a performance; Yoko Ono, whose only piece here is “TO GEORGE, POEM NO. 18, OCTOBER 29 1961” which looks like a page of writing which has been effaced so much that it resembles a map with the land as the white paper—nothing is legible on the page except for a few letters and a Japanese character (figure 5); James Waring and Ray Johnson have a collaborative contribution called “laughter poem,” printed twice, once in handwriting and once in type in which the word “ha” is repeated over many lines; Dieter Rot\(^{35}\) whose work here is “Black page with holes,” similar to Ono’s trick of effacement, covers writing with paper exposing only small parts; and lastly, Emmett Williams whose “Cellar Song for Five Voices,” the score for a verbal performance, is also categorized as “poetry.” In the case of Ono and Rot, considering these pieces as poetry makes us yearn to read something in the works. It also makes us think about a poetics of the illegible—a poetry that is completely unreadable. As Craig Dworkin shows, text like this can bring the politics of literary work to the fore. Dworkin's definition of “paragrammatic reading,” which stems from Leon Roudiez and others, is a reading that uses unconventional forms of signification and meaning making. One must rely on networks external to normative habits and grammar in order to apprehend this text.

\(^{35}\) This artist is also known as Dieter Roth—I call him by the name published in *An Anthology.*
at all (Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible* xx). For Dworkin, both reading and writing has political implications.

Figure 5: Yoko Ono’s “poem” in *An Anthology*.

This issue of form and media delineation is, to a greater or lesser degree, also political. For Cage, who deeply influenced these artists, and had his own piece included in *An Anthology*, form itself was political expression. Joseph writes, “According to Cage, the relations between composition, score, performance, and audition were directly political to the extent that they involve the imposition of something like semantic force...For Cage, form and power appeared intimately
connected to such a degree that form was politics; an abstract or transcendent connection or relation was, for Cage, an imposition of power” (Branden Wayne Joseph 84). Scores are rules, or laws. Part of the revolution in scoring—from notes to images, or notes to words—meant that a score no longer worked as mediation, necessarily. It was not a representation of something else to be done, but it had direct effects in shaping the subject. In this sense, Cage considers a conductor a policeman; he enforces a particular regime, a way of enacting the score (Branden Wayne Joseph 84). With An Anthology, Young and Maciunas, as the editor and designer of the collection, imposed a certain amount of control over the work through using names and media as organizing principles. This choice calls attention to what is being represented in total sum. For example, their editorial choices highlight issues of inclusion and boundary. There are only two women published in the collection—Yoko Ono and Simone Morris (Forti), who, though included in the first edition, does not have a design page for her name and does not have a designation of media or genre. Both women have one page in their section, whereas the men’s sections vary from one to twenty pages. The choice to organize the book by author makes these women visible as women, or more precisely, it makes them visible as not men.

Jackson Mac Low actively works to diffuse the power enforced in his section by the genre titles under his name. In the beginning of one of his works he writes, “The text on the opposite page may be used in any way as a score for solo or group readings, musical or dramatic performances, looking, smelling, anything else &/or nothing at all. Jackson Mac Low July 1961.” In other words, Mac Low tells us that it
should not just be considered poetry—that there are no laws of aesthetic appreciation here at all. Rather, the work is an active call to the reader to make the text what she will. Unlike Ono and Rot’s work, which changes the category of poetry, his wryly suggests that the category does not matter. As a whole, however, the collection suggests that generic nominalism can be experimental. Mac Low’s just happens to be the only work which points out the irony of rules meant to be broken; although his work is listed as “Story Music Poetry Essays Change Operations Indeterminacy” on his author page, we can “use” it however we would like. Generic nominalism is ours to experiment with as well the policeman’s, especially if we want to allow for Mac Low’s anarchist politics.36

With these localized politics understood, An Anthology as a whole can be read as a critique of Greenbergian notions of medium specificity. In 1940, Clement Greenberg argued that the avant-gardes of the 40 years before have achieved “a purity and radical delimitation of their fields of activity” (Greenberg 32). If under the Greenbergian paradigm, each artwork must display the purity of its medium and the limitations of its medium, according to An Anthology, modernism is decidedly over, though it cannot be dismissed with completely. In order to embrace a more experimental way of understanding the roles of media, An Anthology asserts that we must revisit this modernist paradigm, but in our re-reading, read it differently. As De

36 See “Part One. Out of the Cage” and especially “Anarchy by Design: On Jackson Mac Low’s Stanzas for Iris Lezak” for a thorough reading of Mac Low’s work (T. Miller). Miller writes that Mac Low’s “ethics as well as his poetics…bring poems and persons into communication with each other, in ways that disclose the preconditions, limits, and enigmas that pertain to both” (T. Miller 49).
Duve reads Greenberg, “the medium in Greenbergian sense is something specific that sanctions the separation of the autonomy of the arts, each in its ‘autarchy,’ something like ‘painting,’ ‘sculpture,’ ‘music,’ and so on” (Duve 64). Thus, for De Duve, “medium” is a sort of convention or pact that an artist enters into with other arts and the contemporary public when he decides to engage in a medium or genre—for example, when a painter decides to make a painting. For De Duve, Greenberg’s model goes wrong by extrapolating that in this case, medium is a “matter of living artists addressing other living artists,” which forces Greenberg to declare abstract painting as the heir of art for art’s sake. In fact, as De Duve, explains, the relation that is more important than that between artists, is that between artist and medium. De Duve decides that, though Greenberg never speaks of the “other,” for the avant-garde or modernist artist, “the other is the medium” (Duve 49). When the artist surrenders to the medium—and Greenberg says that he must in modernist art—he is surrendering to the other. In fact, De Duve claims that “surrender” is the key word for Greenberg’s entire aesthetics and he shows the ways in which that thesis can also be found in Greenberg's writing (Duve 53). In An Anthology that very relation—between artist and medium—is played out in each section.

This searching and experimenting around issues of medium specificity, multimedia, and its limitations is performative in a similar way to the active reading prompted by Brecht’s Water Yam. We must partake in the active undoing of modernist arguments about medium autonomy, and in doing so notice localized political issues that each work brings to the fore. In other words, it is through the
critique of media autonomy that we are able to clearly see issues of gender inequality, Mac Lows’s brand of anarchy, and Cage’s metaphorical politics.

**Yoko Ono’s *Grapefruit* and Event Perception**

Ono's scores are different from Brecht's in that, for the most part, she exposes how they should be realized. Even if realization is impossible, her scores make it clear that realization is part of the score. Ono’s work brings the larger focus of the enigmatic relationship between enacting and reading (which is inherent in Fluxus scores) to depict more narrowly the relationship between perception and reading. Her scores illustrate the complicated relationship between user interaction and the imperative mode of the score. In other words, here we have to figure out what is special about lighting a match or playing a note, rather than if we are able to do it. After illustrating why we should read scores as poetry in “The Poetry of George Brecht’s *Water Yam,*” my examination of Ono’s work in this section will show how reading and media convergence are connected through issues of embodiment and performance. Ultimately, Ono’s scores emphasize a shift in perception through reading because even her earliest pieces questioned the meaning of perception, the body and community.

Though Ono had been working on scores through the 1950s, *Grapefruit*, a complete book of Ono’s scores, came out in 1964. She had been corresponding with Maciunas about a publication of her complete works before this, but when Maciunas’s disorganization and lack of funds made it seem like it might not happen
in a timely fashion, Ono published it herself in Tokyo by means of a small press she called Wuntemaum. The book was revised many times subsequent to the first edition, most famously by Simon and Schuster in a 1970 edition with an introduction by John Lennon. The differences between these editions are myriad and complex.\textsuperscript{37} Here I will focus on the beginnings of Ono’s scores, the lead up to the 1964 publication, and some of the texts therein. During this phase, media convergence was an important thrust of the work as Ono’s scores underwent several modes of presentation in addition to mediating on inter-arts and media convergence through the work itself.

For Ono, this type of work began with performance, or “word-of-mouth-scores.” Ono’s public recognition for her scores happened in 1961 at a small show at Maciunas’s gallery, the AG Gallery, on Madison Avenue in New York City. The show was, in fact, an exhibition of “paintings and drawings” that ran for two weeks in the dark (Maciunas could no longer pay his electricity bills). In the front of the gallery were Ono’s “instruction paintings” and the back showed her traditional Japanese calligraphy paintings done in sumi ink (Munroe and Walker Art Center). When visitors arrived, Ono would show them around the gallery and explain the instructions behind each painting shown in the instruction area. For example, she would tell them that the oddly shaped canvass on the floor was “Painting to be Stepped on” and that

\textsuperscript{37} The later edition added “film,” and “architecture,” to the early categories. These additions reflect a change in perception and space-time understanding with a change in media and hermeunetics. The 1970 edition is also more interested in perception than in realizability, and even includes an “Information” section that explains how each piece was first realized. The scores are more whimsical too, which means they appear less violent. The later edition also includes illustrations, a questionnaire, picture games, and mailing pieces in addition to fixing some spelling and grammar mistakes in the 1964 edition.
they were welcome to help make it. For “Smoke Painting,” she invited visitors to burn part of the canvas on the wall and watch it smolder. This word of mouth method of conveying the work provided an auditory performance and a communal interaction; in this way the scores are realized several times over—by concept, by voice, by communication, by action that follows, and by the object resulting. Thus her earliest pieces were deeply involved in questions of perception, the body, and community. By 1964, her famous “cut piece” became an important touchstone for feminist performance art through the 1980s. But even before she was making performance art, her presence in the gallery and a connection with her audience was crucial to the way she thought about her scores.

This notion of word-of-mouth scores changed after this first show. For all the other shows in the 60s, Ono included written scores in the gallery, but performance and translation continued to be a key part of her work. For the 1962 exhibition “Instructions for Paintings,” in conjunction with a performance at Sogetsu Arts Center in Tokyo, the instructions went through several media translations before they got to the audience. Bruce Althshuler and Midori Yoshimoto explain, “In order to avoid the emotionality of her own handwriting, the artist asked composer Ichiyanagi Toshi, to whom she was married at the time, to write these texts in Japanese in his more controlled hand. Ono had written these texts in English, translated them herself into Japanese, and then had her Japanese texts copied by Ichiyanagi” (Munroe and Walker Art Center 78). This copying removes the piece further from the artist’s hand, but it importantly also emphasizes an iterability of the piece through hermeneutic
process. At each stage of repetition, the translation practice brought about slight but important changes that reached toward realizing the score. The media of each stage crucially changed the score in the manner of an enactment. In other words, in Ono’s work, each medium critically changed both the meaning and the way of gathering meaning from the score—as Marshall McLuhan would later write, each medium creates epistemologies (McLuhan). When the scores are read, they are as much about reading as they are about whatever content they contain. Thomas Kellein argues that this issue of unrealizability, or scores meant to be read (not performed or realized), was actually something of a boon for Maciunas. In 1964, Maciunas made the declaration that “most of the Japanese pieces are non-performable” (letter to Ben Vautier, March 1964). Kellein reads Maciunas’s observation as evidence of his cheapness. Kellein writes:

Now in the spring of 1964, the success and acceptance of his [Maciunas’s] dream was no longer dependent on the size of the audience or the number of concert performances. In the Chairman’s [Maciunas’s] view, there were pieces that could shine despite the dire financial circumstances of Fluxus, even though they had only been written for the index-card box. And these were not only poetic, peaceful works, but no one need feel at all guilty if they were paid no attention to speak of. (Kellein, The Dream of Fluxus 98)

In other words, it was economically helpful to all involved that in 1962 Yoko Ono presented her work at the Sogetsu Art Center in Tokyo, but replaced the paintings that had been on the wall at the AG gallery with texts for people to read (Kellein, The
Dream of Fluxus 102). It meant less expensive materials, less expensive moving of artworks, less preparation and production time.

Kellein’s clever gloss on the inception of conceptual art contains some truth, but it is not the whole story. Ono’s pieces are as much about interaction as they are about text, and they have very little to do with expensive paintings. Her scores show an interface between language and bodily performance, and they are quite frequently impossible to actualize despite the straightforward nature of the instruction. This impossibility is an important part of the object and the purpose of the art, albeit a money-saving convenience for the Fluxus group. Even the works that show the impossibility of performance also point to their materiality; they often expose that actualization is part of the piece. The oscillation between object and performance is an integral part of her work throughout the 60s; the 1964 edition of Grapefruit begins with a note to George Maciunas:

Dear George:

Most of my pieces are meant to be spread by word of mouth, therefore, do not have scores. This means is very important since the gradual change which occurs in the piece by word spreading is also part of the piece. Paik suggested that I send you a piece he likes which is one of the word spread pieces. I have thought over quite a bit about it, since he was right to suggest the piece because it is also one of the very few pieces that is easy to perform. But I think I will not change my mind about maintaining the piece as a word-spread piece……….∗
Ono’s work shows a different participatory nature than Brecht’s when she implies that the pieces themselves can work like a children’s game to morph and change with personalities and misunderstandings, or, as she writes, “the gradual change which occurs in the piece by word spreading is also part of the piece.” She does not reveal which piece Paik suggested she include and likewise we have no idea what the “word spread” pieces look like from this text. This letter hints that there is something in the bodily perception of the piece, something collaborative that we cannot get to through the text by reading in a normative fashion. By pointing out that both in the publication of the score and in its circulation by word of mouth there will be something missing, Ono is pointing out a Derridian fallacy inherent in believing that there is any complete or true way to communicate or perform the score. Her works purposefully put the issue of bodily perception into the score, thereby critiquing the idea that any score could be circulated textually and maintain an “original” or “real” or even “performed” form.

38 In Derrida’s critique of Lévi-Strauss’s work on writing, he argues that all naming is violent (all naming is writing), and that erasure of writing or naming is another act of violence as well (Derrida 112–113). He discusses the Nambikarwa practice of proper names to illustrate this point. As Lévi-Strauss explains, the Nambikarwa are given names and then forbidden to use them; the anthropologist obtains the names for his research, regardless of this taboo. In Derrida’s model, original erasure of the names is the civic “moral” protective gesture, meant to guard the Nambikarwa from the violence of naming; but Derrida points out that erasure results in a different violence of having a name in the first place. Forbidding the use of the names strips the subjects of the identity they obtained by the originary violence. A third violence ensues, a transgression if (or when) the name is spoken. Derrida critiques Lévi-Strauss for not differentiating between “hierarchization and domination, between political authority and exploitation” (131). Derrida sees writing, and “word spread” pieces would fall within the category of writing, as an ethical space as well as a violent one.
Like their unusual circulation practices, many works in *Grapefruit* reveal an interest in the possibilities of the body’s perception, input and output. For example, Ono famously performed this score in 1961:

**VOICE PIECE FOR SOPRANO**

Scream.

1. against the wind
2. against the wall
3. against the sky

1961 autumn 39

The notion of protest is bound up in this score, which asks its female participant (“soprano”) to scream “against” three obstacles. It works as a strong check to the quiet work of the other scores circulating at the time. For example, think of George Brecht’s “WORD EVENT,” which could not be quieter or subtler. About “VOICE PIECE” Ono writes, “The avant-garde guys didn't use the voice. They were just so cool, right? There was also [a] very asexual kind of atmosphere in the music. And I wanted to throw blood” (Munroe and Walker Art Center 238, Ono quoted from Mark Kemp, “She Who Laughs Last: Yoko Ono reconsidered”). Where the experimental art world was a masculine, quiet, high art scene, Ono aimed to bring some feminist loudness into the work. We can also read her emphasis on the voice, or the scream, as an anti-racist rebellion, or protest against racist criticism launched at Ono for her

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39 This score was included in both editions of *Grapefruit.*
Asian accent, in addition to her “shrill” female voice.\textsuperscript{40} Her choice of metaphor here—the desire “to throw blood”—emphasizes interest in the body. Indeed, blood is a reoccurring medium in Ono’s work.\textsuperscript{41}

The scores in \textit{Grapefruit} are violent throughout. They thematize fire, hammering, filth, death, blood, wounds, destroying buildings and flora, burial, destruction of art and identity, rape, and using people.\textsuperscript{42} For this reason, Kristine Stiles places Ono’s work within a group of artists who focus on the body in response to the survival of genocides (Stiles, “Survival Ethos and Destruction Art”). Ono’s history growing up Japan in the 1940s bore witness to the violence of war. She hid in a bunker in Tokyo during the firebombing of 1945 and later fled the city with her family to hide in the mountains, homeless and hungry. Her father spent time in a prisoner of war camp during the war. By the time Ono wrote \textit{Grapefruit}, she had been living between the US and Japan for many years and she had been suffering from the racism and sexism that would later become amplified by her relationship with The

\textsuperscript{40} Ono’s voice was often the object of racist hatred, especially after she became a mainstream figure in her relationship with John Lennon. Famously, a full-page cartoon appeared in \textit{Esquire} in 1970 which read “John Rennon’s Excrusive Gloupie: On the loud to the briss with the Yoko nobody Onos” and depicted Ono holding a leash attached to Lennon as a bug. As Joseph Jeon explains, this type of making fun of the Asian accent was common, as was the specific hatred of Ono displayed in this work (Jeon 145). Her avant-garde work was considered racialized as well, especially when compared to Lennon’s. Jeon writes, “Ono’s dissonant screaming and wailing seem aberrant and foreign” and she is depicted as corrupting Lennon with her nudity, avant-garde politics, and especially her voice.

\textsuperscript{41} Blood would be a reoccurring medium in feminist body art of the 70s as well. See chapter three of this dissertation for a full explication.

\textsuperscript{42} Ono’s work is not generally known for this violence. The 1970 edition of Grapefruit, though it includes these earlier scores, is watered down by utopian pieces that thematize the power of love, dreaming and the imagination. For example “BOX PIECE” asks participants to “Buy many dream boxes./ Ask your wife to select one./ Dream together” (Ono and Lennon). \textit{Acorn}, Ono’s 2013 follow up to Grapefruit has even more of a feel-good tenor to it.
Beatles’ band member John Lennon. In a term compounding racism and sexism, Ono was often referred to as the “dragon lady” who broke up The Beatles (Jeon 109–143). Stiles argues that destruction art like Ono’s brought the body into the modern art world at this moment precisely because survivors of genocide and pain brought embodiment into avant-garde discourse (Stiles, “Survival Ethos and Destruction Art”).

Stiles’s work importantly points out the similarities between Ono’s art and the horror of World War II. I would like to add, more than the other artists writing event scores at this time, Ono’s work focuses on the unique power of bodily perception and affect as a way of working through reading and hermeneutic practices. These pieces ask us to exercise a different set of hermeneutic practices and perception—how do we know if a scream is “against” something? We must listen carefully to the scream, in fact, we must also read the scream within its context. Though critics may be less blatant about their racial hatred today, Ono’s voice is still criticized incessantly—so much so that on her eighty-second birthday she wrote an open letter to all those who have criticized her voice. She writes that she is not concerned with being in tune or hitting the right note, “my voice will be dead, once I am concerned about it, in the way you are asking me to” (“Yoko Ono Responds to Critics in Open Letter”). In her work, being alive is feeling and creating a full range of—perhaps dissonant—sensuous experiences.

43 Jeon argues that the two dominant manifestations of Ono in American popular culture are “dragon lady destroyer, and avant-garde wing nut” (xvii). He writes about Ono as a “hate object,” reading American hostility toward her, including racial epithets, hate groups on Facebook, racist and misogynist cartoons, and anti-avant-garde sentiment as symptoms of a globalized yellow peril, affirmation of American innocence, and border-drawing.
Ono reveals this keen interest in enlivening our conditioned sense of perception in “To the Wesleyan People,” a 1966 lecture that was later published in the 1970 edition of *Grapefruit* when she writes:

Event, to me, is not an assimilation of the other arts as Happenings seems to be, but an extrication from the various sensory perceptions. It is not a ‘get togetherness’ as most happenings are, but a dealing with oneself. Also it has no script as happenings do, though it has something that starts it moving— the closest word for it may be a ‘wish’ or ‘hope.’

At a small dinner party last week, we suddenly discovered that our poet friend whom we admire very much was colour blind. Barbara Moore said, ‘That explains about his work. Usually people's eyes are blocked by colour and they can't see the thing.’

After unblocking one’s mind, by dispensing with visual, auditory and kinetic perceptions, what will come out of us? Would there by anything? I wonder. And my Events are mostly spent in wonderment.

(Ono and Lennon)

Ono’s “extrication from the various sensory perceptions,” or act of “dispensing with the visual, auditory, and kinetic perceptions” should allow us to deal with ourselves, or to “see the thing.” It is interesting to note that “dealing with one’s self” happens through the exposure of another’s desire or wish—by communicating through the
performance of another’s art, we can see. Her aim is to strip away the parts of our hermeneutic sense that are previously conditioned in order to heighten our understanding of the world. She claims that she does this for individuals by imposing another’s wish or hope on them, whether or not this hope can be realized. Importantly, the possibility of seeing comes through paradoxical impossibility of seeing, from being “blind.” This conundrum of perception echoes the question of media shift and epistemological shifts in Ono’s works. Opening new modes of perception, like creating new media, formulates new ways of knowing, feeling, or “seeing.” In other words, for Ono opening new modes of perception is about creating both possibilities and impossibilities of action and participation; one of the many ways she does this is by shifting media and genre.

Despite Ono’s philosophy of the event score in general as a desire or wish to make us “see,” Grapefruit is divided into sections that reflect singular, but not necessarily visual, genre and medium. In the first edition, they are “music,” “painting,” “event,” “poetry,” and “object.” However, in a similar mode to An Anthology, a score in one section could just as easily appear in the next section; “FLY PIECE,” for example, appears in both “Music” and in the event section. So the section headings do not necessarily describe differences in each section’s content. “COLOR PIECE” in the “Painting” section reads more like a poem than anything else in the book—it is longer than the aphorisms, more lyrical, and has a narrative. In fact, each section shows the impossibility of a distinct or singular medium or category, such as “music” or “painting.” The “music” is not “music”; the painting is not painting as we know it.
Ono’s work shows the larger trend of the period in which artists used generic nominalism as a generative and creative source. Ono’s work asks readers and audiences to think about these texts in the painting section as “paintings” to open the category of painting to a wider and more varied definition, and also allow the work itself to perform “painting.” As Branden Joseph claimed above, “reiteration [of the medium] in each instance” forces attention to go to the medium as much as it does to the “content” of the score. In fact, the reiteration shows that the medium itself carries variable content. And this content interacts with the content that the piece itself contains to make a larger and richer work of literature. For Ono, this amplification—the larger and richer—is importantly about bodily perception and the possibilities that reading holds.

As with Brecht’s work, if we are able to read these works “as poetry” we are able to see the yield of the event of media convergence. This type of reading requires a close mode of attention to what is inside and outside of our reach. In a piece which comments on what may be the impossibility of seeing, Ono’s “PAINTING TO ENLARGE AND SEE” reads:

Write five hundred telephone numbers on a canvas in a space as large as your palm. The numbers can be overlapped with one another. Also the numbers can all be the same. Observe the drawing by enlarging it with a microscope. Also, you may take a picture of the drawing and enlarge it to the size you prefer.

1961 summer
This piece works with the illusion of size, scale and legibility. After using only a limited space of canvas, it doesn’t matter how large one makes the piece under a microscope or in a picture frame, the numbers will never be legible again if they overlap. It calls into question our understanding of individuation—once these numbers have been layered, they will never look like individual numbers again. The only person who might recognize what numbers are present is the individual who put them into this mix. Yet in this process of enlargement, we may see the grain of the canvass or the spots in the ink; our focus is irrevocably changed. In light of the genocide of World War II, we think of murder on mass scale—the palm-sized numbers recall identification numbers in Nazi camps. By changing the scale on this small area, the score exposes the horrifying perspective of the state and of the mass. The speaker’s request for us to use our palm to consider original scale, and to use our preference to decide the final size, implicates us in the logics of the state by exposing its perspective and legibility. Our very bodies are part of the process.

A newfound perception, often violent, is always embodied in Ono’s work. For example, “BLOOD PIECE” shows attention both to the body and to text by making a life-giving bodily fluid the medium of creation and death. With this piece we begin to understand the impossibility of a singular medium (rather than convergence) through the impossibilities of bodily participation or perception:

Use your blood to paint.
Keep painting until you faint. (a)
Keep painting until you die. (b)

1960 spring
As far as I know, this piece was never performed by Ono or realized in a Fluxus festival of any kind; it meditates on the pain and the impossibility of realizing “painting” as well as the pain and impossibility of performing a score. Yet the piece also contains several enigmas—in order to consider its performance, we must think about duration carefully. Over the course of an entire lifetime, an artist could theoretically perform the score. It is only by our normative standards of performance duration that “BLOOD PIECE” is impossible. If we are to change our notion of “painting,” perhaps this piece could already be one; it is a textual “painting.” Or, the lack of lettering after the first line could indicate that the second two lines are choices—a performer can choose to follow path “a” or “b.” The piece draws attention to bodily cycles, duration, and the limits of genre or media. It is through an extended pause learned from a modernist tradition of reading poetry—something like “close reading”—that we come to these conclusions. Furthermore, the piece almost enforces this type of attention through its difficulty as performance. It’s hard to pass over it quickly, yet at the same time it troubles this familiar category of attention toward poetry in its impulse toward painting. This piece makes a strong statement about the impossibility of realization of the work as instructed while working within a lyric mode (i.e. we can think of the “pain” included in “painting”). It also points to the impossibility of inhabiting any space or genre permanently (we must use poetry to explore the duration of painting, for example). It’s important to note that in Grapefruit these instructions are interspersed with other pieces that are easier to perform (hammer a nail into a mirror; light a match; count the winkle's on a stomach).
Because they sometimes call us to take action, they make us think about reading as a more expansive category, using and moving beyond the categories that modernist close reading allows.

One might think that the section entitled “Poetry” is less interactive than a section dictating how to make paintings. Yet the works in the “poetry” section challenge that assumption. Here is a typical piece:

TOUCH POEM FOR A GROUP OF PEOPLE

Touch each other.

1963 winter

If we read the entirety of the poem as “Touch each other,” we may wonder what we are supposed to notice here. We may begin to notice issues at the level of lettering or words—perhaps we notice that there are a lot of vowels in this three-word phrase, and so on. Yet, we might think that the score could also be asking us to enact, as a group of people, a touch poem together. Ono herself performed “Touch Poem” on numerous occasions. One time, at the 3rd New York Avant-garde festival in 1965, Ono and about fifty others followed the “poem” as if it were a script, gathering into a room and touching each other. Yet there are several other poems with the same name in Grapefruit. Both “TOUCH POEM III” and “TOUCH POEM VI” seem more difficult to enact. “TOUCH POEM III” states “Hold a touch poem meeting at somewhere/ in the distance or a fictitious address/ on a fictitious day” and “TOUCH POEM VI” reads “Ask people to come./ Invite only dead people.” These works seem more like riddles and less like instructions. Both play with the stakes of the tradition of poetry.
making us think about the metaphysical tradition of “death” in poetry and the poetic aspects of performing touching as well as the poetic aspects of reading about touching. These readings make us see an inherent critique of participation as they also call for participation.

I turn to one final piece by Ono, “SUPPLY GOODS STORE PIECE,” to explore the way a more fluid notion of media and genre might change our political categories and challenge understandings of ethics in our reading practices. It is in the “objects” section.

Open a supply goods store where you sell body supplies:
Tail
Hair
Lump
Hump
Horn
Halo
The third eye
etc.

1964 spring

Though we can see immediately why this piece is categorized under “objects,” it questions our understanding of “supplies” and of “bodies.” Just as the sections of the book show, in this particular piece, categorization is a generative process. We are asked to think about the body as ever expanding, or as McLuhan dubs it, taking on “technological extensions.” The notion of these “body supplies” anticipates Donna Haraway’s writing in the mid 1980s and early 1990s where she argued against notions of essentialist identity, instead revealing the ways that bodily distinctions
between human, animal, machine and fictions are “leaky,” fluid, and necessarily acquired. In this passage, human is mixed with animal, machine, and fiction, as “tail” is next to “hump” and “halo.” We can see a book like *Grapefruit* as exposing many different forms of what Haraway refers to as “illegitimate fusions”: in addition to fusions of animal and machine, fusions of language, media, genre and art practice (Haraway 2295). Furthermore, Ono shows that the very losses and gains brought about by circulating through media, genre and spaces, are also the fluid or movement-bound aspects of identity and bodies.

Haraway considers women of color especially as falling into her term of cyborg identity, “a potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of outsider identities” (Haraway 2293). Ono’s identity is indeed complicated and “outsider,” and her work often grapples with these aspects of her life. She was born in Japan and lived between there and the United States. Despite its publication in Tokyo by Ono, the first edition of *Grapefruit* was mostly in English. Every few pages opens to a spread of an English score on the left page with Japanese text on the right. Echoing this notion of “struggle against perfect communication,” there is also at least one score in Japanese that is not translated into English (Munroe and Walker Art Center 82). Furthermore, the scores in Japanese are not translated versions of the English scores that face them, but rather other scores all together. To show Americanness, the book claims that it was copyrighted on July 4th, and cites all the major players of the New York avant-garde as influences on the dedication page. An important part of *Grapefruit* is the going-between aspect of cultural and national identity; many accounts claim that Ono gave
the book its title to show the hybridization of her cultures—at the time she believed a grapefruit to be a mixture of an orange and a lemon, and took it to be an analogy to her mixed sense of belonging. Her 1961 exhibition at the AG Gallery showed this divide literally—the New York avant-garde was represented alongside traditional Japanese calligraphy. To return to Haraway’s theory, after pointing out that “writing has a special significance for all colonized groups,” she continues, “Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other” (2293). Ono’s show of identity is as much about hybridity as it is about extension and survival. In addition to exposing “illegitimate fusions” through media hybridity, Ono shows that the very losses and gains brought about by circulating through media and genres are also the fluid or movement-bound aspects of identity and bodies.

* This cyborg theory of media and genre can do much to change our notions of midcentury modernist reading practices. It remakes theories of media essentialism or purity, allowing these important categories to also create combinatory identities and active forms. As genres shift, reading acquires new modes of attention. Here notions of reading poetry include durational quandaries, halos and humps. Fluxus scores set multiple media at play, indicating the way medium or genre is always also enactment. As Craig Dworkin puts it, media are activities; they are always “interpretive” (Dworkin, No Medium 28). Yet by reading the scores as poems, we expose not only their localized cultural and ethical implications—the way they answer political and
aesthetic concerns of the time or the way they interpret this moment in inter-arts—but also the cultural and ethical concerns that surround the category of poetry in general. When I argue that these works should be read “as poetry,” I am pointing out that we can arrive at these conclusions of genre expansion through alternative modes of reading and attention, and that these modes are useful for reading works that are more readily considered “poetry” to begin with. The tactic of reading poetry in this case reveals that what Badiou calls “generalized theatricality” highlights a change in the category of poetry, and displays a change more broadly in what it means to read in this moment. This change moves general reading practices into the “experimental” paradigm where reading can expose movement, expansion, and openness. Reading can extend out to the limits of comprehension and visibility and into aspects of everyday life. As my next chapter will show, reading poetry is an active event in and of itself, and it may work to shape the everyday spaces we know.
Chapter Two

“I do this, I do that”: Cold War Poetries of Event

In the last chapter I argued that texts not usually considered poetry can be productively read as poetry; here I examine work that everyone agrees is poetry and I read it as poetry. Yet these are poems of actions—not only do they chronicle that action that created them (“I do this, I do that”), but they also call forth a necessary desire to enact as a sort of reading (Should I do this, can I do that?). To enact a work is to perform it, or allow it to be an agent for action; this requires a different set of ethical concerns. Like my study of Fluxus experiments that make up the “event score,” my study of the poetry of the New York School will illuminate how deliberate forces at the mid-century helped to dismantle what was then the standard currency of modernist notions of “reading poetry.” Poetry of the New York School, despite its break with traditional forms and meter, still very much resembles traditional poetry (unlike the hybrid and visual arts experiments discussed in the last chapter), but like Fluxus, it also pushes away from modernist and New Critical models of reading. As I will show, this poetry was engaged with routines and interruptions of the everyday—the occasion, the event, the street, errands, gossip, the protest—and the reformation and activation of static spaces.

The ways that much of this work is “traditional” will be an important part of my argument here. A study of New York School poetry allows a focus on poetry-reading that moves away from the silent, still, solitary reader alone with her book. Whereas, in a vein similar to Fluxus and happenings, at this moment Beat poets were
holding large readings and performances that often went to political or ecstatic directions at large proportions, the New York School of poets’ primary output was in publication. They did give readings and performances, but their central contribution was text.\(^1\) To put it simply: a major question of post-war literature in the United States (and of post-60s work in particular) is “Can I read this? And, if so, how?” The answer to the first part of the question for most of the New York School experiments is resoundingly “Yes, I can read this.”\(^2\) The second part of the answer is much more complicated. It makes us rethink our fast first answer. We think, “Sure I can read this, but should I also be enacting it? Did the author already enact it? Did it enact itself through its reading?” The works I discuss in this chapter do not necessarily outwardly reject medium specificity in form, but through the encounter they suggest with their readers, these poems stretch standard notions of reading.

Characteristic New York School poems list everyday actions as possibilities for the reader, as well as illustrations of the speaker’s life. Frank O’Hara began this tradition in 1959 by naming the type of work “I do this I do that poems,” in a poem called “Getting Up Ahead of Someone (Sun)” (O’Hara, The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara 341). The name was so apt that it stuck with critics and other poets,

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\(^1\) Famously, neither Ashbery nor O’Hara liked to give poetry readings. Their focus on print is in contrast to other contemporaneous movements like the Beats, and even the Black Mountain poets who were especially interested in orality and presentation. This trend was more pronounced in the 1960s, with Black Arts movement, for example. See Mike Sell’s Avant-garde Performance & The Limits of Criticism: Approaching the Living Theatre, Happenings/Fluxus, and the Black Arts Movement and James Edward Smethurst’s The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s (Sell; Smethurst).

\(^2\) There are exceptions to this answer: Bill Berkson’s mirror poetry in Locus Solus, which is printed in reverse, several collaborations between Joe Brainard and Frank O’Hara which are objects of abstract poem art pieces (to name a couple).
including many “second generation” New York School Poets who used this term as
though it were an established genre. An early example of this type of poem is “The
Day Lady Died,” in which we read “It is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine/ because I will
get off the 4:19 in Easthampton” (O’Hara, The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara
325). Poems by other New York School poets are structured similarly, cataloging
specific actions and detailing public places in a lyric mode.

The New York School is known for their “occasional poems,” works that deal
with the intricacies of one unfolding event; in this respect New York School poems
are similar to the event scores previously discussed. O’Hara is famous for poems
composed for a particular news event (the death of Billie Holliday for example in
“The Day That Lady Died”), but also for poems about, or on the occasion of, his
friends’ weddings, or birthdays, or even a particular meal with a lover. However, he is
not the only New York School poet to write this type of work. James Schuyler’s prose
piece “Current Events” plays with what is or is not an occasion or an “event” by
noting every action, situation, and mood within a constrained space and time. It
begins, “A bewildering scene met the eye of pedestrians in front of the bus depot on
the south-east corner of Main and Cheektowaga on a recent Saturday morning April
the twenty-third. Dominating the orderly throng, gradually assembled from about
7:30 A.M…” (Schuyler, “Current Events”). Similarly, John Ashbery’s “The
Instruction Manual” situates the reader perfectly in time, space and “occasion” from
the outset; it begins, “As I sit looking out of a window of the building/ I wish I did not
have to write the instruction manual on the uses of a new metal” (Ashbery, “The
Instruction Manual”). Through the action described, the poem unfolds a critique of white-collar labor, and US capitalism at the mid-century.\(^3\) Throughout this chapter I show that much of the New York School poetry should be categorized alongside Fluxus experiments as a critique of dominant modernism. The poems importantly show the way that central questions of the era about geopolitical space unfold through poetry as everyday event.

When it comes to many of the New York School poems, the formal boundaries of the poem on the page are insufficient for understanding what it means to read. As the poems are written seemingly in the act of “doing” something, participating in an event, or in an occasion, they make us question any reading of them that is static or stationary. In order to have fidelity to the activity of the poems, we also must do something. This of course does not mean that we ourselves must “go get a shoeshine” or arrive at “4:19 in Easthampton” upon reading “The Day That Lady Died,” but it means that the poem activates our environment—spatiality is enfolded into language as a shifting virtual space. This virtual spatiality is not simply localized to indiscriminate scenes, or places of interest to the authors of the poems. Rather, these spaces in the language of the New York School poems hinge on major global political issues of Cold War culture, national and personal identities and subversive activism.

This chapter begins with a discussion of Frank O’Hara’s poetry and the
Seagram Building that provides an extensive example of the characteristic of New

\(^3\) See “John Ashbery’s Free Indirect Labor” for a reading of “The Instruction Manual” along these lines (Bernes).
York School poetry to figure codes, designs, and real spaces of the city as grounds for political action. The specificity of the O’Hara section allows it to be more than a case study—it is also an examination of the political contexts that mid-century experimental poetics engage. I will show that the discourse of Cold War politics and nationalist ideological advertisements works as fodder toward the invention of more spectacular displays of event-based identity. These “events” stand against the pressures of forced homogeneity as well as activate very real spaces. The section following provides a discussion of the magazine *Locus Solus*, which will show that much of the work of the New York School is part of a participatory and event-oriented experimental force that broadened media designations of “poetry.” My reading of *Locus Solus* will illustrate how the magazine itself enacts 1) the creation of an active, plural, and participatory space in print and 2) how the play with real space (i.e. New York and Paris) is part of this “event” that critiques geopolitical issues surrounding “containment” and Cold War conceptions of cultural ascendency. I end the chapter by illuminating the ways in which the experimentalism of New York School poetry characterizes a turn in mid-century poetry with implications for experimental work today.

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I use the term “discourse” in a basic sense; I refer to the public conversation, criticism, and theory that surround a certain topic. The discourse I explore here is markedly historical, as in the case of the discourse surrounding urban architecture at the mid-century.
Frank O’Hara Rebuilds the Seagram Building

In Frank O’Hara’s 1964 poem “Walking,” the poet gets “a cinder” caught in his eye. New York City’s fresh air and sunlight then “pushes it aside,” clearing his vision. Then he drops his “hot dog/ into one of the Seagram Building’s/ fountains” before deciding “the country is no good for us.” Assuming that the “cinder” is city filth or cigarette ash, the poem is nodding to the contemporaneous discourse about public and private spaces surrounding the architecture of the Seagram Building, as well as participating in an urban planning debate about sidewalk-level space, air quality, and light. The speaker prefers the Seagram plaza, because in “the country,”

there’s nothing
    to bump into
    or fall apart glassily
there’s not enough
    poured concrete
    and brassy

reflections
    (O’Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara* 476)

The poem argues that the Seagram Building’s plaza, surrounded by bronze I-beams, provides a spatial configuration that is healthier than the open countryside. Like many of O’Hara’s poems, this work calls on the ideology of the Seagram Building to explore and create surrounding urban spaces. The discourse on modern architecture complicates many of O’Hara’s poems from this period, and the poems participate in the discourse on modern architecture as well. The Seagram Building shaped nationalist and corporate private interests by creating a “public space” that invited a culturally potent combination of onlookers, fashionistas, and missiles. In “Walking,”
while lounging at the Seagram, O’Hara uses his hot dog to litter corporate art, and
declares “the country is no good for us” directly under the privately flown American
flag—an image both charmingly American and a public health hazard at the same
time. Just as the poems resist being read as a negation because of their complex
mixture of patriotism and anti-American sentiment—both subject to an indeterminate
irony—they also ensure a radical critique through intensifying the ambivalence of
already fraught spaces.

I will read Frank O’Hara’s poems as both political and participatory. By
attending to architectural discourse and the politics of spatial practice, I show that
Frank O’Hara’s poetry politicizes the landscape it figures and suggests radical
alternatives. Specifically, I examine poems that figure Mies van der Rohe’s Seagram
Building as important to a radical politics and experimentalism in O’Hara’s poetry. I
will argue that O’Hara’s Seagram Building—steeped in architectural modernist
ideologies and nationalist corporate interests—works to open the possibility for a new
ethics of encounter within midtown Manhattan. I read these poems in the context of
Cold War private and public barriers, which work their way through Lunch Poems
and O’Hara’s other contemporary experimental works, alongside a discourse of the
public and private in International Style modernist architecture. This aids in
understanding O’Hara’s work as suggesting radical politics through radical reading, a
claim that has been debated without considering the Seagram Building, or attending
much to architectural discourse in general. Deriving a connection between O’Hara’s
“I do this I do that poems” and the politics of architectural space shows the need for
O’Hara’s poems to be resituated. They are not poems that chronicle the city, but rather should be read as akin to contemporaneous event scores and happenings. Like Fluxus works, this poetry problematizes the difference between interpretation and enactment as it critiques dominant modernist notions of “reading poetry” in general.

So much work has been done on O’Hara’s role in the New York School poets, that I do not need to retrace that history here. The group was closely intertwined with multiple generations of abstract expressionist painters—both by inhabiting the same bars, cocktail parties, galleries and museums, and by collaborating on projects. As a result, the dominant strain of O’Hara criticism makes a connection between the

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5 When a homology isn’t being made with the New York School Painters by way of historical and aesthetic concerns, much criticism focuses on O’Hara’s friendships and social life as it appeared in his poems. It is for this reason that Robert Hampson and Will Montgomery edited Frank O’Hara Now: New Essays on the New York Poet. They feared that, though extraordinarily popular, O’Hara’s “reputation is in danger of calcifying around the urbane and charming persona that speaks in his poems” rather than the more challenging aspects of his work (Hampson and Montgomery 3). More widely, in the last few decades, O’Hara’s work has been instrumentalized to examine the oppression of gays in pre-Stonewall New York, as critics began to acknowledge the suggestion of homophobic violence that hangs over many of the poems. Andrew Ross reads “The Day that Lady Died” as featuring gay vernacular, which Ross claims is protopolitical: “it is a response to politically induced oppression, but at the same time, it is a response that accepts its current inability to act in an explicit political manner to combat oppression” (Ross 388). This argument gave rise to a series of identity or non-identity based readings that featured homosexuality as the center of the creative practice. See “B/O-Barthes's Text/O'Hara's Trick” (Bredbeck); “Confessional Counterpublics in Frank O'Hara and Allen Ginsberg” (Hartman); “Frank O'Hara's Open Closet” (Herring). For an example of this style of criticism with a more semiological impact, see “Symbolism and Code in Frank O'Hara's Early Poems” (I. Davidson). In an overlapping strain of criticism, O’Hara’s work is read as reflecting a New York City phenomenology; some critics treat the poems as a sort of recording of the experience of urban New York. An unusual take on this strain could be Timothy Gray’s argument that “the poets of the New York School, however devoted they may have been to avant-garde techniques like abstraction, should be placed alongside Annie Dillard, Wendell Barry, and Mary Oliver in the ranks of contemporary American nature writers” because they paint an urban “pastoral” (Gray 3).
aesthetics of abstract expressionist painting and the work of his poetry. Perhaps stemming from these arguments about aesthetic similarity to particular painters, from the 1960s-1980s, O’Hara’s work was largely read as apolitical. John Ashbery’s essay “Frank O’Hara’s Question,” written shortly after O’Hara’s death, has become the most important example of this reading, claiming that O’Hara’s work does not argue a political agenda, or “has no program” (Ashbery and Richie 6).

O’Hara’s connection with abstract expressionism, however, can also be read as having a more political (though not radical, but nationalist) edge. Since Max Kozloff’s article “American Painting During the Cold War” appeared in Artforum in 1973, art critics have hotly debated the relationship between abstract expressionism and Cold War politics. One year later, Eva Cockcroft’s article took this connection between U.S. Nationalism during the Cold War and the avant-garde art world further by arguing that “links between cultural Cold War politics and the sources of Abstract Expressionism” were “consciously forged” to attract European intellectuals to an American way of life (Frascina 126). The Museum of Modern Art in New York City was largely responsible for reifying and packaging abstract expressionism for this purpose. As Cockcroft showed, during the Cold War board members worked for the national defense; the museum sent exhibitions overseas to areas that had lucrative

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6 See Frank O’Hara: Painter Among Poets (Perloff, Frank O’Hara, Poet among Painters). It first appeared in 1977 and is largely responsible for this connection.
7 Hazel Smith comprehensively reviews the readings of O’Hara’s work situated into changing critical contexts. She points out that the readings of O’Hara’s work as “pure surface” and as radically apolitical now seem like a product of the post-new critical world (Smith 1–30).
8 Kozloff pointed out a connection between the “symbolic values” of abstract expressionism and the ideological circumstances of the Cold War, arguing that the individualist "charismatic hardsell" that defined U.S. politics of the time also defined the feeling of major abstract expressionist artists like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg (Frascina 116–120).
economic interests or were in need of anti-Soviet propaganda. Abstract expressionism was especially suited to representing the U.S. abroad because it was “new, fresh and creative... it could show the United States as culturally up-to-date competition with Paris” (Frascina 129). As powerful art historian and MoMA director, Alfred Barr argued that abstraction came about autonomously as an aesthetic stage after representation; the institution of MoMA implied that the United States of America was ahead of the rest of the world. In other words, this form of painting was used as potent American propaganda. By the time Serge Guillibaut’s *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* came out in 1983, a clear connection had been forged between Cold War isolationist politics and abstract expressionism.\(^9\) On the other side, many critics argue that abstract expressionism, and modernism from this time, is apolitical or suggests a radical politics opposed to mass culture and the status quo.\(^10\)

There are many parallels between this debate about the New York School of Painters and what I will argue here concerning O’Hara’s poetry. Both the Seagram Building and O’Hara have been aligned with abstract expressionism: O’Hara because

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\(^9\) Guilbaut’s book is a full study of “how the work of the avant-garde painters came to be accepted and used, without their being aware of it, to represent liberal American values [and used as] anti-Soviet propaganda” (Guilbaut 190).

\(^10\) Greg Barnhisel’s “Perspectives USA and the Cultural Cold War: Modernism in Service of the State” surveys these arguments clearly, claiming that for many critics and philosophers including Spender, Rosenberg, Greenberg, Macdonald, Howe and Adorno, “modernist art was by definition opposed to mass culture, whether that mass culture was American, Soviet, or Nazi” (Barnhisel, “Perspectives USA and the Cultural Cold War” 733). Thus, despite the connection to government forces, for many critics this art was against the status quo always resisting instrumentalization. Barnhisel’s larger argument, which builds from this survey, is about the way that literary modernism was instrumentalized and made “useful” to the state. For an expansion of this argument, also see *Cold War Modernists* (Barnhisel, *Cold War Modernists*). Robert Burstow disputes a strong connection between MoMA’s abstract expressionist exhibitions and the CIA, a connection which stemmed from Crockcroft’s work (Burstow).
of his affiliations and collaborations, the Seagram Building because of its avant-garde status and its debacle involving paintings by Mark Rothko and the Four Seasons restaurant. O’Hara also worked at MoMA for many years, in a job that allowed for the lunch breaks he famously used to write his poems. He eventually became the curator in charge of traveling exhibitions, the very shows that Guilbaut and others later exposed as cold war propaganda tools. Furthermore, as critics argue that MoMA was responsible for packaging abstract expressionism, it was likewise a MoMA exhibition catalogue that reified the “International Style of Architecture” that the Seagram exemplifies. O’Hara figures the Seagram Building to challenge the very ideals of conservative cultivation, individual freedom, and wealth that have been aligned with Abstract Expressionism. O’Hara’s work carves out an alternative outside the spaces that we know; I will discuss how it carves out a time outside the museum, showing performative possibilities outside institutional confines, and how, pointing to more generative categories, it makes a space outside of Cold War delineations of “public” and “private.” Thus in addition to the parallelism of debates about abstract expressionism, discussing O’Hara’s work in this way adds a new dimension to the conversation about the entanglement of Cold War politics, radical art, and nationalism.

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11 In 1958, Mark Rothko was commissioned to paint murals for the lobby of the Seagram Building. One story goes that when he found out they’d be displayed in the restaurant instead, he reneged on the deal (Lahr). Phyllis Lambert shows evidence that he was unclear on the meaning of privately owned public space from the beginning (Lambert).
More recently within O’Hara criticism, critics have discussed O’Hara’s work in terms of radical political possibility. Following Mutlu Konuk Blasing’s writing on the connection to capitalist markets and exploitation in O’Hara’s work (Blasing 52), Susan B. Rosenbaum argues that O’Hara’s walking poems circumvent flows of capital in order to “materialize other potential sources of identity and desire” (Rosenbaum 71). In a similar vein, Michael Clune argues that O’Hara’s “personal” poems create a poetics of “choice” that is based in an attempt to rescue the individual from the mechanical consumer model that accompanies free market discourse (Clune 5, 71). Alternatively, against what Oren Izenberg calls other critics’ “sociologically inflected readings” about the market, Izenberg claims O’Hara invents a new system of unrestricted values altogether (Izenberg 37). I agree that O’Hara creates new categories, which are not otherwise afforded by modernist capitalist discourse, but as I join this conversation about O’Hara as a political poet, I want to point to a politics of spatial practices and architectural discourse to help read the event of these action poems. The Seagram Building figured in O’Hara’s work allows for this political work.

The history of the Seagram Building—and its interconnection with O’Hara’s poetry—begins in the 1950s when Mies van der Rohe collaborated with Philip

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Johnson under the direction of Seagram’s whisky heir, Phyllis Lambert, to create what would become an important modernist architectural landmark. The Seagram Building was completed in 1958, while O’Hara was writing *Lunch Poems*. What does the “Seagram Building” or the “House of Seagram” in O’Hara’s poetry have to do with the Seagram Building at 375 Park Avenue in New York City? Here I move away from readings of representation and referent that have been well covered\(^{13}\) to instead explore poetic language as dynamic, not stable. This poetry does not mirror the quotidian, or use pieces of the city to make something else; instead, through participation it makes the structure of corporate midtown, as Deleuze and Guattari remark about the making of a minor literature, “vibrate with a new intensity” (Deleuze 19). This new intensity comes from political tactics for traversing distance and claiming a politicized social landscape. As we read the poems, the real spaces change.

*Public and Private Space in the Dynamic Seagram Plaza*

When the poet of “Walking” drops his hot dog into the Seagram fountain, he is using corporate public space the way it was intended, at least to a certain degree. The space, though owned by the Seagram Corporation, was meant to be for public use. By sanctioning the corporate space public, the building opens up the possibility for a variety of lunch encounters. The fountain itself is irresistibly touchable or litter-

\(^{13}\) Following but diverging from Marjorie Perloff’s assertion that O’Hara’s work relies on the surface of the real city, Lytle Shaw reads the proper names in O’Hara’s poems as the “raw materials” akin to those of artist Robert Rauschenberg’s work (Shaw 235).
able; it is “watery and clear and windy,” and it is meant as a space for the public to enjoy while eating lunch. It should not be surprising that O’Hara uses the Seagram Building’s plaza to show this dynamism. The plaza was highly popular immediately after it opened; it was a comfortable noontime space for executives, lovers, youth and homeless persons alike. Thus it was always moving and changing depending on which street vendors arrived, whether performers were juggling or miming, and who was making out on the steps of the fountain.14 William Whyte’s 1970s study “about city spaces and why some work for people, and some do not” features the Seagram plaza as the most successful “public” city space. In addition to extolling certain design qualities of the plaza, Whyte argued that people like to feel crowded—they like to think they are situated where events are unfurling—rather than being alone in empty spaces. According to Whyte, how much a plaza is used or enjoyed has to do with dynamic changes or happenings that take place through time. The dynamism of the plaza and of the fountain is like the tempo of O’Hara’s poetry of the time—his work often stages fast line breaks, snipped clauses and the dynamism of changing events. Yet, in addition to mirroring the contemporaneous city, there is also something subversive at work in his poems as they question the usual uses of spaces that “work for people.” Through dynamic encounters, many of O’Hara’s poems show scenes like the hot dog drop: moments of encounter that are public yet not quite sanctioned, that are in keeping with a dominant ethos but also subvert it. The

14 A 1963 “Talk of the Town,” in The New Yorker mentioned the Seagram plaza as a good place to watch “pretty girls daydreaming,” and witness the “passage of a platoon of executives” before returning to work (Bernstein).
“Walking” speaker’s hot dog littering is an example of making a personal mark on the public space, which is exactly what Whyte argues that people like to be able to do in public spaces, as long as they can do it in a crowd. Yet the clean fountain is for eating lunch near, not throwing lunch in— the speaker should be consuming his American snack, not using it to defile corporate culture.

All of the works I discuss here were either published in Lunch Poems or written during the same period. Lawrence Ferlinghetti suggested the concept for the City Lights Pocket Edition collection of Lunch Poems to O’Hara, and though he was reluctant at first to have much to do with the editorial decisions, O’Hara hammed it up by writing the cheesy back-cover blurb. The conceit of the book is that O’Hara wrote each of these poems on his lunch break from his job as a curatorial assistant at the Museum of Modern Art. Read as a singular project, the book carves out a literary break within the dominant structure of “work.” In other words, the lunch break is itself an oasis of expression or measured “free” time within the structured workday, and the book acknowledges the parameters of the workday while asserting private creative acts within them. O’Hara allows the union of these public and private acts to be generative, and he gives them a queer, almost sarcastic tone:

Often this poet, strolling through the noisy splintered glare of a Manhattan noon, has paused at a sample Olivetti to type up thirty or forty lines of ruminations, or pondering more deeply has withdrawn to a darkened ware-or

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15 The correspondence about Lunch Poems also shows that the project was taken on in somewhat of a flippant, or at least playful, tone. The earliest postcards between Ferlinghetti and O’Hara talk about Lunch Poems as “lunch,” claiming that it is "in the toaster" or "on the stove," metaphors for the writing and editing process (qtd. in O’Hara, Lunch Poems, 50th Anniversary Ed. 74, 73). The original postcards are held in the Bancroft Collection at the University of California, Berkeley.
firehouse to limn his computed misunderstandings of the eternal questions of life, co-existence and depth, while never forgetting to eat Lunch his favorite meal...
(O’Hara, Lunch Poems)

Despite the fact that the conceit of the book is to capture of both time and space within the structure of corporate capitalism, the tone here is flippant. O’Hara doesn’t devote space to “eternal questions of life, co-existence and depth” in this book. Or, if he does, they are never described in these self-important terms again. The teasing style of the blurb, or book advertisement, is used here to state a message about the book product and its own nature of public and private. The blurb on the outside of the book, written by O’Hara, both illuminates and complicates interior themes; the space and tone usually meant for advertising is hijacked to explicate the themes of the book. This trope of escaping to half-private space (a “darkened ware-or firehouse”) is important to the poems I will discuss. Because of the time constraint of lunch, the poet is not afforded a trip to his bedroom (the ultimate symbol of the architectural private), presumably miles away, so he inhabits half-public spaces to do private things. This liminal privacy anticipates Michael Warner’s more recent discussion of “criminal intimacy” in “Sex in Public,” as these places have been the principal scenes of gay male culture (Warner, Publics and Counterpublics 201). Furthermore, the poet’s withdrawal to a warehouse or a firehouse serves as an important reference to spatial tactics that frame the work. Both a firehouse and a warehouse are institutionally sanctioned spaces of the city, important for the upkeep of American dreams and ethics. The speaker stepping in to a warehouse, a building where goods or merchandise are stored, shows the self-aware confinement to a capitalistic goods-
based culture. It is among the darkened products of consumer society, half privately, half publicly that O’Hara writes his “deep” ponderings. Likewise, in a typical gesture of misuse, both the firehouse and the warehouse should be used for the everyday needs of city culture, not for “limn[ing] computed misunderstandings.”

The Olivetti mentioned likely refers to the Olivetti Shop near MoMA where O’Hara would sometimes write poems on the sample typewriters (Ferguson, O’Hara, and Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles 118). Again the poet is almost using the public space as intended. O’Hara subversively makes the sample typewriter useful for something—in this case, the writing of poetry—other than the possibility of buying it. In the case of the sample typewriter, as Drew Milne argues about O’Hara’s early work, here the poet is “doing writing as performance” for a public in the store (Milne 299). The book blurb performs the possibility of a public through these referents. Michael Warner writes about the formation of the public as “ideological.” He explains that the public “depends on a hierarchy of faculties that allows some activities to count as public or general, while others are thought to be merely personal, private, or particular” (Warner, Publics and Counterpublics 117). Warner shows that imagining the transformation of the private individual act into a public reality is a political move—it disrupts the ideology of spaces. The fact that many of these poems express worlds outside 1950s dominant corporate culture as they work within the public structure of space and time—deep ponderings in a firehouse, an anti-nationalist moment of spectacle, later, a public gay love relationship—make that political move a negotiation of space for gay practice. The fact that these spaces are
recognizable proper names of the MoMA neighborhood shows that, as Warner claims, the event of the poems relies on public signs, their histories, and the discourse surrounding them.

Architectural historians often read the Seagram Building as a trickery of the 1916 zoning laws mandating public space. The 1916 laws were the first to protect the light and air quality for pedestrians in New York City, and the building’s design took advantage of them. In order to build taller and wider than the laws would allow, Mies’s design incorporated the famous Seagram Plaza. This privately owned “public space” at street level allowed for corporate density that was technically legal but previously unseen.¹⁶ This trick was later codified in the 1961 zoning resolution, which awarded bonus space through a floor-area-ratio system to private buildings that provided a public plaza in their design. Whyte explains the law’s progression: “In 1961 New York enacted a zoning resolution that gave developers a floor-area bonus for providing plaza space. For each square foot of plaza space, the builder was allowed 10 feet additional commercial floor area. The requirement of the plazas was that they be accessible to the public at all times. That, as it turned out, was about all they were” (Whyte 112). It wasn’t until 1975 that amendments required that plazas “be amenable to the public as well, and laid down specific guidelines for insuring that they would be” (Whyte 112). Both the Seagram and the nearby Lever House’s designs include corporate “public” plazas—thereby keeping the light and air quality for pedestrians unchanged—that work dynamically between the category of “public”

¹⁶ The one exception is the Lever House (1952 Skidmore, Owings and Merrill), which previously accomplished a similar feat with a lighter, glass aesthetic.
and “private.” They are permeable to anyone but are maintained by the structures of corporate culture.¹⁷ The negotiation of private and public space, the confines of capitalist culture, and the assertion of individual and collective needs within it were a strong part of the dominant discourse of the surrounding urban structures in the late 50s and early 60s, and the Seagram Building itself was a pioneer in this discourse. It brought the “inside” nature of private space outside, and with this complication it also jeopardized the democratic ideology of outdoor urban public space.

By contemporaneously staging some of his most intimate poems in the space of this structure, O’Hara’s poetry participates in this complicated discussion of the Seagram Building. In studies of the categories of “public” and “private” in Cold War discourse and literature, the rhetoric of “containment” is ever-present. In the articulation of containment politics there is an external threat that must be “contained” in order to protect the sanctity of privacy.¹⁸ Yet looking at the architecture of public and private spaces of this era allows a different discussion of these categories. As O’Hara’s poetry and the history of the Seagram Building shows, architectural spaces and poetics can be both public and private in a multiplicity of generative ways. With techniques of subversion and dynamism, the poems enter into dialogue with corporate New York and ultimately suggest an alternative: they open new possibilities for modernist architecture and suggest a heightened sense of the

¹⁷ These “privately owned public spaces,” or POPS, have become important recently for their role in the Occupy movement. In New York City, POPS (Zuccati Park, for example) are required to remain open for 24 hours a day, “unless special permission is granted by the city planning commission” (Spencer and Levitt). It was this law that initially allowed protesters to sleep at the park.
¹⁸ See Containment Culture (Nadel).
“right to the city,” a term from Lefebvre, by working through a private space made public. In line with my reading of O’Hara’s poetry as a critique of corporate ideology and architecture, Robert Bennett writes, “O’Hara explicitly challenges the functionalist pretensions of International Style Modernist architecture by imagining dysfunction [and] ladic spaces” (Bennett 9). Bennett shows that through images, the poems “deconstruct post WWII America's techno-rational geometrical sense of architectural and urban construction” (Bennett 103). I agree with this sentiment but would also like to question why the poems figure a corporate site like the Seagram Building, one fraught by contradiction about the difference between modernist ideology and the avant-garde, a space that already questions public space and private corporations. O’Hara’s poems offer a critique that works from within—and because of—these already existing tensions.

When discussing the nature of poetry’s relationship to politics—or to what I have been calling radical politics—we must be careful to be specific. When O’Hara’s work asserts a “right to the city,” it also changes social life. Despite Lefebvre’s claim that any program wishing to change the fabric of social life cannot do it with language alone, he also argues for the possibility of a literal product of space to be produced from representational space (Lefebvre 19). In other words, cultural and social constructions can be created from symbolic—or, literary—space. In his “Personism: A Manifesto,” written to explain “Personal Poem,” O’Hara describes

19 This term comes from Lefebvre’s essay of that title. As Margit Mayer points out in her essay “The ‘Right to the City’ in the context of shifting mottos of urban social movements,” the term has a troubled history of neoliberal appropriation. I read Lefebvre’s “right” as not only a right to a given urban space, but as the right to constitute that space as well (Mayer).
love poems as being written to gratify love poems, not people; O’Hara’s philosophy of “personism” puts “the poem squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky-Pierre style” (O’Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara* 499). The image of the poem sexually receiving two persons—like the image of buildings washing their post-coitus sweat in the Central Park reservoir, which I will discuss shortly—extends our understanding of spaces as it extends our understanding of what poems do. O’Hara’s poems call directly on life and action. O’Hara called his poems “I do this I do that poems” (O’Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara* 341) for the precise reason that they call for movement, or *doing*, in the social realm. This rhetoric of thinking of poems as agents acting with, or alongside, people is key to understanding O’Hara’s work, as well as other participatory experimental poetry.

O’Hara’s “The Lay of the Romance of the Associations,” a farcical poem also first published in 1964, though not included in *Lunch Poems*, illustrates this radical critique. The poem describes a romance between the Park Avenue and Fifth Avenue Associations; the street planning of Upper East Side Manhattan is both the stuff of a love relationship and the resistance to its consummation. After a brief stanza to set the scene, the poem puts the two associations, named after their streets, in dialogue.

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20 William Watkin also reads these poems as invoking action, in what he calls the “center of the neo-avant-garde aesthetic” (Watkin, *In the Process of Poetry* 155).

21 “High above Manhattan’s towers
gilded like Camelot in every weather
I heard the cries of the Park Avenue and the Fifth Avenue Associations
trying to get together.”

In the magazine *C*, where this poem first appeared, this stanza is underlined. (Berrigan) In Allen’s *Collected*, it is italicized (O’Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*). Either punctuation style asks us to read it paratextually.
After the Fifth Avenue Association says, “I have so much to say to you but we are far apart,” the second stanza begins:

I hear you, yodeled the Park Avenue Association
in Westchester accents cracked with emotion,
and I too am harried even in my very center and a strange
throb of emotion fills the towering Seagram Building
with a painful foretaste of love for you. But alas,
that bourgeois Madison Avenue continues to obstruct
our free intercourse with each other.

(O’Hara, The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara)

Of course, this poem is a satire of Upper East Side corporate culture. While the Park Avenue Association has the accent of a wealthy New York suburb, the Fifth Avenue Association later wonders what Saks might think. Madison, the street that runs between them in the city grid, is “bourgeois.” Yet, the project of the poem goes beyond class farce. There is a play between the singular and the collective in the above passage. The associations are personified and speak as a singular “I,” though not in one voice (Park Avenue has accents). Likewise, it is Madison Avenue itself who is “bourgeois,” not the people on it. These streets are animated, but also bear a metonymic relation to their inhabitants.

In this poem, the city is romancing itself against its own structured spatialization. The streets create a framework of planned urban terrain, a territorialized east side Manhattan in which Madison runs parallel in between Park and Fifth. The Seagram Building is part of this structure, but it is phallically filled with the “painful foretaste” of Park Avenue. The relationship expands across the space of the east side of the city, while also crossing through many tropological areas—from the lovers in a love poem and their historicity, to commercial
associations, to the streets of the city, and then to the buildings on these streets. By the time we read to the end of the second stanza, the poem has traveled a great distance via this relationship. The title includes a spatial play in its pun as well; the associations and their laying are set apart textually and the gratuitous double set of articles around “Romance” creates a distance within the poem. Here it is useful to think of the redundancy of “The Lay of the Romance of the Associations” [emphasis mine], as a depiction of a poem sexually gratifying itself, as in “Personism.” A lay is a “short lyric poem intended to be sung” (OED), and also has a long history in medieval French romance poetry that deals with the courts, or the highest of the feudal classes. This definition and history helps us read the sing-songy duet, tone of the poem and its fixation on the elitism of the neighborhoods. Yet the poem’s bawdy nature allows semantic slippage: these associations would like to lay each other.

So far I have been discussing this poem as though the “associations” were the streets themselves, and the poem often refers to them this way. The “romance,” however, is between the associations, not between the streets. The Fifth Avenue Association is a long-standing group of New York merchants with a rich political history. From its inception in 1907, the group has worked hard to keep its elite status—sometimes campaigning for or against city laws and building developments according to their mission. 22 Park Avenue Association, founded a little later in 1922,

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22 In 1917 the Fifth Avenue Association was active in advocating for the private sector after the 1916 zoning law put restrictions on what private corporations could build in the area. By the 1920s Fifth Avenue above Thirty Fourth Street was solidified as the “elite shopping district” (Weiss 61–62). Max Page argues that the Fifth Avenue Association was a major play in the transformation of New York City from 1910-1940. He writes, “Fifth Avenue became,
spent its time publishing the *Park Avenue Social Review* and “keeping the avenue free of commercialism and unwanted motor traffic” (Trager 118). Through the associations, O’Hara is importantly discussing the politics and the commerce that surround these streets as well. In other words, the poem not only makes the grid become dynamic, but plays on its class signifiers and merchant affiliations as well.

The end of the poem suggests a sexual encounter in Central Park. The associations may leave their dominant spaces entirely for an illicit meeting. Fifth Avenue proposes:

> Why don’t we rendezvous in Central Park behind a clump of cutthroats near the reservoir and there we’ll kiss and hold each other sweatily as in five o’clock on a mid-August Friday in the dusk and after, languorously bathe, to sweeten city water for all time.  

Here “cutthroats,” though most apparently read as muggers or murderers lurking in the park, could also refer to a common type of fresh water trout in the reservoir. The poem again plays with the notion that the country is safe and healthy, while the city threatening and dirty. Either way, here the two associations are forbidden to meet any other way than in the dangerous half-private setting “behind a clump of cutthroats” at the end of the workday. When Michael Warner points out that intimacy is privatized, he writes “the discourse contexts that narrate true personhood have been segregated from those that represent citizens, workers or professionals” (Warner 199). As this scene of “criminal intimacy” can be read as a nod to gay culture, it also dissolves the restrictions and boundaries of the public sphere that privatized these acts. The two

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in the early years of the twentieth century, the center of intense efforts to resist that market's destructive dynamic and to preserve a particular tangible sense of place” (Page 168).
streets might be able to leave their loci and meet in the park for sex at closing time, though illicitly and dangerously. The structure of dominant ordered culture, once it breaks, loosens its hold on the physical structures of both “real” space and normative consumer spatial practices—and allows for an activation of new rights and norms. After the streets are able to break out of their structure, they wish to “sweeten city water for all time” through the water supply. This infectious but improbable image of the sweat of sexually fulfilled collective-singular streets entering our drinking water forces us to think about streets, sex acts, and labor differently. O’Hara’s poem works against corporate rigidity through a raunchy after-work “lay,” and is able to do so because of its play on architectural discourse surrounding the Seagram Building.

Along with the metaphor of the Seagram as erection also comes its history; the Seagram Building appropriated the avant-garde’s progressive and “clean” cachet to bolster the ideology of Cold War America. From even before it was built, the Seagram Building was situated to be exemplary of modernist architecture in the United States. Bauhaus, an avant-garde movement in Europe with a careful aesthetic that worked to be “objectivity consonant with the modern world,” later became for Americans “a ready-made style with an established aesthetic conditioned by certain practical considerations” (Jordy, Bacon, and Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture 213–214). The beginning of this change is marked by the 1932 MoMA exhibition and companion book, which unified the program of International Style. Henry Russell Hitchcock Jr. and Philip Johnson defined International Style as “emphasis upon volume—space enclosed by thin planes or
surfaces as opposed to the suggestion of mass and solidity; regularity as opposed to symmetry or other kinds of obvious balance; and, lastly, dependence upon the intrinsic elegance of materials, technical perfection, and fine proportions, as opposed to applied ornament” (Hitchcock). They cited Bauhaus, and Mies specifically, as important to the movement, and discussed many of his buildings in the book. The International Style then, soon to be copied all over the United States, would embody the “look” of uniform corporate America. And despite all the ways that the Seagram Building deviated from corporate modernist architecture, “bronze and a specially tinted pink-gray glass, the non-standard, actually 4 ft. 7½ inch curtain-wall module, and the dull glow of its spectacularly orchestrated perimeter nightlighting,” it (and its architect) is still seen as exemplary of American corporate style (Scott 336).

Later this style would be largely disliked and derided, but during World War Two in the U.S., modern architecture was advertised as a healthy hygienic future and the Seagram company used this Bauhaus image to sell their products (Flowers 95–96). In the 1940s, a Seagram ad series, which ran under the phrase “Men Who Plan Beyond Tomorrow Like…” followed by catchphrases of the Seagram product (“…the Lightness of Seagram’s V.O.” or “…Canadian Whiskey at its Glorious Best,”), used architecture to gesture toward progress and cleanliness. The ads show modernist office spaces with “germ-free air” produced by new “hygienic lighting,” and cities made up of ramps, health centers and “tall glass towers equipped for light and heat

23 Life® Magazines March 12, 1945. “Men Who Plan Beyond Tomorrow Like the Lightness of Seagram’s V.O.” © Diageo. All rights reserved. Used by permission.
These ads aimed to associate Seagram’s whiskey with a clean, powerful, modern future, and they used an architectural aesthetic that recalled Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe to do it. The Seagram Company would later continue to use this readymade image of American superiority, wealth and cleanliness—which paradoxically came from a European avant-garde tradition—to clear their reputation of whatever might be unsavory to the 1950s highball drinking public.25

Secret – and very likely gay—sex that changes the taste of the city’s water supply through a “painful” ejaculating skyscraper is a wild subversion of this cleanliness. Not only does the lay recall an avant-garde trajectory by its use of farce (for example, Jarry’s “Ubu Roi,” a play that uses known people and place names for farcical and comic purposes), it directly undermines the carefully constructed discourse of the building in question. In the place of cleanliness, we have sweat. Instead of power, we have dissatisfied desire—and whiners who sigh “alas” in “voices cracked with emotion.” It is the most farcical play on the possibility of public and private boundaries in a Cold War context imaginable: there is penetration and infiltration on a mass scale. Deborah Nelson writes about the dominant understandings of public and private spheres in this era, “The potency of American democracy in Cold War rhetoric was, therefore, not its cultivation of a vibrant and

24 Life® Magazines February 21, 1944. “Men Who Plan Beyond Tomorrow Like CANADIAN Whisky at its Glorious Best” © Diageo. All rights reserved. Used by permission. 25 As Benjamin Flowers points out, the Seagram Company especially was in need of rebuilding their reputation. They were owned by a Jewish Canadian family, the Bronfmans, who had been very active in bootlegging during Prohibition. After decades of struggling because of this association, Phyllis Bronfman Lambert (daughter to Samuel Bronfman) decided to create a landmark modern building “to take a “moral position’ and make a commitment to greatness.” (Flowers 110)
free public discourse but its vigilant protection of private autonomy. Furthermore, the stakes of this conviction were typically apocalyptic: either we preserved the integrity of private spaces and thus the free world, or we tolerated their penetration and took the first step toward totalitarian oppression....”(D. Nelson xiii). In this poem, the penetration is from a private scene into a public space. This penetration then changes the entire order of the city with its potency. Not only is the sanctity of the dominant and elite sections of New York changed through this penetration, but those sections are also enjoying it.

At one point in the poem, in order to coax Madison Avenue toward sex, Park Avenue says, “our joining will fecundate/ this otherwise arid and sterile-towered metropolis!/ the alliance of aristocrat with parvenue has always been/ the hope of democracy, not to mention bureaucracy”(O’Hara, _The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara_ 321). The hope is that the mixture of class then allows fertile green plants to grow, but the nature metaphor is tied to capitalism when the product of the romance is described as “tender evergreens of love and commerce.” The nationalist rhetoric of containment culture and sanctity of the private are combined with capitalist culture—all to be undone by “sweetened” waters. During the early years of the Cold War, the Soviet threat was often described as “essential fluid” in a sexualized narrative of what Alan Nadel, from the rhetoric of George Kennan’s work, calls, “courtship and rivalry.”26 The park reservoir, like the Seagram fountain in “Walking,” is a fluid

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26 See _Containment Culture American Narrative, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age_ (Nadel 5). Stanley Kubrick’s film _Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the
public place available for corruption. Both poems change the taste of the public water;\textsuperscript{27} they use the poetics of architecture to generate new spaces between private and public. This makes the politics of O’Hara’s poems about subversion but also about possibility. Through these encounters, the poems create new spaces.

\textit{Bomb} plays with these notions as well; General Ripper believes he has discovered the Communist plot to pollute Americans’ “precious bodily fluids.”\textsuperscript{27} During the Cold War, there was a debate about the possibility of fluoride in the drinking water making up a communist plot to endanger American safety—conservative groups insisted it was poison. Both Kubrick and O’Hara play with this notion.
Figure 6: Life® Magazines February 21, 1944. “Men Who Plan Beyond Tomorrow Like the Lightness of Seagram’s V.O.” © Diageo. All rights reserved. Used by permission.
Figure 7: Life® Magazines March 12, 1945. “Men Who Plan Beyond Tomorrow Like CANADIAN Whisky at its Glorious Best” © Diageo. All rights reserved. Used by permission.
Postmodernization and “a silver hat please”

“Personal Poem,” written in 1959 and published in Lunch Poems, also depicts the Seagram Building as a dynamic space:

I walk through the luminous humidity
passing the House of Seagram with its wet
and its loungers and the construction to
the left that closed the sidewalk if
I ever get to be a construction worker
I’d like to have a silver hat please
(O’Hara, Lunch Poems 9–14)

Here we are aware of the literal product of space—the House of Seagram organizes the experience of the areas around it through a semiotic and categorical claim—as well as its dynamic possibilities. However, the speaker quickly produces a navigational tactic in the third line: “the left that closed the sidewalk if.” The introduction of the “if” to the end of this line displays the dynamism of the city; the sidewalk is closed conditionally, on the condition of “if.” The House of Seagram is not a static sign organizing space but a dynamic and changing place subject to everyday changes, problems, and remodels. Yet the quick enjambment of the next line doesn’t provide the structural conditions of an urbanism that would temporarily close a sidewalk for a busted sewer line or new gutters. Rather, the next line is a communication of subjective desire. Thus tactics of private desire animate the building and the structured space of the city. The trajectory of this passage goes from the irrational, natural conditions of the weather (“luminous humidity”) to the semiotic spatial organization of corporate Manhattan (the “House of Seagram”) to an aestheticized homoerotic embodiment of labor (construction workers with the
possibility of a “silver hat”). Although the temporality of the reading process sorts them as a progression from one state to another, these elements are described in conflation as well as in linear temporality. The possessive “its” in the second line claims that the “wet” and the “loungers” belong to the House of Seagram; the private building has claimed the street area, the people, and their work as well.\textsuperscript{28} This simultaneity and conflation of ownership can be read as an acknowledgement of the expansive, prevailing nature of the dominant city infrastructure through figuring the “House of Seagram.” Yet there is something extravagant about this image as well—the workers in silver hats are envied.

When the Seagram Building went up, it embodied luxury in its use of materials, its detailing and extraordinary artistic acquisitions,\textsuperscript{29} and because of its fashion photo-shoots in its lobby. The bronze exterior, meant to patina and change in time, was expensive and difficult to maintain. This extravagance was apparent and highly publicized to critique the “functionalism” of the International Style, which though expensive still showed the interior support beams on the exterior. For example, before construction started on the building, a \textit{New York Times} article titled “New Skyscraper on Park Avenue To Be First Sheathed in Bronze: 38-Story House of Seagram Will Use 3,200,000 Pounds of Alloy in Outer Walls Colored for Weathering” lists fact after fact about the detailed fixtures and decadent materials.

\textsuperscript{28} The “wet” of the Seagram building is also a cultural and visual pun. In addition to Seagram’s whisky or gin being a wet product, to the company’s chagrin, the Seagram Building was often likened to a highball of whiskey because of its bronze caramel colored exterior and its shape (Flowers 126).

\textsuperscript{29} They acquired valuable art including Rembrandt and Michelangelo’s paintings and of course the (nearly acquired) Rothko murals for the Four Seasons Restaurant.
The article spouts shocking figures: “Fabrication of the bronze, which will be completed at the Garden City (L.I.) plant of General Bronze, will require 160,000 man-hours of labor. The water-tight joining of each bronze unit to glass will be subjected to a ‘hurricane test’ of wind and water.”

As it brought wealth into a functionalist modernist discourse, the Seagram Building also combined cultural prowess with nationalism and capital-driven technology: it introduced the first automatic bill changer, and it was the first corporate business to fly an American flag (“49-Star Flag Raised At Seagram Building”). For the dedication of the Seagram building in 1959, a symposium on the new values in the Nuclear age was held at the building. Speakers included Robert Frost, Bertrand Russell and Dr. Milton S. Eisenhower, as well as a heterogeneous handful of banking executives and anthropologists (Callahan). In 1962, the spectacle of the marriage of geopolitics, wealth and art culture reached new heights when a full-scale model of a Polaris missile was shown in the lobby. In the Seagram Building, corporate America meets “culture,” because of Cold War politics and the vehicle of the International Style. Just as abstract art may have been considered “ahead” of the world in a progressive, nationalist way, this building embodied techno-capitalist American style. The Seagram Building pushed boundaries and charted new territory—and O’Hara’s poems figured this momentum to create worlds through a mingling of quick city street scenes, literary tastes, and the possibility of a love story through a handshake.
As post-war commerce became a national platform in the midst of the Cold War and the transition to late capitalism, the Seagram Building became paradigmatic of this change in geopolitical context. As Benjamin Flowers writes, the Seagram Building was “engaged in the construction of both a business entity and a particular way of life” (Flowers 100). This way of life was defined by material power and cleanliness, and in the 1950s, advertisements linking architecture and national “morals” with international power continued. Flowers writes, “In the face of the threat of nuclear war, the Seagram Building was welcome evidence of the powers and ingenuity of American engineering and design. The wealth, imagination, and advanced technology necessary to construct it were cast as the very forces that would serve the United States on the geopolitical stage and preserve the vitality of American business, culture and society” (Flowers 139). In other words, the Seagram Building was a major capitalist and nationalist spectacle. During construction, the company generated interest by encouraging “sidewalk superintendents,” or people who peeped in on the construction through Plexiglas holes at various heights and intervals in the fences around the site. To encourage peeping, the company broadcasted information about the construction in multiple languages and displayed a model of the completed building near the site (Flowers 136). Thus the construction itself garnered a spectacle by working through an economy of attention. It stood for a corporate future for

30 For a study of the effects of these postmodern changes to New York City on art see Joshua Shannon's *The Disappearance of Objects: New York Art and the Rise of the Postmodern City*. He argues that the New York avant-gardes in the 60s revealed the city’s postmodernization by showing urban renewal, ascendency of commodity design, and a shift toward systematicity in their aesthetic (Shannon 188).
America, and it did this—paradigmatically of late capitalism—by advertising its own image. It is for these reasons that architectural historian and theorist Felicity Scott reads the building as a “sort of switching point, a symptom of modernism's ever-more complete integration within the globalizing and spectacular forces driving…postmodernization, forces at once social, economic, technological, aesthetic, informatic, and geopolitical” (Scott 366). Similarly, critics of O’Hara’s work often read the New York School’s poetry as signaling an important switch from modernist to postmodern literature (Altieri; H. Smith; Lowney; Blasing; Watkin, In the Process of Poetry).

Whether the construction work that “closed the sidewalk” in “Personal Poem” alludes to the raising of the building or to a moment of repair, the spectacle of abundance is made clear through the aestheticized construction workers in “silver hats.” Yet as the poem depicts corporate spectacle, it also offers a droll, alternative gay culture. Without criticizing or undercutting the image of wealth and power, the poem inflects it ever so slightly with a queer reference.31 Later in the poem, after discussing their literary tastes, the poets in the poem discuss desire and reputation: “we don't want to be in the poets' walk in/ San Francisco even we just want to be rich/and walk on girders in our silver hats.” Here the poem satirically rejects prestige in favor of wealth and spectacle. The poets want to be watched from below (“on girders”), not commemorated abstractly—they want their poems to be like the

31 For a thorough study of Cold War gender politics and poetry, see Michael Davidson, Guys Like Us : Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics. In a different poem, Davidson considers O’Hara’s register to be “insouciant, queer, celebratory,” which provides an important antidote to both the contemporary gender politics and contemporary nationalism.
Seagram with its Plexiglas peepers, but not quite the same. Here stylish gay culture quietly subverts prestigious corporate culture.

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The discourse surrounding modernist curtain wall office buildings now has a melancholy, not a celebratory, tone. The cheapness of International Style look-alikes allowed a proliferation of knock-off buildings and the public forgot about the more spectacular buildings like the Lever House and the Seagram Building. Scott points out that this unhappiness with cheap, flat corporate architecture is usually (unfairly) traced back to Mies van der Rohe. By the 1970s, the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies admitted that “Mies’s historical reputation is undergoing what could be called a bad period” (Scott 245). Scott considers this moment the turn to postmodernism. She writes:

The Seagram Building emerged into a media environment that no longer operated according to a modern or industrial paradigm, but which functioned at the very forefront of postmodernization. This was no longer a milieu of avant-garde negation and shock aesthetics—whether in photography, photomontage, print, cinema, or architecture…It was a territory organized increasingly by the totalizing logics of the Cold War, by the globalizing forces of multinational corporations (such as Seagram), and by the spread of

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32 Terence Diggory reads this poem differently but also with the politics of the Seagram Building in mind; he argues that O'Hara upstages the Seagram building in “Personal Poem” with a sense of “camp style,” as signified by the silver hats that goes against the aesthetic of the building. He reads O'Hara's interest in the building as staged through William de Kooning's paintings and aesthetics—another gesture toward the New York School of painters and away from International Style and abstract expressionism (Diggory).
American consumer culture and corporate architecture, while simultaneously being regulated at home by the ever more extensive reach into domestic space of corporate television networks. (Scott 348)

In other words, the Seagram Building both exemplified the discourse and signaled its changing nature—it appeared as a modernist gesture in an age that could no longer support it.

In O’Hara’s “Nocturne,” dated 1955, the speaker describes his feelings when he is far away from his lover as similar to an International Style corporate building.

By reading this poem closely, I hope to shed light on this issue of why postmodernization makes villains out of modernist buildings and how O’Hara’s architectural critique might intervene. I quote the entire poem:

There’s nothing worse
than feeling bad and not
being able to tell you.
Not because you’d kill me
or it would kill you, or
we don’t love each other.
It’s space. The sky is grey
and clear, with pink and
blue shadows under each cloud.
A tiny airliner drops its
specks over the U N Building.
My eyes, like millions of
glassy squares, merely reflect.
Everything sees through me,
in the daytime I’m too hot
and at night I freeze; I’m
built the wrong way for the
river and a mild gale would
break every fiber in me.
Why don’t I go east and west
instead of north and south?
It’s the architect’s fault.  
And in a few years I’ll be 
useless, not even an office 
building. Because you have 
no telephone, and live so 
far away; the Pepsi-Cola sign, 
the seagulls and noise.  

(O’Hara, The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara)

The poem itself is shaped like a skyscraper, and the speaker claims that without his lover, his eyes, “like millions of/ glassy squares, merely reflect” similarly to the glass curtain walls of business buildings. The poem then uses language of the critics of Bauhaus: “Everything sees through me/ in the daytime I’m too hot/ and at night I freeze.” These complaints were popular critiques of downtown office spaces as this style of building became more popular. The glass curtain walls created a very hot environment inside in the afternoon, and despite the advertised aesthetically sterile quality of the light, were thought to be a health concern. The tone of these three lines is similar to Tom Wolfe’s in From Bauhaus to Our House, a diatribe against the International Style written 20 years after these buildings went up. Wolfe claims that architecture of this type was not functional and that, for the most part, it was detested. In “Nocturne,” the poet decides that his structural problems have occurred because he was “built the wrong way” and this is “the architect’s fault.” We see the critique of fad, or periodized architecture in the way he discusses his lonely, vacant constitution: “And in a few years I’ll be/useless, not even an office/ building.” A melancholy lover

33 A renovation in 2007 installed a new glass curtain wall in the modernist UN building. Before that, the glass was “very thin, single-paned with leaky caulking and early aluminum design” and the building lost a lot of money on both air-conditioning and heating costs (Treblin and Phalnikar).
feels irrelevant—like a modernist building in a changing era. Yet O’Hara’s poem is not so much criticizing modern architecture as it is interrogating its ideology.

The speaker’s modern building is under the threat of Cold War ideology. We hear this mirrored in the fact that the lovers’ quarrel is as much about who might kill whom, as about “space” between them. This recalls my earlier discussion of notions of threatening, even lethal spaces of containment culture. Meanwhile a “tiny airliner drops its specks over the UN Building.” This could be a moment of extraordinary violence as the poet calmly watches a bomb being dropped on the United Nations; though the “specks” more likely refer to a leaflet bomb, or pamphlets dropped from an airliner. The event—be it an image of a bird defecating examined through a metaphor of a propaganda dissemination or violence, or, a true political event of some kind—that the poet witnesses, merely allows him to reflect further on the architecture of the space.

The United Nations Building, another example of International Style, designed by Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer, was built in 1950. It sits removed from other skyscrapers overlooking the East River in Turtle Bay. The speaker’s loneliness is likened to a solitary skyscraper before the International Style was widely copied, pointing to this issue of postmodernization as the “modern” becomes a period style. Then these symbols and tropes of architecture and the war are used to discuss an intimate relationship, showing the ways that pushing the boundaries of this rhetoric generates new (and unexpected) spaces. The poem’s false equation at the end—because the lover is unreachable, the facts of urbanism present themselves—is
further testament to this alternate space. Perversely, the private relationship creates the possibility of the public signs (the “Pepsi-Cola sign…/ and noise”). Both the Pepsi-Cola sign and the airliner with leaflets illustrate the advertisements of a postmodern era “over” the modern discourse. The relationship is not direct in an avant-grade sense (or over a “telephone”). Rather ads and city noise are hijacked in the service of personal affect—and these elements are simultaneously critiqued. In other words, the love-relationship takes on postmodern qualities as it plays with postmodern critique.

The speaker without his lover is like a modern building under the threat of postmodernized obsolescence. He too embodies a sort of paradox—the voice of the queer speaker aging, like the International Style, was once the ultimate symbol of the new and the modern, yet may become only a symbol of a period now passed. The sadness of periodizing modernism is tragic and impending. The poem thus depicts these modernist architectural spaces as they sit on the threshold between modernist villain and postmodernist lover. This poem, like the others I have examined, is working alongside the poetics of its contemporary architecture. It allows us to see the generative possibility afforded by these spaces through the way the poems produce radical happenings; they help us activate these spaces. Michel de Certeau’s philosophy (done 20 years after O’Hara’s poems) on how individuals use tactics of enunciation to navigate everyday activities and to create dynamic spaces is similar to the work of this poetry.34 The crucial difference, however, rests on the roles of the

34 See The Practice of Everyday Life (Certeau). Hazel Smith rightly points out that “O’Hara’s embrace of popular culture, consumerist culture and the quotidian… anticipates the attitudes
literary and the relational. Though O’Hara’s poetry does show walking in the city through its movement and a representation of its experience, the poems also create their active reception. These “real” spaces surrounding MoMA become capable of being manipulated. The poems thus accomplish an act that spatial practice cannot, showing what we cannot achieve with our everyday practices and what our “real” spaces cannot do. They use the rhetoric of their very possibility to generate new possibilities. With elite consumer associations comes intercourse that subverts Cold War ideology, with the spectacle of national wealth and cleanliness comes a queer desire, with architectural critique comes the possibility of a valuable love relationship. Each poem asks us to participate in an event in the places that we know in order to transform these very places.

My reading of O’Hara’s work and the Seagram Building points out the resonance between a radical poetic tradition and “I do this I do that.” They both call on the transformative abilities of spatial practice. They ask us to consider our relationships with spaces and with reading. Allen Ginsberg’s homage to O’Hara, “City Midnight Junk Strains,” exposes the connection I am drawing.35 He uses O’Hara’s architectural metaphors to describe the poet himself:

Poet of building-glass
I see you walking you said with your tie
flopped over your shoulder in the wind on 5th Ave
under the handsome breasted workmen

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of the 1980s and 1990s, for example de Certeau’s suggestion that the public can use spaces and products of everyday life in a creative, even subversive way”(H. Smith 33).

35 For a beautiful discussion of Ginsberg’s poem in relation to O’Hara, see Geoff Ward’s “Housing the Deliberations’: New York, War, and Frank O’Hara,” (Hampson and Montgomery 13–28).
on their scaffolds ascending Time
& washing the windows of life
(Berkson 148)

The objectification of the workers (“handsome breasted”) and the “flopped” tie paint a queer image in keeping with the queer spaces of O’Hara’s poems. More importantly, Ginsberg noticed that O’Hara’s work does something participatory: the poet is the building as he also actively builds; the workers around him are helping him build as well—they are “ascending Time” and creating new possibilities for “life.” Ginsberg noticed that, like the most experimental work of the time, these poems require their readers to help create new spaces by reading and enacting.

**Where is the New York School?: *Locus Solus* as Curatorial Project**

Like the focus of the individual poems, the making of the “New York School of poets” was an event in and of itself. In fact, the “school” was a sort of occasion, or, as I will show, a group of occasional poems. As the story is usually told (when it doesn’t center on O’Hara), the New York School of poets made up an important part of what was called the “New American Poetry,” first so titled by Donald Allen in 1960.36 The emplaced nature of the school was important—they were poets who

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36 Donald Allen’s anthology, *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960*, first called them the New York Poets. Their section of the anthology (titled as such) included Barbara Guest, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler, Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery and Edward Field. The first five make up what is commonly known as the New York School of poets. Field’s inclusion in the section was somewhat bizarre. He later claimed he had no connection to the New York School but was included in the collection because he had a brief affair with Frank O’Hara and O’Hara strongly influenced Allen to include him (*Encyclopedia of the New York School Poets* 160 quotes from Field, *The Man* 84-85)
came to New York and were writing there—but it was also full of contradictions. The three main players (Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch) actually met at Harvard in Massachusetts. Furthermore, Ashbery spent most of the New York School years in Paris. I do not have a stake in defining what makes up the New York School or tracing its well-known history. Rather, in this section of chapter two, I examine how these poets define their work as part of a movement. Instead of looking at the anthologies that defined their work externally, I examine Locus Solus, a small magazine produced by the key players of the New York School and published in Paris between 1961-1962, long before the anthologies that gave the school its codified name. I offer a discussion of the magazine in some detail because, while it is the most unified voice of the New York School, it also makes the contradictions of the New York School most apparent. In this way, we arrive at a full picture of this experimental movement, which, I argue, ultimately critiques the notion of a unified or static image of Cold War New York City, while reinserting the possibility of the role of poetry to make change. It does this through changing what we think it means to “read a poem” as well as changing the way we think about spaces.

In the previous section of this chapter, I showed that the connection between O’Hara’s poems and the politics of architectural space allows the work to be

37 See The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets; The Scene of My Selves; The New York School Poets and the Neo-Avant-Garde; Statues of Liberty: The New York School of Poets; Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions, and In The Process of Poetry: The New York School and the Avant-Garde (Lehman; Diggory and Miller; Silverberg; Ward; M. Nelson; Watkin;) for good and current accounts.

38 In addition to Donald Allen’s New American Poetry, anthologies that helped externally define the New York School include John Bernard Meyers’s The Poets of the New York School (1969) and Ron Padgett and David Shapiro’s An Anthology of New York Poets (1970).
resituated; once it is resituated, we see that the work opens generative spaces amidst narrow nationalist Cold War ideology. In this section, I will show how a politics of textual spatial practice works to define the movement of the New York School of poets in general. O’Hara called on both dynamic images of real space and on the solidified images that discourse created about those spaces (from advertisements and propaganda, for example); so too does the New York School of Poets call on several types of spatial images in order to generate a new space entirely. Where O’Hara used the Seagram Building, *Locus Solus* figures New York and Paris at large; the publication figures these spaces fluidly through a spatial practice of enactment, both through the activity of the poems themselves and the journal’s circulation. Under Michael Warner’s paradigm, any given reading public is the “social space” created by its relative circulation of texts. In other words, *Locus Solus* carefully engineered its own spaces of critique both on and off the page, and in Warner’s words, in the circulation and accumulation of a public, that critique itself is “world making” (Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics” 82).

*Locus Solus* was an engine of the New York School tastes, understandings, and styles; though it was edited in Paris and printed in Lans-en-Vercours it seemingly provided an image of New York City. Edited by John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler and Harry Mathews, with each editor assuming editorial responsibility for a different issue—except Mathews who was more responsible for the “physical aspects of the magazine”—the magazine brings the primary members of the New York School together with Mathews, who would become a member of Oulipo (Mathews
letter; Kenneth Koch papers at the Berg Collection 11.10). The journal started when Mathews and Ashbery, both of whom lived in France in the late fifties and early sixties, decided to spend part of Mathew’s small inheritance on starting a new journal.\(^39\) They named it Locus Solus after the proto-surrealist novel of the same name by Raymond Roussel. The term “Locus Solus,” can be translated from the Latin to mean “the only place” or “location alone,” and it is the name of the estate owned by the eccentric protagonist of the novel. Thus the journal immediately signified an interest in sovereign spaces through the surrealist legacy. The French surrealist literary focus on a textual unseating of structured spaces was flagged right away as being brought to New York City via the New York School.\(^40\)

Even though the journal only lasted through five volumes (with volumes three and four published as a single issue), it came to define the voice of the New York School. The central members of the school—O’Hara, Ashbery, Koch, and Schuyler—

\(^{39}\) Mathews had moved to Paris with his wife and infant son in the early 50s. In the mid-50s Ashbery came to France on a Fulbright in Montpellier, and when it was over, he came back to France again (this time Paris) to do dissertation research on Raymond Roussel. By the late fifties, Mathews lived between his apartment in Paris and a farmhouse in Lans-en-Vercors. Ashbery introduced Mathews to modern French writers, Michaux and Reverdy, for example. Importantly Ashbery also introduced Mathews to Roussel, from which they both eventually claimed influence. Ashbery and Koch convinced Mathews to fund the magazine. Mathews hadn’t published much of his work in the 50s and felt taken advantage of at first—the New York School wanted to publish their own poetry and that of their friends—but soon he saw himself as part of the group (Sawyer-Lauçanno 258).

\(^{40}\) The New York School of poets were very interested in French surrealism and also often critically compared to French surrealist writing of this kind. The clearest examples of this unseating can be seen in André Breton’s Nadja, and Louis Aragon’s Le paysan de Paris which both explore subjective experiences of Paris. Raymond Roussel’s novels and poems which work to explore impossible physical spaces through the spaces of language was an important predecessor for both more recognized surrealist work, and for Ashbery and Mathews who modeled their poetry partially from his influence. As discussed later in the chapter, this a proto-psychogeographic, experimental impulse, which later manifests clearly in the work of Guy Debord and the SI, alongside the New York School.
are the only poets to be published in every issue, besides Mathews. Poets that appeared in three issues include Barbara Guest, Bill Berkson, Kenward Elmslie and Michael Benedikt, who critics have long considered the next ring of the inner-circle of the New York School. Despite its French publication, its inclusion of French quotations, poetry in French, and focus on translations from the French, the journal included mostly New York poets and circulated heavily in New York City. As the mail circulation of Fluxus scores formed an experimental space that bears a direct imprint on the work, this other image of New York, made through the Parisian journal, directly affected the style of poetry that not only characterized the first generation of the NY school, but also the second and the third. Thus, despite its designation of “one place,” the journal shows the way multiple places inform any singular one.

Understanding the formation of the New York School of poetry according to the journal provides different results from understanding the group as simply a constellation in Donald Allen’s Anthology. Not only did Locus Solus contain different poets than Allen’s Anthology, but it also includes more poets, and more varied poetic styles. As Terence Diggory points out, it also included several prose

41 Like James Schuyler, Barbara Guest is often considered a central member of the New York School of poets. For a discussion of her work as part of the group as well as her exclusion from the group due to sexism, see Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions (M. Nelson).

42 The Kenneth Koch Papers archive at the Berg Collection contains several of the customs import statements in two increments of 1500 (Koch 11.6). This is the clearest indication that I have found of the number of journals that circulated in New York at the time of their publication. Much critical history of New York City’s print culture at the moment cites Locus Solus as a major part of the scene (Kane; Clay and Phillips). Daniel Kane characterizes Locus Solus as famous “on an underground scale” (Kane 156).
pieces that fit under the New York School label (the anthology was just poetry), and forecasted Ashbery's “experimental turn” (Encyclopedia of the New York School Poets 298). The first volume dedicated more pages to Edwin Denby than to any other poet, perhaps a hint that he should have been included in the “school” in the first place. The first volume also contains the largest number of topical “occasional” and “I do this I do that” poems that the New York School is known for.43 Barbara Guest’s “Afternoons” shows emplaced parataxis, a playful, switching “I,” and vivid scenes of New York; Schuyler’s “Current Events” illustrates an “occasion” in prose form. Frank O’Hara’s “Adieu to Norman, Bonjour to Joan and Jean-Paul” is a famous example of this type of poem as well. As O’Hara lists what is happening in his group of friends in New York City, he also chronicles the possibilities of alternative identities and ideologies in France (O’Hara, “Adieu to Norman, Bonjour to Joan and Jean-Paul”).

Meanwhile in the real space of New York City, where Locus Solus was primarily circulating, the mimeograph became an accessible and easy way for poets to circulate their work. As Daniel Kane’s and also Steven Clay and Rodney Phillips’s archival work has made clear, mimeos became a fast and ready way for poets of the New York scene to communicate and hear what was new—and they were important

43 The fifth and final volume (1962) makes some serious divergences from the earlier volumes in framework and tone. For the first time, nonfiction prose is included: an essay of art criticism by Edwin Denby and a political essay by Harold Rosenberg. Yet neither of these pieces show a program for the New York School as a whole. Perhaps these changes had to do with the new “managing editor,” Michael Benedikt. It could also reflect the fact that many of the mimeos circulating at the time were overtly political, thus prompting the New York School to engage in conversation.
for the New York School of poets. Magazines like Yugen (1958-1962), Kulchur (1960-1966), Fuck You, a magazine of the arts (1962-1965), C (1963-1980), Umbra (1963-1974), and then a little later, Angel Hair (1966-1978) published poems by many members of the New York School alongside works of a completely different ethos. These journals were made quickly and cheaply, circulated in small bookshops (often for free) and despite their sometimes short lives, made up a vibrant Lower East Side culture. Ted Berrigan’s C, for example, published many of the same poets as Locus Solus as well as those now deemed the “second generation” New York School of poets. Despite coming directly during the mimeograph revolution of the 1960s, Locus Solus fits more into the category of a modernist little magazine (perhaps displaced by 40 years) than a mid-century mimeo. Locus Solus was printed expensively on fine paper and it looked more professional than the mimeos of the Lower East Side. Clay and Phillips rightly describe the look of the Locus Solus as “squat and serious” and explain that the lack of editorial statements drew attention only to the “high quality” literature within that shows “impeccable” taste. Indeed, more than notions of furthering a new style of poetics or politics (the goal of many of the Lower East Side Mimeos), the curatorial aspect of Locus Solus was of the utmost importance to the editors.

In fact, the curatorial choices and inclusions may have been the sole motivation for the editors. In a famous letter to Chester Kallman, James Schuyler

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44 The only advertisement in all the issues of Locus Solus is a small ad for Kulchur in the back of Volume 5, perhaps showing a close relationship between the publications. O’Hara was the art editor of Kulchur from the summer of 1962 to 1964.
(editor of issues one and five) noted that the primary aim of the journal was to create a unified voice. Schuyler called *Locus Solus* an “anthology magazine”; and writes: “I and ‘others’ (it is a deep secret; the other is John Ashbery) are invisibly editing an anthology-magazine...Part of its unstated objective is as a riposte at *The New American Poetry*, which has so thoroughly misrepresented so many of us—not completely, but the implications of context are rather overwhelming” (Schuyler, *Just the Thing* 129). Of course, Allen’s anthology did not include Kallman and in soliciting Kallman for poems, Schuyler describes the first issue as a “cheerful, serious, international, kind of Paris-New York edited contents, and that of course means you.” Despite the fact that he calls *Locus Solus* “international, kind of Paris-New York,” and does publish some contemporary French poetry,\(^45\) we can see clearly here that Schuyler’s notion of the magazine was very much based on the periodization and styles of the United States of America. He hoped to properly “represent” his in-group, “us,” through the poems he chose for the first issue. From repetition within the table of contents, we see that “us” includes the key players of the New York School. According to Schuyler, the implied reader must be the same as those that look to the poetry anthologies for representation. In other words, the implied readers are not necessarily other poets in New York or even Paris, but rather a mixture of cultural institutions that could be comprised of critics, academics and poets who are asking the question, “what is the New York School of poets?” Yet

\(^{45}\) Every volume begins with a Roussel quote in French. Volume 3-4 especially shows the French collaboration by printing a middle section of contemporary French poems by Denis Roche, Marcelin Pleynet and Pierre Martory.
besides this letter and various other fragments or recalled conversations, we do not have much material describing the intent of the magazine, which clearly signals both the desire on the part of the editors—as well as amplifies the readerly need—to examine the content of the magazine to answer these questions.

The New York School created its program by curating its publication. Instead of writing a manifesto in the style of earlier avant-gardes, they created an image of the New York School through the poems they placed alongside each other.\footnote{The militancy of twentieth-century avant-gardes made the manifesto an important form. See \textit{The Century} for an analysis of their importance to twentieth century history as whole (Badiou). See \textit{Manifesto: A Century of isms} for a collection of manifestos (Caws).} Importantly, enacting their own anthologization here also meant creating their own poetics of process. This enactment is both enabled by the institutional forces that named it to begin with, and it is also critical of institutions. Through the magazine, the poets subvert the ways we might think about New York School through these actions—i.e. why is New York coming out of Paris? What does that tell the poets of New York City who may or may not be in the “school”? The focus on collaboration throughout \textit{Locus Solus}’s publication (as shown through the rotating editorship, the importance of the collaboration issue) only furthers this notion of enactment. Besides publishing the major names associated with the New York School, what made the magazine particularly characteristic of New York School work? I hope to show that the New York School showed interest in both establishing and dismantling notions of New York City as an urban cultural center through critiquing Cold War isolationist politics. For example, Schuyler’s claim that the magazine does include Paris and is
international, gives a hint at the way the New York School was interested in issues of America’s cultural ascendance at this moment in the early 1960s.

From the end of World War Two, Western Empires had been competing in what David Caute calls the “Cultural Olympics.” In order to win, an empire must “prove their virtue, to demonstrate their spiritual superiority, to claim the high ground of ‘progress,’ to win public support and admiration” (Caute 3). By the 1940s and 50s New York and Paris specifically were battling over cultural ascendancy. Serge Guilbaut’s book, How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War, argues that through Cold War nationalist ideology funneled through Abstract Expressionist exhibitions, the US, and New York specifically, claimed ownership of modernism and the avant-garde. He pinpoints this victory in 1948. Caute and others dispute this claim; Caute claiming that abstract expressionism did not have international impact until the 50s. Just as the connection between Frank O’Hara’s poetry and Abstract Expressionism has been written about at length, so had the connection between the New York School of Poets and the Painters, and to some extent both groups’ connection to Cold War nationalist ideology has been remarked upon. However, critics have yet to attend to the way that Locus Solus engages culturally fraught images of both New York and Paris at a volatile time both in the story for both experimental literature and twentieth-century nationalism.

Many of the Locus Solus poems lay images of New York and Paris over each other as palimpsests. In some poems, the images are interwoven. O’Hara and Bill
Berkson’s collaboration “From the Memorandums of Angelicus Fobb” is an “I do this I do that” poem which depicts a gay love relationship unfolding in New York City over the course of two June days in 1961. It begins with a scene of Manhattan’s Park Avenue “at 10:10 PM” in the moment “after-a-French-movie-rain is over.” This way of situating time in New York City proposes that the city’s space is culturally vast enough to include all the affects of French cinema. A list of places in New York City comes next, along with a list of famous art and architectural sites from around the world (Joan Miro, Frank L. Wright, Westminster Abbey) that are used to describe New York City’s cultural riches. The poem makes New York City cosmopolitan and worldly, even superseding images of the perhaps culturally elite France (O’Hara and Berkson). In a moment of romance in which the poem depicts either a public indecency, or a coming out (despite the fact there are “cops around”), a bit of cultural wisdom occurs, “heaven is where you hang yourself/ so dress up The French will have ideas about it/ if you don’t.” Queer identity is aligned with cultural know-how, and “The French” play a strong role in depicting this sophistication. Yet, the poem urges the U.S. cultural capital to “dress up,” as these images are appropriated into New York scenes. The story of gay lovers ends in dialogue, “‘Let’s tell the world!’/ Are you sure you want to?” (O’Hara and Berkson). The fear of homophobic violence ends the poem—one lover is unsure he wants to be open with their “kiss” to the world. Yet, the notion of telling “the world” also resonates with Cold War propaganda, which gay culture is most certainly left out of. On the one hand New York is painted as more culturally elite, but, on the other hand, because of its
queerness, New York is understood to be a subversion of a cultural arms race—and depicting it this way is a political gesture of claiming space.

Romanticized, culturally rich scenes of New York abound in all the issues of *Locus Solus* journal. James Schuyler’s “December” meditates on the feeling of New York Christmas and the ethos of the East Coast and the West Coast through the scene of the large decorated tree in Rockefeller Center (Schuyler, “December”). In this poem, New Yorkers are boastfully described as reserved but deep in feeling. Jean Boudin’s “Second Story Brownstone” almost patriotically thanks New York for the beautiful fall season (Boudin). In a different vein, LeRoi Jones’s “A Long Poem for Myself” contemplates the universal feeling of suffering and vulnerability of crowds from an overlook in New York City. The poem imagines the singularity of each person in a large crowd—“each man’s limited flesh” and “his own face”—as it illustrates the large impersonal nature of the city. As the speaker and his companion contemplate this paradox, the city begins to belong to them: “It is ours/ finally, the white spokes/ of its will” (L. Jones). This mechanical, clean, and idealized image of big city Americanness is similar to John Perreault’s poem, “Circles,” in which the poet fantasizes about U.S. presidents and the “true identity/ of automobiles” (Perreault, “Circles”). These poems suggest New York’s uniqueness and cultural prowess.

Yet, as these poems depict the American splendor, they are also critical of it. O’Hara’s “Poem” is openly critical of the Cold War isolationist politics. Printed prominently as the first of his poems in the first volume, it sarcastically begins:
To be idiotic in a vacuum, it is a shining thing! I see it, it’s like being inside a bird
(O’Hara, “Poem”)

The poem suggests the precarious position of isolationist politics—without the input of the outside world, even being idiotic could feel piercing and bright. From working at the Museum of Modern Art, O’Hara knew first hand that the U.S. shipped its culture to other areas of the world in the hopes of persuading others to the American way of life, not for reasons of open cultural exchange. The image of being inside a moving, flying animal recalls this fact. In other words, the works of art from the United States—artifacts of the nation’s power—flew abroad but, like being trapped “inside,” did not circulate, become affected, or evolve. O’Hara’s Poem continues, “Where do you live,/ are you sick?/ I am breathing the pure sphere/ of loneliness and its sating” (O’Hara, “Poem”). This notion of breathing only loneliness, despite where one is living, has echoes of Cold War soft power and cultural diplomacy as well. The Fulbright program (an example of U.S. soft power abroad), which allowed Ashbery to be in France at the time, was founded to some degree on these notions of isolation, and fostered the efforts of American Cold War propaganda.47 As historian Sam

47 As Richard Arndt explains in great detail, the Fulbright system came about as an amendment to the Surplus and Properties act in 1946 and was implemented in 1949. It was unclear what was passing through congress at the time: “Busy congressmen thought they were voting for anti-Soviet propaganda. Even Fulbright found himself using the rhetoric of war. Asked years later if he had not himself fed the illusion that his program was a vital weapon in the cold war, Fulbright admitted to expediency: “I’d do anything, so long as they gave us the money” (Arndt 181). American propaganda turned close to American spying when at one point the USIA asked all American Fulbrights to write weekly reports on the political climate of their area, but the order was quashed by the BFS (Arndt 235). Thus,
Lebovic shows, the Fulbright program was originally conceived as “a budget-priced megaphone to transmit American ideas to the world, rather than as a genuine international dialogue” (Lebovic). Americans were expected to go abroad and introduce their culture to the outside world, yet not let the outside world enter into their psyche or influence their life choices. Later in the poem, the speaker asks, “Do you know young Rene Rilke?” suggesting that familiar international culture is just outside our periphery, “like a wind tunnel” that we cannot experience from the inside.

Though they are more abstract than many of the previous examples, Ashbery’s poems in Locus Solus also critique U.S. politics, this time from outside the U.S. Indeed, as Jasper Bernes claims about Ashbery’s poems from this era, “The poems in [The Tennis Court Oath] keep looking over their shoulder at the America from which Ashbery has fled”; this is an America of white collar, alienated labor created by deindustrialization (Bernes 520, 522). Like the program that allowed Ashbery to be in France, the poetry is marked by the troubles of U.S. diplomacy. Ashbery’s “Idaho,” in Locus Solus Volume 1, shows an internal, subjective space as it experiments with space on the page—the two suburban Americans, Biff and Carol, and the personality of their relationship are exposed through splattering of punctuation, half thoughts and memories across multiple pages. Biff and Carol’s feelings and memories come to the surface through an explosion of layered stories despite both Fulbright’s intentions and the result, the program was undoubtedly nationalist and inflected by Cold War politics. 

48 In “Ashbery’s Free Indirect Labor,” Bernes shows how The Tennis Court Oath is organized around the theme of changes to white color labor in the U.S. Many of the poems first published in Locus Solus later went into the Tennis Court Oath, including both “Idaho” and “The New Realism,” though Bernes does not discuss them.
over white space that also tells a campy tale of their courtship. These layers thus create an alternate space between interior and exterior ways of knowing, at the same time lampooning the comfortable suburban lifestyle that was in fashion in the U.S. Ashbery’s poetry often works through political critique in this abstract mode of layered overprinting.

“The New Realism,” Ashbery’s poem printed in Volume 3/4, clearly refers to the works of the French art movement the *nouveaux réalistes*, and also to the essay (titled “The New Realism”) that Ashbery wrote for an exhibition of French painting in New York. This exhibition showed American Pop Art alongside works by French artists like Yves Klein that clustered under that name. As Ashbery writes in his exhibition essay, like surrealism, this art is meant to show another possibility of the “real.” John Shoptaw argues that Ashbery’s poem by that title exposes a “pressing threat to human nature [through the] grim wheels of economic justice” (Shoptaw 47). It certainly critiques U.S. capitalism (“several dopes/ On the loony stock exchange/ Near your dumb bank”), and it is notable that it does so under the name of the French avant-garde art. The poem depicts capitalist enterprise— the character in the poem acknowledges that “only once does prosperity let you get away”—through war zone imagery (Ashbery, “The New Realism”). The poem shows the “world that is a war now” as both destructive and desolate; from the beginning we understand this war has caused the poet to lose “the beautiful dreams” upon waking up “enlisted” in the army. Under this war zone, however, nature is teeming throughout the poem, until the end when it is finally “wrecked” by “hosts of bulldozers.” The last lines of the poem read:
And the iceberg slowly sank
In the Volcano and the sea ran far away
Yellow over the hot sand, green as the green trees.

(Ashbery, “The New Realism”)

The bulldozer apocalypse is surreal, explosive, and ends with the color of money.\textsuperscript{49}

This image cites similar images in French surrealism, recalls the green commerce from O’Hara’s “The Lay of the Romance of the Associations,” and it appears to work within the methods of the writing of Raymond Roussel. Though we are unsure if a language constraint helps to propel the images of the poem, the oddness of the images shows us that tricks of language can manipulate the very spaces we know and understand, like the spaces of war and capitalism. Roussel’s long poem, \textit{Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique} is a series of stories and descriptions in complicated rhyme all nested within each other through an intricate series of parentheticals. Each canto, named for a location in Egypt, spans many pages in one sentence, but contains also a plethora of stories at once through footnotes and sets of parentheses. The readerly disorientation casued by a line in Canto One which reads “—L’oiseau, quand (((((le soleil échauffant jusqu’au marbre)))) “—the bird, when (((((the sun so hot it warms even marble))))” is not uncommon in the text (Roussel and Ford 51). Thus, the

\textsuperscript{49} This poem could be a forerunner for what Christopher Nealon calls “John Ashbery’s Optional Apocalypse” (Nealon). Nealon sees Ashbery's campy, ironic attitude in his poems as a response to a “new historical situation” of global capitalism specifically in New York City (Nealon 73). The “powerlessness” in Ashbery’s later work can be read against the seventies in New York which David Harvey and others describe “as a scene for a battle between capital and labor in which investment bankers and corporate leaders seized the opportunity of the recession of the day to un hitch the city from federal support and make it dependent on private financing” (75). The apocalypse in this earlier poem is more desperate and impending, even if distanced, and abstract. At this historical moment in the early 1960s, late capitalism was just beginning and these spaces of “dumb banks” were less defined (Ashbery, “The New Realism”).
riddle-like complexity of Roussel’s spatial images also runs through the layering of
language in his work. As Foucault writes about Roussel, “He doesn’t want to
duplicate the reality of another world, but, in the spontaneous duality of language, he
wants to discover an unexpected space, and to cover it with things never said before”
(Foucault 18). There is a similar duality happening in Ashbery’s poems of this period.
Through complex experimentation with language, they tell many stories at once; in
Ashbery’s case, these stories refer to but are different from the situated geopolitical
issues of their historical moment.

Perreault’s poem “Paris” is a more literal meditation on the two cities of Paris
and New York. The speaker is a Frenchman who has “never been to New York City”
but keeps a scrapbook of images of famous New York sites, has learned some
American phrases, and fetishizes the American culture of “ice cold American
chlorinated floridated drinking water” as well as what he thinks is the sanitary aspect
of the American practice of shaving under one’s arms. The poem ends:

In America everyone has such nice white teeth
How I long to run my tongue along the insides
of those nice white teeth
(Perreault, “Paris”)

The poet wants not only to be inside America (perhaps by way of a kiss), but also to
inhabit, or be embodied by Americanness (on the inside, or in ownership of, an
American mouth). Yet the poem has ironic undertones. For example, the speaker
claims that New York “is so much nicer looking when playing basketball.” In other
words, it may not be nicer looking than France at all, just more American (where
basketball was invented and is played). The American phrases the speaker has learned are listed. The list starts with “OK/so long/ yeah” but ends with “you betcha life” and “Nigger.” Through this change in diction, we glimpse a threatening, racist America under the surface. This is an America that uses violent racial slurs and was, at this exact historical moment, amidst a struggle for desegregation in the South. The abruptness of this violent word helps us to see the whole poem as more ironic—the invocation of whiteness of the “nice” teeth in the ending lines now echo the wide, white smiles of minstrelsy. Yet nonetheless the poem cynically shows that the U.S. is gaining credibility as cleaner, more modern and more technologically advanced than France. After all, the answer to the poem’s question, “Are there Paris pigeons in New York?” is no. This is reminiscent of U.S. exhibitions that showed the “American Way of Life” to foreigners. The exhibitions aimed to show the U.S. as new and sleek—a place with modern dentistry for all, nylons, and state of the art washing machines.\(^5\)

As the *Locus Solus* poems strive to depict and dismantle images of New York, they also undo any possible static image of New York. For example, Robert Lax’s untitled poem depicts a port longing for something unnamed—the poem repeats what the port is not longing for, leaving the reader only the image of an empty port with no possibility of desire, expectance or arrival (Lax). These poems are imbricated in Cold War propaganda, as they undo it. The neighborhoods of New York, figured and disfigured through international imagery shows an attempt at a new ethics of encounter between global cultural centers as it ironizes nationalist propaganda. The

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\(^5\) See *Cold War Confrontations: U.S. Exhibitions and Their Role in the Cultural Cold War* (Masey).
action of the political message is writ in the action of the poems—New York is undone before our eyes. It is both lampooned for its faux globality and praised for being cosmopolitan, and buildings and architectural spaces especially capture the paradox. For example, when Musa Guston’s house becomes no longer a “place,” and when Brooklyn becomes pluralized (Guston, “Brooklyns” *Locus Solus* 5), these poets explore the possibility cultural non-dominance, and also wryly accept it.

The second volume of *Locus Solus*, the “Special Collaborations Issue” edited by Kenneth Koch, shows the centrality of action, or process, most vividly. Koch’s volume is made up entirely of collaborative work spanning from Ancient Chinese poetry to present New York School members. Likewise in the note on the collection, Koch tells a history of collaborative writing, which includes ancient Japanese and Chinese verses, the Troubadours, Renaissance poetry, Metaphysical, and romantic poets. He discusses the importance of the “strangeness of the collaborating situation,” conceding that the surrealists were the first to collaborate “for this specific purpose,” but claiming that strangeness is the universal inspiration for collaboration (193). The idea of strangeness is of course linked to foreignness through the French language especially; Koch is interested, at least in part in to étrange or the figure of étranger. This interest in the Frenchness, the surrealist process, surreal image, and in a constructed sort of strangeness was a key element of the New York School work.51 It

51 By the late 1950s and early 1960s, surrealist practices, which began in Paris in the 1920s, were well known in the U.S., and were widely used among U.S. avant-gardes. André Breton’s asylum in New York in the 1940s had long passed, and there had been many exhibitions and translations as well as several surrealist magazines coming out of New York. See *A Boatload of Madmen: Surrealism and the American Avant-garde 1920-1950* for a clear
includes an active (as in collaborative) element to the work, and an interest in both imaginary and real spaces. Koch chooses the pieces for this issue because of their process, or the action required to write them. Noticing the active element of process as well, Liz Kotz refers to Ashbery’s experimentation in *The Tennis Court Oath* (of which some of the poems were published in *Locus Solus*) as “process based” because they use collage techniques in their construction (Kotz, *Words to Be Looked at* 102). She further makes the link to John Cage and his followers when she notes Ashbery’s “use of improvisation rather than strict chance procedures, with their greater suppression of ego and artistic control” (111). The point of the collaboration for the New York School was the “situation,” not the technique, or the result. This is unlike the collaboration of groups like Oulipo, who were not only interested in following strict procedures, but also interested in developing them for later use (they are kept in compendiums). Koch suggests that collaboration itself activates an event that is of interest to the New York School poets. Perhaps because of this novelty, Volume 2 of *Locus Solus* became famous beyond its circulation; it was often talked about by the Lower East Side circles in the 60s and into the 70s. Like the poems that directly engaged images of New York and Paris, this collaboration issue opened up a new conceptual space for its readers as well as for its collaborating poets.

As *Locus Solus* creates an image of New York and of the New York School, it

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history of this influence and for a discussion of surrealism and abstract expressionism (Tashjian). In addition to the New York School poets citing French surrealism as an influence, the knowledge of French surrealism’s widespread influence in the U.S. was probably on their minds. Their friend, Daisy Aldan, poet and editor of *A New Folder*, which published many New York School poets, wrote a dissertation on the influence of French surrealism in literature of the U.S. Michael Benedikt later edited an anthology of surrealist poetry (1974).
also inserts the importance of Paris into this new image. The ideology of the Cold War U.S.—that the U.S. was as new and modern as possible, or, the first and best to do everything—was in competition with notions that Paris was an (if not the) art capital, or cultural center, of the world. *Locus Solus* shows a geographical confluence through the poetics of enactment, opening a new space of New York while depicting a Cold War struggle. It is commonplace to point out that a major theme of both Anglophone and French aesthetic modernism is mapping everyday urban experience and its effects on the subject. This is apparent through the New York poetries of Whitman, Crane, Lorca and in the work of symbolism and surrealism in Paris. Walter Benjamin’s notions of the urban *flâneur* beginning with Charles Baudelaire models the city as a space of private, yet publically conditioned exploration. Later this notion is important to French surrealist writers such as Andre Breton and Louis Aragon (*Nadja*, 1928 and *Le paysan de Paris*, 1926 respectively). The work of *Locus Solus*, however, marks a different way of mapping private, yet publically conditioned exploration—through the images of discourse, which then provide a disruption of that discourse. It figures real space and ideological space within a textual space. This textual space thus requires an active reading practice. This move characterized much of the work that comes after the New York School, which fits into the category of experimentalism. It is especially important to keep this active theory of mapping and curating the New York School in mind for my discussion of conceptual poetry, a movement beginning with the new millennium, which comes in chapter four.

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To conclude chapter two, I draw connections between New York School poems to other 1960s experimental work with a radical politics. Lytle Shaw links O’Hara’s work to radical tactics of the Internationale Situationniste (Situationist International, or SI), which is valuable because it identifies the political iconoclasm, or what he calls “urban gesture,” of the work of the poems (Shaw, “Gesture in 1960: Toward Literal Solutions”). In assuming this relevant connection, given the transformative critique I have shown O’Hara’s work to be performing, I place O’Hara’s poems alongside other works of the global 1960s. The Fluxus artists of the last chapter, working contemporaneously to O’Hara, produced experiential “events.” For example, George Brecht’s Water Yam collected “event scores”—or small pieces of paper describing possible events—into a box for a spectator to puzzle through; and Yoko Ono’s Grapefruit consists of a group of scores ostensibly meant to be used to make paintings, architecture, and poetry, rather than collecting what one might think of as the work itself (discussed in chapter one). Like O’Hara’s poems, these works are events and encounters to be read. Though they are not typically read as poetry—many of them are more readily assumed to be performances or visual art—examined alongside the Locus Solus poems, we can see that they can all generate an enactment of new spaces. The poetry of the New York School and Fluxus scores should be thought of in the same genre together as textual creation of spaces to be enacted through reading. In regard to Locus Solus: a reading public enacted a movement through struggles of cultural ascendency during a complex and changing geopolitical backdrop, and it also became the primary example of the New York School. Without
providing a polemic or purpose, *Locus Solus* expanded the genre of poetry and portrayal of spaces by bringing in an action-based style. As examined in the last chapter, *An Anthology* used sections, or labels, to do the similar work of expanding genres.

The “I do this I do that” poems are a central thread that ties the work of *Locus Solus* and O’Hara’s Seagram Building together. Without the listing of actions chronicling enactment, neither the image of the New York School nor of New York City spaces would be called into question. Many critics have noted the influence of Paul Goodman’s essay, “Advance-Guard Writing, 1900-1950” on Frank O’Hara’s work. O’Hara ecstatically wrote a letter to Jane Freilicher after he read it for the first time (Gooch 187), and it could be viewed as a sort of origin story for the coterie poems which mention painters and poet’s names, as well as encouragement, if not inspiration for his “occasional poems.” In Goodman’s terms, these type of poems work to “reestablish community” (375). Naming events, places and friends in poems, according to Goodman, very literally, drew them in. In addition to arguing that the avant-garde writing of the late 1950s should focus on a specific event or occasion, Goodman writes that in the mid-century, the avant-garde became concerned “neither with the subject-matter nor the method but with the use, and attitude, of being an artist altogether” (Goodman 370). To do this, the artist had to “create a new relation of artist and audience” (Goodman 372). This creation of relation, importantly, is what O’Hara’s and the other members of the New York School’s “I do this I do that”
poems strive to do.\textsuperscript{52} We can read them, but how can we do something to create these spaces outside of planned space?

These lists of actions, like Fluxus events, show us possibilities just outside the everyday. They act as scores to illustrate how to activate our environment. Importantly, they remain poetry, even taking the crisis of poetry as their subject. At this moment when participatory art was gaining ascendance over poetry, these poets show what can be done with a poem. The New York School of Poetry is one movement that shows a shift to the “experimental,” a fluid way of creating, maintaining and furthering collaborative experiments that assume the principal and theory of enactment. Perhaps this is an enactment of a new ideological order. My next chapter will explore artworks that are invested in the active, bodily critique of dominant orders and in creating potential new paradigms.

\textsuperscript{52} In the typical fashion of the experimental movement, the image of the “I do this I do that” poems was perpetuated by multiple facets with multiple ideological ends. Terrance Diggory explains that “New York School poets have never developed a theory of genre, but the practice of genres held a special fascination for Berrigan and contributed to his role in promoting the notion of that New York School might actually exist. For instance, while O’Hara applied the title ‘Personal Poem’ only once (1959; Collected Poems), as a description rather than a genre designation, Berrigan elevated that type of poem to the status of genre by applying the title as many as nine times (if his system of numbering can be trusted)” (\textit{Encyclopedia of the New York School Poets} 186).
Chapter Three

How to Read Constraint-Based Work, or, What Is Constrained After All?

“The poet…writing everything that comes into his head is subject to other rules which he does not know” – Raymond Queneau, translation by Alison James, Constraining Chance

“Your Body Is a Battleground”—Barbara Kruger, art advertisement

“Let us then cloak ourselves in solemnly merry stanzas that guide us in the use of this piece of equipment within which we are moving”—Madeline Gins and Arakawa, Architectural Body

“What we wanted from foulipo was a numbe of geneative and estictive, numbe based pocesses and constaints that helped us undestand the messy body…” – Stephanie Young and Juliana Spahr, “Foulipo”

In “The Naked Bosom,” a section of a constraint-based work of literature by Oulipian author Italo Calvino, a man approaches a topless young woman sunbathing on a beach. The novel is Palomar (1983), or, Mr. Palomar (as translated into English from the Italian in 1985), and the constraint generating the work is complicated—it involves a table of the twenty-seven numbered sections of the book in a 3 x 3 x 3 pattern wherein each number dictates a certain type of “thematic area.” If Calvino’s readers do the math, we understand that “The Naked Bosom” is meant to correspond to a descriptive “visual experience whose object is almost always some natural form,” and additionally, that this section must contain an element that is “cultural in the broad sense” (Calvino Index). In “The Naked Bosom,” the man, Mr. Palomar, is overly self-conscious; he cannot decide how to look at the woman’s body, or, if not to look, in what ways to focus his gaze as he walks by. Stunned by his unpleasant
predicament, Mr. Palomar mechanically circles the sunbather, attempting various methods of suspending his gaze: “looking,” creating a “mental brassiere” in his visual field, making the “dark halo of the nipple” part of the coastline, “viewing,” “glancing” and finally “putting aside” the breast with his vision (Calvino 9, 10, 11). At the end of the story, Mr. Palomar observes that the woman becomes irritated, and leaves in an “impatient huff” (Calvino 12).

The lesson to be learned from “The Naked Bosom” is that the man’s perception is bound by culture—the breasts of the sunbathing woman (the object of the visual description in “natural form”) are unreadable, they cannot be visually experienced in any sense, despite Palomar’s “enlightened intentions.” Though he may good-naturedly wish to do the right thing in this awkward situation, he can only see the woman’s body as an object for visual consumption. The woman in this section, like the ocean wave in the section before it, or a goat’s milk cheese and a gecko in later sections, is an object determined by the authored constraint. She is one object in Mr. Palomar, an interrogation of combinatorial systems of experience, perception, and other ways of seeing or reading. Her breasts are there to work out the problematic for Mr. Palomar of “how can one read something that is not written” (Lucente and Calvino 248).

However, what if we considered the location of this constraint differently? What if this nude woman on the beach is not a sunbathing object, but rather the artist of a constraint-based work herself? This chapter, in interrogating constraint-based systems wants us to consider the possibility of a different location for what we think
of as “constraint-based work.” When Carolee Schneemann performed *Eye/Body* in 1963, she held her nude body very still within complicated mixtures of art media in order to explore the possibility of being the see-er and the seen inside an environment she constructed herself. *Eye/Body* ultimately changed the possibilities for the female nude in an art historical sense; suddenly this body could be both subject and object. And the piece shifted political possibility for constraint-based work; in moving the constraint as performed on an object, to the constraint as performed on the self-as-artist, this work positions the constraint closer, ultimately, to its reader. Furthermore, the use of constraint to free oneself from the conditions of sexism in the male art world draws our attention to a range of ways that perception and “visual experience” can be shaped and changed by constraint.

Interrogating both the purpose and the location of the procedure in constraint-based works gives the genre renewed theoretical and political agency. As I will show, constraint-based work—whether it hopes to undo bourgeois notions of genius, the systemic oppression of women under patriarchy, capitalist structures of consumerism, or even mortality itself—helps us to understand the relationship between reading and space by way of bodily perception. Moving from the connections made between reading and everyday space in event cards (the topic of the first chapter), and reading and architecture (the topic of the second chapter), this chapter probes the connection between space and language in constraint-based works. In asking the questions (which are not too far from Calvino’s), “what is the relationship between constraint and reading?” and “what is the relationship between constraint and space?” I find that
the body—and perception—is the third term that connects reading and space, and that constraint-based works allow us to most readily perceive this. The body connecting reading and space is alive and fleshy. It can see and be seen; it may have breasts and also eyes. It is perhaps genderless, but in this chapter, it is a feminist body. Allowing for this body to exist—to breathe and inhabit spaces—allows also for the bodies of readers who, as this chapter will ultimately show, have important work to do.

In what follows, I read early constraint-based works within a trajectory of experimental texts that pose questions about the body’s relationship to space through language. To do this, I analyze the collaborations of poets/architects Madeline Gins and Shusaku Arakawa, several examples of feminist body art (also known as performance art), as well as mathematical and device-generated work of the experimental literary groups Oulipo (abbreviated from “Ouvroir de littérature potentielle,” or potential literature workshop, beginning in 1960 in Paris). Whereas critical reception has, for the most part, separated literature generated by language constraint from performance art generated by bodily constraint, I argue that by considering these works together we see that they both aim to emancipate the body’s existing relationship to space through the use of externally imposed rules. In constraint-generated work of both kinds, the unpredictable and impossible places that language and perception locate are readily displayed, and the constraint itself is an exposure of the connection between real and poetic space. Following this line of inquiry necessarily includes re-theorizing what is called “constraint-based literature” in order to include the human body within the framework.
Thus this is a chapter about constraint-based literature, or work that is also known as literature created by a “generative device,” or by “procedure.” What does that mean? The English noun *constraint*, meaning the exercise of force to determine or confine action, is related to the English verb *constrain*, which comes from the Old French *constreindre*, and the Latin *constringère*, to tie tightly together, compress by tying. Two elements of this definition are helpful for introducing the work of this chapter. In the works I discuss here, constraint is the exercise of *determining* action through force or confining gestures. It is no coincidence that action or movement is a part of this definition that will then be applied to literature and art—this work emerged at the moment when interarts experiments became increasingly action-based. In this way, the constraint process is always emergent; it is the imposition of a rule that creates an action-based movement that is to be determined. This emergence, or movement “to be determined,” means something different in each of the works I discuss below. For Oulipo, a group that creates constraint-based literature, that emergence is defined as “potential.” In the way that Oulipo tells their story, they do.

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1 For Joseph Conte procedural form is “a generative structure that constrains the poet to encounter and examine that which he or she does not immediately fathom” (16). According to Conte, within this broad definition of procedural form, there are two types of works: those that fall under a predetermined form and those that are created by a generative device. I consider both Conte’s types as creating constraint-based works, the major category I examine here. Another succinct and straightforward definition comes from Baetens and Poucel’s introduction to a special issue of *Poetics Today* on the topic of constraint-based literature: “strictly speaking, a constraint is a self-chosen rule (i.e., different from the rules that are imposed by the use of a natural language or those of convention); it is also a rule that is used systematically throughout the work (its range therefore differs from that of style, which is less systematic), both as a compositional and as a reading device” (Baetens and Poucel 613). Because all language and all literature must adhere to some rules, in many ways constraint is, as Baetens and Poucel dub it, a “universal phenomenon.” This tension will be explained at length through the chapter.
not create literature at all, but create potential literature. For artists and architects Madeline Gins and Shusaku Arakawa who create “procedural architecture” (Arakawa and Gins, Architectural Body xii), or “architecture as hypothesis,” everything they construct is in the tense of “what if” (Arakawa and Gins, Architectural Body 29). For the body art that I will discuss below, these experiments often lead to questioning the limits of control or knowability. This element of “what if,” “potential,” or “unknown” helps define the “experimental” in literature broadly speaking. This work is often thought of as emphasizing the process of its production, not necessarily the product.

Another crucial part of the definition of constraint comes from the Latin: the notion of tying together or compressing through joining. Constraint-based work puts pressure on notions of community or togetherness that dictate prevalent societal and ideological structures. The “force” or the compression of constraint comes from making one’s own rules in order to create freedom from external rules. For feminist body art, added constraints on the body illustrate existing patriarchal and societal bodily constraints. For example, we may ponder what action VALIE EXPORT determined when she put a large box over her bare chest in “Touch Cinema,” inviting people on the street to reach beyond a curtain in the front and touch her breasts. This procedure exposed and explored the way that women’s bodies are usually packaged and controlled by men in the paradigm of “cinema” previously understood. Similarly, Gins and Arakawa’s project of “deciding not to die” questions how constraint of the body leads to awareness, rejuvenation, and even defies the rules and logics of mortality. They argue that people “completely allied with their architectural
surrounds can succeed in outliving their (seemingly inevitable) death sentences” (Arakawa and Gins, *Architectural Body* xvi). For Gins and Arakawa, the “architectural surround” is the body and everything around it, and becoming “allied” includes completely remaking, through the process of imposing procedures, the way we create meaning (Arakawa and Gins, *The Mechanism of Meaning*). Their procedural work attempts to teach us to be consistently aware of the ways that we produce and shape our surroundings through what we think of as normal laws of gravity and shelter. By imposing new rules, they teach us how living in a “maximally invigorated sensorium” can help us escape our otherwise accepted destiny (Arakawa et al. 247). With Oulipo, the writers and mathematicians in the group set language rules (constraints) in order to get out of the enslavement of the rules involved in an inspiration paradigm for authorship, and other external forms or systems for writing.

Past critics have discussed literary constraint as merely a symptom of postmodernism, or as a new development in the way we understand authorship. Others argue that the role of the reader or professional critic is recreated by these works. Yet critics have not yet fully considered the body as implicated by constraint-generated works. Considering the body—as a reading and thinking body—in the way we think about constraint allows constraint-based work to be politically active beyond its function as a generative device. In other words, much of the critical work about constraint-based literature focuses on the novelty of the constraint itself, privileging

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2 The special issue on Constrained Writing in *Poetics Today* (2009-2010) largely focused on readership (623). Also see Noulipian Analects and Literary Memory, Consciousness, and the Group Oulipo (Viegener and Wertheim; Consenstein).
the process over the product as the object of examination. For example, when Joseph Conte, an important theorist of constraint-based literature, reads John Cage's *Themes and Variations*, he explains that his method is not a “systematic explication of the text” because there is “not much to be gained by [this type of reading of the text itself]” (Conte 256–257). Rather, Conte works for many pages to explain the system by which Cage composed this work. Conte is not alone in his privileging of process over product; many constraint-generated works have been deemed unreadable by critics. It has been said on numerous occasions that constraint-generated work is important only as a writer’s exercise. These symptomatic ways of avoiding the work of art itself in favor of the process that produced it are interesting to the extent that they tell us about the limits of our reading practices. They expose that we are not yet able to confront, or to truly read, this work. Yet, what if this limit of legibility is ensured by our own critical blindness? By ignoring the reading body, which is also always an authoring and authored body, our critical efforts end at the generative process. My hope is that this project below—the attempt to allow the reading body and the authored body to have a place in and outside the constraint—may allow us to more fully deal with the work as well as the apparatus which it produces.

One assertion about the ways we can see the body—and feminist body art, in particular—as connected to formal practices of constraint arises from Juliana Spahr

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3 Joanna Drucker explains this assertion at length in *Prove Before Laying: Figuring the Word* (Viegener and Wertheim).
and Stephanie Young’s essay “Foulipo.”\textsuperscript{4} This piece, written without the letter “r,” (a technique taken from slenderising, an Oulipian constraint) ponders why most language-constraint based works have been written by men from a position of unquestioned privilege, yet also are categorized as aesthetically or politically radical. Troubled by the notion that more men use numbers-focused, constraint-based generative devices than women—they discuss the contemporary poetry scene as well as constraint-based literature’s origins with Oulipo—Spahr and Young decide that these works do not reach the level of political critique that is needed. They argue that constraint-based literature is still embedded in patriarchy and privilege. It may point out problems with bourgeois privilege, but does not dismantle it: Oulipo constraints and those inspired by Oulipo “tended to mock ather than build” (Spahr and Young 38). As an alternative to what they see as an inauthentic engagement with politics, Spahr and Young discuss feminist work that centers around the body—in particular, they discuss body artists Shigeko Kubota, Marina Abramović, Carolee Schneeman, Eleanor Antin, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, and Valie Export—and that came on the scene at the same time as the Oulipo work. They argue that contemporary artists and poets have largely forgotten this feminist work from the same period, while Oulipo

\textsuperscript{4} This piece was written for the 2005 CalArts Conference. Their text underwent “slenderising,” a technique from Oulipo, which removes one letter (in this case the letter “r”). It also had a strong performance element—the performance involved the undressing of several people in the audience. Later it was published in \textit{A Megaphone: Some Enactments, Some Numbers, and Some Essays about the Continued Usefulness of Crotchless-pants-and-a-machine-gun-Feminism}. The version I cite here is from \textit{A Megaphone}. 

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and constraint-based literature plays a large role in poetics today. This amnesia about body art reflects a problem in the history of literary arts. Spahr and Young wonder if there is a possibility for a feminist recovery of what, in the introduction to their collection of essays, they call the “the abstracted avant garde of Oulipo” (Spahr and Young 15). With “foulipo,” Spahr and Young hope for a new category, a feminist Oulipo, something that “engaged the elation between formalism and body at and saw both as part of a tradition that was complicated and interconnected” (Spahr and Young 41). Following Young and Spahr’s charge, this chapter considers the implications and impositions of rules on the body while also thinking through formalist language constraint. I hope to recover the way that these two types of procedural work are ultimately interconnected.

To execute this shift in critical framework, I showcase three ways of imagining constraint-based work, and three ways of understanding the location of the constraint in constraint-based work. First I will discuss Oulipo works in order to lay the groundwork for the way we think about rules. For Oulipians, constraint-based works aim to give authors freedom from societal constraints. Because Oulipo creates forms of literature that are fundamentally author- or artist-centered, Oulipo’s reception often focuses on process rather than product. I argue that we can read the work itself closely by attending to the ways in which our bodies are implicated by

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5 In the art world, there has been recent revival of 60s and 70s body art. Since 2005 when Spahr and Young wrote this piece, major exhibitions—such as the continuing exhibitions at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum (2007-present), and The Artist is Present, a retrospective of Marina Abromovic’s work (2010)—have brought these very body artists in to focus. The poetry world still does not seem to cite these artists as a source of inspiration.
rules. The chapter’s next section discusses works of feminist body art that make the artist herself the product—the body of the performer is both enabling the process of constraint and enacting it on herself. The nude body is both the artist and the art in this case. This section illustrates the ways in which constraint-based works can serve as ideological critique; it argues that constraint-based artworks can make unlivable social rules visible. In the chapter’s last section, the concept of constraint is placed on the reader, not on any external object. In the work of Gins and Arakawa, the reader is invited to perform small local constraints that retrain the eyes, deform implicit logics, or attach unlikely mental images to language. Gins and Arakawa’s work also enforces a sort of freedom from the ultimate, organic constraint imposed on all readers: mortality. Through exercises and rules applied to mind and body, we can, according to Gins and Arakawa, decide not to die. The difficulty involved in carrying out Gins and Arakawa’s procedures exposes the self-undermining characteristic of constraint-based artwork. In other words, in the last section, constraints can be impossible. Under the threat of impossible rules, constraint-based artwork evaporates into everyday reading. This allows us to conceive of a more active reading practice, based on the contortional poetics in the work itself. As the last section will show, these tactics of readerly contortion could save our lives. The three ways of constructing and executing constraint-based work that this chapter covers (focused on author, then on author and work, and finally only on the reader-as-subject) show that processes of constraint, though they may be formal in nature, are also messy, bodily, and open for interpretation.
Oulipo and the Authoring Body

Oulipo, a French group of writers and mathematicians that first convened in the summer and fall of 1960, invented constraint-based literature as we know it today. This means that they codified mathematical principles and language games to create new literary work and to modify older works of literature. The group continues into the present moment, holding meetings in Paris weekly and publishing new work frequently. For Oulipians, the constraint is born from a desire for freedom from previously unacknowledged, but nonetheless debilitating constraints on the ways that literature has been previously created and read. In other words, for Oulipians, rules actually allow special freedoms. For a clear definition of this notion that language-constraint garners freedom from the rules of society, scholar of Oulipo and Oulipo’s youngest member, Daniel Levin-Becker, quotes Gilbert Sorrentino’s syllabus for a class on constrained writing:

Generative Devices are consciously selected, preconceived structures, forms, limitations, constraints, developed by the writer before the act of writing. The writing is then made according to the ‘laws’ set in place by the chosen constraint. Paradoxically, these constraints permit the writer a remarkable

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6 There are much older precedents for constraint-based literature, albeit different from how we know it today. See Georges Perec’s history of the lipogram, which begins with the ancient Greeks and the bible. Perec argues that all societies have been interested in language as material, and thus practiced forms of constraint-based literature in different ways throughout time (Perec).

7 The membership has grown and now includes international members, including two writers from the United States of America, Harry Matthews and Daniel Levin Becker. For a meeting schedule, list of current Oulipians, and a compendium of constraints and publications, see http://oulipo.net
freedom. They also serve to destroy the much-cherished myth of ‘inspiration,’ and its idiot brother, ‘writer's block.’ (Levin Becker 13)

In other words, literature under a constraint that its author acknowledges or selects contains more potential freedom than literature that is governed by the rules of ideology and literary histories, rules that its author might not even be aware that she was constrained by. As Raymond Queneau suggests, “inspiration which consists in blind obedience to every impulse is in reality a sort of slavery,” except that the poet does not know the rule. He continues, “to explore the rule is to be emancipated from it by becoming the matter of its potential for surprise, whereas to ignore the rule is to be imprisoned in it by becoming the slave to the reprise of its intention” (quoted in Bök 71). Through imposed constraint, we can eschew ideological notions that literature is pure inspiration or expression in its easiest form. Constraint helps us see that the words that just happen to come to us are also mediated by constraints of personal histories and pathologies, societal notions of what makes literature, and the rules of grammar and conventional forms.

Oulipo proposes that the use of constraint can expose the rules (and sometimes break these very rules) that govern all writing. From the 1960s to the present, Oulipo members meet to create and discuss new constraints. A few notable examples include the lipogram (writing that excludes one or more letters), writing based on anagrams, writing based on branching systems or spatial puzzles, writing based on mathematical equations of parts of speech such as the “elementary morality,”
and the S+7 (short for substantif plus 7, or, in English, noun plus 7). As Oulipo member and critic Walter Motte explains, there are three “levels” of constraint:

First, a minimal level, constraints of the language in which the text is written; second, an intermediate level, including constraints of genre and certain literary norms; third, a maximal level, that of consciously pre-elaborated and voluntarily imposed systems of artifice. No text can skirt the minimal level and remain readable: perhaps no text can wholly avoid the intermediate level. But it is the maximal level that concerns the Oulipo: this is what they refer to in using the word “constraint”; this is what characterizes their own poetic production, and consequently, the model they propose to others.

(W. F. Motte 11)

The first two “levels” of constraint that Motte describes above would not be as readily recognized as constraint without a creation of the third level. In other words, we rarely think of ourselves as “constrained” by the grammar of our language (the first level). When we write within a literary genre or form, we begin to feel more constrained—writing a sonnet is not easy (this reflects Motte’s second level). When we discuss constraints such as N+7—constraints that are readily understandable as limits on the ability to create, produce, and imagine – we begin to realize that we have been constrained all along. This is Oulipo’s important lesson. Grammar and literary genres constitute rules, just as the function of authorship creates often inflexible categories that are too shadowy to grasp. Paying attention to these rules gives us new flexibility and access to forms of potential expression and potential literature.
In the history of the avant-garde, this notion of conceptualizing freedom and flexibility is a significant development. Though Oulipo shared members with the Surrealist group, the notion of achieving freedom by attention to rules is a major departure from the Surrealists, who attempted to create a mode of writing so pure it was ungovernable, “automatic,” and a body of new literature so rootless as to have no history. Christian Bök clearly states the divergence: “While the Surrealists argue that, because inspiration is instinctive, it is inexplicable, the Oulipians argue that what is most automatistic in the instinct of writing must also therefore be the most programmable” (Bök 79). As their name describes, Oulipo experimented with these constraints, not simply as a novel way of creating work, but for the purpose of searching out new “potential” in the category of literature. This potential includes both ways of reading and writing—it is ludic and full of “surprise” as well as of rote tactics that Queneau makes clear in his argument about enslavement above. Like many of the experimental groups of this period, Oulipo valued the process as well as the product. The important aspect of the ouvroir was the programming itself. Yet, though Oulipians argue that we can eschew ideological notions of pure expression or true inspiration, the work that they do remains, at least theoretically, driven by human agency, desire, and fallibility.

Despite more recent computer programs that perform Oulipian constraints perfectly, or without error, the idea of the clinamen, or the “swerve,” has been a part

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8 Raymond Queneau, a founder of Oulipo, was also a member of the surrealist group.
9 This rootlessness is what Andre Breton refers to as “the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations” in his surrealist manifesto of 1924 (Breton 26).
of Oulipian theories from the beginning. The notion comes from Lucretius’s Latin for the Greek klesis, meaning “a bending.” For Lucretius, the clinamen was a bending of falling atoms that allowed for free choice. For the Oulipians, it is the notion that every rule must be broken somewhere in the Oulipian work (Mathews and Brotchie 126). This swerve away from the rule allows the reader to detect the true symmetry of the rule (W. F. Motte 19). For example, critics have noticed that the rules for George Perec’s novel La Vie mode d'emploi (Life: A User’s Manual) calls for one hundred chapters, but the book only contains ninety-nine (Mathews and Brotchie 126). Perec likewise “breaks the symmetry” and introduces “an error into the system” of his novel, by naming a character Lino instead of creating an apartment with a linoleum floor, which would have followed the blueprint of the book (W. F. Motte Jr. 275; Levin Becker 88). This purposeful mistake highlights the rigidity and the constructed aspects of the rule. The importance of this imposed disorder, or even messiness, will be a crucial link to other types of constraint-based works beyond the confines of Oulipo.

In the early years of Oulipo, the group did not publish their work or give public readings. Yet despite this relative isolation of the Oulipo group in Paris in the 1960s, they have had an enormous influence on writing in the U.S. and elsewhere.10

10 See Noulipian Analects and “Constrained Writing,” a special issue of Poetics Today for a discussions of these influences in contemporary writing. Marjorie Perloff’s “The Oulipo Factor” and her Radical Artifice, which is written under the “sign of John Cage,” also takes up the tradition of constraint in poetry and poetics (Perloff, “The Oulipo Factor: The Procedural Poetics of Christian Bok and Caroline Bergvall”; Perloff, Radical Artifice). Language Poetry and conceptual writing both claim a direct influence to constraint-based forms.
Additionally, critics often compare Oulipian literature to chance-based works, or aleatory operations, which by the 1960s was a full-blown tactic of many literary movements in the United States. In both constraint-based literature and chance-based literature,[11] there are clear elements of both authorship and textual production that the artist yields to an external force. As a group, Oulipo disavowed chance-based operations, claiming that there was no relationship between the works they produce and those produced by chance operations.[12] They argue that constraint-based literature leaves nothing to chance, and that this exclusion of chance is the very purpose of the rigid, numbers-based rules that define their group. The only element of chance that Oulipo concedes is the clinamen, since it is not predestined where the swerve or blip will occur. Critic Allison James seeks to complicate the group’s anti-chance stance. She argues that Oulipo work is “best understood in terms of a response and challenge to chance. The creativity of the Oulipian constraints depends precisely on their capacity to produce the accidental and the unexpected, while at the same time controlling and directing this chance element into particular channels” (James 225). Importantly, this “controlling and directing” part of Oulipo literature separates it from the events of the Fluxus groups, or any categorization of the “open work.” Though the

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11 Aleatoricism or chance-based methodology was used by many avant-gardists, and is especially important to the work of John Cage. Chance-based operations consist of any technique that brings an element of randomness into the work. This could be rolling dice, turning to haphazard pages in a book, pulling cards out of a hat, etc.

12 The group’s “anti-chance” stance was first introduced by Claude Berge in an early meeting and was then embraced by most of the group (Bens, Oulipo 1960-1963, quoted Allison James, Constraining Chance 15).
constraint may seem arbitrary, the author’s purposeful and rigid employment of the constraint is central to the work.

Despite readings of Oulipian works that focus only on the imaginative authorial process, a link to the body, even if only by metaphor or analogy, is crucial to understanding their work. Very often, a body appears in an Oulipo text. Oulipo’s S+7 [N+7] technique, called the “best known and least understood constraint” to come out of the group (Mathews and Brotchie 39) creates a very bodily poem, François Caradec’s “Le Souvenir de Jean Queval,” [Jean Queval’s Memory]. The constraint consists of replacing each noun (N) with the seventh following it in the dictionary. Texts used for this constraint can be original or not, and the size and type of the dictionary makes a difference in the final product. Examples in English include the beginning of Genesis under N+7 in which, after God created the “hebdomad,” God said, “let there be lightface, and there was lightface”; or, with a different dictionary, after God created the “hen,” God said, “let there be limit: and there was limit”; or, a famous Wordsworth poem about a “crowd” floating “on high o’ver valves and ills” (Mathews and Brotchie 198–199). In the case of N+7 poems, the content of the poem is formed by oscillation between internal and external forces (by enforcing the dictionary’s structure to create meaning in the poem); at the same time, the authoring subject’s intention is formed through this movement (literally, the “constraint,” or rules that make up the text allow him to choose the variable). Lastly,

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13 All of the Oulipian constraints are communally “authored,” though in some cases, an individual who came up with the constraint is also credited. S+7 is attributed to Jean Lescure who invented it during an Oulipo meeting in 1961. Here I translate S+7 (substantif +7) to N+7 (noun +7), which is standard.
the reading subject’s experience is formed by lines that indicate bearings, borders, and manipulation through mutation.

In the poem, “Le Souvenir de Jean Queval,” we can see this oscillation with the use of prepositions that point to Jean Queval’s bodily movements and that also create the limits of the body of text itself. The poem is created by a continuous N+7; it is described as a derivation of the original constraint,14 named “la méthode Caradec,” (after the author of the constraint), where you make a chain of N+7s which then travels through a dictionary in increments of seven.15 When the nouns change, the poem flexibly shapes new bodies with new spaces:

Je vis entrer Jean Queval
Dans un cabriolet de la rougeur du bain
Dans un cachalot de la roulure du baigneur,
Dans un caché-sexe de la roussette du bagnard,
Dans un cacique de la routine du bafouillage,
Dans un cadeau de la royauté du badaud,
Dans un cadre de la rubrique du bacille
**Dans un café de la rue du Bac.**16

I saw Jean Queval enter
In a convertible of the redness of the bath
In a shake of a swimmer’s sperm whale
In a dogfish’s convict’s g-string
In a head of show of the stammer’s routine
In a gift of the onlooker’s monarchy
In an occasion of the rubric of germs
In a café on the rue du Bac.17

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14 As Allison James shows, the group began by using only the simple version of the constraint itself but quickly moved on to expanded versions and derivations (James 129).
15 “une systématisation du S+7 : il s’agit d’une chaîne de S+7 le long de laquelle on parcourt un dictionnaire de 7 en 7 substantifs.” My translation above.
16 Oulipo.net
17 My translation. This translation is very literal so as to preserve the repetition and the number of nouns manipulated in the French.
The poem is not always printed with the bolded lines (this text came from oulipo.net, not from *Abrégé*), but printing it this way allows us to see more readily that the rule was repeated backwards. Before we find Jean Queval at his origin point (coming into a café on the rue du Bac), we see him contorted into uncomfortable positions inside of a variety of unlikely places. The images are wild and vivid. Jean’s body is manipulated into a g-string, a car, the metaphorical shake of a sperm whale. Jean’s suitcase is transformed into a farewell, which is displaced to a variety of bizarre locations. A few stanzas later we find out that he holds an empty suitcase, or briefcase, on his head to protect himself from the rain. As the line “Dans un café de la rue du Bac” [In a café on the rue du Bac] becomes “Dans un cabriolet de la rougeur du bain” [In a cabriolet of the redness of the bath] and then “Dans un cache-sexe de la roussette du bagnard” [In the g-string of the dogfish of a convict] through the constraint, Jean Queval’s body and location is contorted.\(^\text{18}\) With constraint-generated works, the unpredictable and impossible places that both language and the body locates and re-locates are shown readily in the event of this constrained construction. Surely it is difficult not to think about the construction. Yet these unpredictable and impossible places are also mirrored in reading, and it is impossible to ignore that they create and contort a body in space.

The reader forms Jean Queval’s memory as she reads the images. With or without the bolded lines, it takes her until the end of each stanza to understand the technique employed or to see the center of the exercise. In the meantime, she

\(^{18}\) Oulipo.net, my translations.
experiences myriad contortions of the memory and takes clues from images about what to look for, where the arc of the story may be. Through transformation, she arrives at the originary line at the end of each stanza. As Alison James writes about N+7 texts, “they demonstrate (in a sometimes unnerving way) the extent to which a text’s meaning depends on the reader’s sense-making activity” (“Automatism, Arbitrariness and the Oulipian Author” 115). We may construct a story using the elements of images above, or we may revel in what Agamben refers to as the “topos outopos,” or placeless place, which is an important element in the tradition of all poetry (Agamben 9), perhaps only just exaggerated by increased rules here. What Agamben means is that all poetry, like philosophy, performs a quest for knowledge. To understand this fully in our reading, we must accept that poetry, though it is in dialogue with the unreal, can inform the real and it does this most readily through place, or location. Here the body is in a variety of places and settings, as the body is in the unreality of the poem. It is shifting so quickly that the unreality, the poetic space or “topos outopos,” is highlighted. The only stable aspect in the poem is the “dans un,” a deictic marker that, in a sense, mirrors the hope of creating the body in unreal space, or in literature itself. In other words, at the level of language, we can see a contortional poetics with the use of deictic markers that point to denotational possibilities and emplacements, the limits of the body in the text itself.\footnote{Here I reference Wlad Godzich and Jeffery Kittay’s theory of deixis in prose, which argues that “while deixis refers to what is outside of discourse, it does so merely to relocate the outside within discourse itself” (Watkin, “The Materialization of Prose” 348; Godzich and Kittay). This insight is a departure from Benveniste’s and other linguists’ theories of deixis because, in this model, deixis provides, not reference to a real world outside the text, but}
Here is another way to translate the stanza above:

I saw Jean Queval walk in
to a cachalot on the rubato of an axle-tree
to a cachucha on the rubber check of an aye
to a cacogenics on the rubble-work of an azimuth
to a cadaver on the rubellite of an Aztec
to a Caddo on the ruby glass of a babassu
to a cadenza on the ruckus of a babesia
to a caducity on the ruddle of a baby-blue-eyes
to a café on the rue du Bac

Instead of performing a very literal, noun-to-noun translation, here I have used the English translation of the generative line, “to a café on the rue du Bac,” to perform the constraint myself. I used café, and also the “faux amis” of rue (meaning, in its noun form, “regret or sorrow” in English) and bac (an abbreviation for the noun “bachelor” in English) to generate the other words. In the generated lines, I translated the French preposition “du” as “of a.” I used the *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* from 1974 because it is the only physical dictionary in my house. This translation allows English speakers to better see the ways that language interacts with the body—when an Aztec person appears wearing a gemstone with a dead body on it, and all the letters are aligned, an expansive imaginative space opens itself to us. The poem is not emptied of its content, but rather the constraint allows the content to shift and drive, to show us that the content can be otherwise.

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rather acts as a foundation for the discourse to exist separately from any possible outside, thereby creating its own world. For my purposes here, we see that a body is created *in* the text. As I will show, this textual body references but is separate from the body or locations external to the text.
Allison James points out the Oulipian writers of N+7s call themselves “operateur” rather than “écrivain,” but once new text is generated, the operator becomes the author because he “activates what is already present but dormant in the original text” (114). In this case, with “la méthode Caradec,” the original text was authored by François Caradec, who is also the operator of the constraint. Below I piece together the elements of the poem that may be “original” (italics specify which parts of the poem were not subjected to the constraint):

*Je vis entrer Jean Queval*

Dans une café de la rue du Bac.
Bref il portait sur la tête une valise.  
*Elle était vide.*
C’était pour se mettre à l’abri de la pluie.
*Quand il ne plus plus, nous sortimes du bistro,*
*et je le vis partir avec sa valise sur la tête,*
en direction de la station de métro.  
*Pour moi ce jour-là, c’était dimanche.*

I saw Jean Queval enter
Into a café on the rue Bac.  
Briefly he wore a suitcase on his head.  
It was empty.  
It was for sheltering him from the rain.  
When it stopped raining, we left the bistro,  
I saw him go with his suitcase on his head,  
Toward the metro station.  
For me, it was Sunday.

From this existing text, the poem is formed through the operational expansion of the constraint, in strings of seven, on the lines that the author chose. It should be noted that the important elements of the plot, or story, remain untouched, or “unconstrained.” Instead, the constraint is used to provide variables to the description, created through deictic markers and prepositions that in turn create new possibilities and locations for
the body in the poem. Caradec used the N+7 constraint to perform a bodily action (the repeated looking up of words in the dictionary), which made a dialectic operation with his intention (the origin of the poem), which became the flexible device that operates on the content of the poem as well as the reading subject. Whether he wrote the lines before or after he attempted the N+7 constraint is beside the point; the lines indicate bearings, borders, and bodily manipulation, which are to be mutated. Thus, when it comes to Oulipo, the embodied authorial process is crucial and central but we should not forget that it also implicates other processes and bodies, namely processes of readership and bodily subjects in the works.

Once we are attentive to the body in the text, its politics cannot be ignored. Jean Queval is a proper name, which suggests a particular body. Furthermore, if we are familiar with Oulipo, this name refers to a poet, critic, translator, and a founding member of Oulipo. The story of the critic using his empty suitcase, or briefcase, to shelter himself from the rain, and then running off to the Metro station (presumably to go to work) on a Sunday, exposes something about the particularity of the body itself in this scene. This is a body constructed and constrained by the forces of capitalist systems: the briefcase, the workday, and even the particularized weekend (why is he going to work on a Sunday?), are the prepositions and limits that hold him into place. It is the constraint, or the N+7 rule, that provides an escape from the drudgery of the workday. Whereas we see that Queval would be only using the briefcase as a shield for his head, to run from his coffee to his work, the poem provides potential situations that are otherwise. In the “original” story, the most that the body can deviate from
routinized work is the tactic of using the briefcase not to carry work papers, but to shelter one’s head. Yet with the help of constraint we can see that carrying a suitcase on one’s head can become smallpox for the therapy or vanilla for the texture [“sa variole sur la thérapie,” and “sa vanille sur la texture”]. Like the poem, the briefcase is empty of content in the ways we may imagine content to operate. But both the poem and the briefcase are useful. The poem points us to the limits of the body in space and the briefcase shelters that body from the weather, and perhaps even from the weekend. Through the manipulation of the suitcase and the other nouns in the short narrative, we see that the body is previously mediated and constrained by societal conditions, and then constrained again by linguistic rules. While François Caradec is pranking or simply playing with the body of his friend as rendered in the text, the consequences of this playing, or reshaping, are political: the poem provides an opportunity to glimpse the way that bodies are created, limited, and maintained through structures of constraint.

**Feminist Body Art and the Use of Constraint**

There are constraint-based works of roughly the same period as Oulipo’s inception in which the political implications of a body under constraint are even more readily visible. In the late 1960s, “performance art” or “body art” emerged as a major art form in many parts of the world. In critical histories, this emergence often finds

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20 For its emergence in North America at the mid-century see Jayne Wark and Rebecca Schnieder; see Diana Taylor for a long history of performance in the Americas; for a global
its origin in a fixation with the gesture in midcentury art practices, or, more specifically, the process of Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings in the late 1950s. Critics like Harold Rosenberg wrote about the performative aspects of Pollock’s process of painting, citing the gesture of creating the work (largely drawn from photographs of Pollock painting with the canvas on the floor), as central to the way the work should be understood. At the same time, body art’s emergence can clearly be linked to political actions of the global New Left as much as to aesthetic developments in the New York art scene. As my second chapter shows, this global interest in enactment reached beyond the world of visual art and into the poetry community. Just in the way that bodily engagements with space became increasingly suggestive in poetic circles, by the mid-1960s the artist’s body itself was often considered to be the center of visual artwork. Historically in sync with the sexual liberation of the 1960s, great strides made by the women’s movement at this time, and political struggle for emancipation all over the world, we can now view body art as a critique of modernism’s logics, limits, and understanding of autonomous media, as well as an attempt to project art into the realm of political protest.

By the mid-70s, body art became a codified genre for artists practicing in the United States and Europe. Amelia Jones defines body art as work that “exacerbates,  

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art historical critique that includes Asia and especially Japan, see Amelia Jones on Gauti; for a study of European body art, see Lucy Lippard.  
21 See Amelia Jones’s “The ‘Pollockian Performative’” for a discussion of this usual connection and a strong critique of Pollock as the origin point (A. Jones, “The ‘Pollockian Performative’ and the Revision of the Modernist Subject”).  
22 In 1976, Lucy Lippard uses the term “body art,” but strategically provides “no strict definition” (Lippard, “The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women’s
performs, and/or negotiates the dislocating effects of social and private experience in the late capitalist, postcolonial Western world” (A. Jones, Body Art/Performing the Subject 1). To a similar end, Rebecca Schneider uses the term “explicit body” to refer to the ways that body art became a mode of cultural criticism, “an effort to make apparent the link between ways of seeing the body and ways of structuring desire according to the logic of commodity capitalism” (Schneider 2). Most agree that artistic performances that directly implicated the artist’s body were in some way political and resistant to dominant modes of capitalism. This work was labeled “performance art” quite robustly after the publication of J.L. Austin's How To Do Things with Words and it anticipated the role of “the performative,” a major theoretical category of the second half of the twentieth century, which aims to consider the ways that social categories are represented through body and material enactments. Here I consider this work as “body art” to distinguish it from earlier avant-garde performance and from contemporaneous performance works that may not focus on the artist’s (usually nude) body.

These works of the 60s and 70s, which aimed “to explicate bodies in social relation” (Schneider 2), were made by women and men in the service of various political aims. My interest here—on constraints on the body within the artwork—

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23 Kristine Stiles makes this connection in “Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions” Also see Unmarked: The Politics of Performance and Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America (Phelan; Wark 86).

24 Most critics distinguish work in this way. An exception is the art historian RoseLee Goldberg, who constitutes a category of “live art” to link body art to earlier avant-gardes (Goldberg).
keeps the larger focus on feminist body art, despite the fact that the field of performance art, like most of the art world in the 1960s and early 70s, was dominated by men.\textsuperscript{25} Perhaps because of the vulnerability of women’s artists at this time, women's body art tended to be more focused on constraint-based tactics. Men's body art of the 60s often thematized excessive eroticism or total unfettering from social constraint. For example, Vito Acconci’s \textit{Seedbed}, in which Acconci masturbated under the floor of a gallery, amplifying his noises for the audiences to hear, comments on embodiment, erotic exchange between artist and audience, masculine societal roles, and art as creative “seed”—but it does not say much about constraint. As Lucy Lippard notes, women who used their bodies in their art were in “double jeopardy,” because they risked being appropriated as an object for male desire as well as being accused of narcissism (Lippard, “The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women’s Body Art” 125). Whether for this reason or for another series of factors, women’s art of this period diverged from the male bodily displays of artist as powerful creator, expert, and center of sexual libido.\textsuperscript{26} As Jane Wark explains, for

\textsuperscript{25} See Wark 169. As Lucy Lippard wrote in 1976, “It was not just shyness, I suspect that kept women from making their own body art from 1967 to 1971 when Bruce Nauman was ‘Thighing,’ Vito Acconci was masturbating, Dennis Oppenheim was sunbathing and burning, and Barry Le Va was slamming into walls. It seems like another very male pursuit, a manipulation of the audience's voyeuristic impulses, not likely to appeal to vulnerable women artists just emerging from isolation” (Lippard 125).

\textsuperscript{26} Other examples along these lines include several of Acconci’s other works, perhaps most especially \textit{Trappings} (1971) where he dressed his penis in doll clothes and talked to it as an “other”; Nam June Paik’s \textit{Young Penis Symphony} (1962), a performance of artists pushing their penises through a large butcher paper, making holes and patterns; Herman Nitsch’s \textit{Aktion} (beginning in the early 1960s) in which he performed sadomasochistic and violent acts—such as putting blood stained objects on his penis—with Christ-like imagery. Amelia Jones urges us to see work like these, as well as works by Yves Klein and the Gautai group, in relation to the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock and the performative photographs of
women at this time, the struggle that took place within body art was both artistic and political: “the challenge was both to undermine long-standing prohibitions, prejudices, and exploitative attitudes toward female sexuality, and to confront their implications for women as artists” (169). In this way, art itself is politicized through the body.

Women’s nude bodies have played an important role in Western art history, but very rarely as the artist. As contemporaneous slogans like the Guerrilla Girls’ “DO WOMEN HAVE TO BE NAKED TO GET INTO THE MET MUSEUM?” point out, the previously existing relationship between artwork and women’s bodies make the body art of women artists unique.²⁷

In body art and performance by women, women artists—and often their nude form—became both the subject and the object of the work. The enacting body, working as both the “process” and the “product” of the work of art, configures new roles for the art and the artist.²⁸ For this reason, the explosion of feminist body art at

Pollock taken by Hans Namuth (A. Jones, Body Art/Performing the Subject 93). Many examples of women’s body art work in direct response to this type of statement. For example, Kabuta’s Vagina Painting (1965) consisted of the artist dripping red paint onto a canvas from a paintbrush attached to her underwear, or seemingly inserted and held by her vagina. In Carolee Schneemann’s Interior Scroll (1975), she stood naked as she pulled a long paper out of her vagina, unrolling and reading it as she pulled. The text on the scroll was a misogynist treatise written by a fictitious male director.

²⁷ When considering the reason for the body’s prominence within feminist art, we must also consider the strong role that the body has taken in feminist theory as a whole. See Wark's chapter “Embodiment and Representation” for a history of the body in feminist discourse and its relationship to feminist art and performance.

²⁸ Like Amelia Jones, who coined the term “body art,” I am more interested in the body-as-artist than the performance as such. I discuss works that showcase an enacting body. This is divergent from critics like Peggy Phelan, who argues that “performance’s only life is in the present” (Phelan 142). Phelan is interested in what she calls the “ontology of performance,” which she claims resists reproduction of any kind. She writes, “defined by its ephemeral nature, performance art cannot be documented...when it is, it turns into that document—a photograph, a stage design, a video tape—and cases to be performance art” (Phelan 31). For
this moment was extraordinary; art critic and historian Moira Roth has called the 70s “The Amazing Decade” of women's art (Schneider 41). Although it is not usually thought of in terms of “constraint,” the enactment of rules, restrictions, and limitations on the nude female body was central to feminist art of this decade. Though some male performance art worked within similar principles, and in specific cases, male work used similar techniques to critique dominant paradigms, a male body under constraint cannot signify the same set of political urgencies. A male body under constraint—especially in the context of the 1970s—would be read as formally interesting, vanguard, or even subversive. However, a male body is still the typical artist’s body. Women’s body art, and feminist body art, that worked within the male-dominated art world to critique the constraints of patriarchy, was more than an aesthetic trend, it was activism. Focusing on these feminist pieces today allow us to hone this critical possibility, or even political “potential” for constraint-based works in general. As Lisa Bloom writes, “because women of my generation no longer face the same kinds of highly structured resistances from patriarchal institutions, it is easy to forget the force that feminism had at that moment when women were engaged in activist movements and aimed to alter dramatically their personal lives as well as their art practices and teaching” (Bloom 155). In reclaiming the political “force” that the work I do here, the document is as much the art as the performance. In every stage of the process, the artist's or performer's body is mediated, so there is nothing supremely ontological about her presence.

29 Similar techniques—techniques that use constraint—in body art by male bodies include Joseph Beuy’s *Cayote* (1974) and Vito Acconci’s *Toe Touch*, (1969) among others. Despite the subversive quality of these artwork, the white male body is never doubted as the body of the artist. In other words, these works did not critique material conditions within an art historical paradigm. In the 1970s, this context was amplified.
these feminist pieces garner, I hope to bring a renewed political understanding of constraint-based practices as a whole. In other words, the activism involved in feminist constraint-based practices of the 1970s is crucial to any story of constraint-based work, despite the fact that it’s been excluded from dominant histories of the aesthetic tendency.

For many feminist performance artists of the late 1960s and early 1970s, constraints on the body show the oppressive nature of societal constraints as well as awaken the body to new possibilities of perception. Much of this constraint-based art involves deconstructing beauty rituals like makeup, and undoing the constructed aspects of female modesty while at the same time opening liberatory possibilities for the body as constructed and constructing. An early example of the latter is the piece, in relation to Mr. Palomar, that began this chapter, Carolee Schneemann’s Eye/Body (1963), which she created after being excluded from the Fluxus group. In this piece, the artist’s body is covered with grease, paint, plastic, ropes, and snakes,

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30 For a catalogue of pieces in this vein see “Makeup, Mirrors, and Masquerade” (Wark 181–184). I will discuss several examples later in this chapter.
31 Ono’s Cut Piece (1965) is an excellent example of body art that critiques patriarchy through critiquing notions of modesty and feminine clothing. In “Cut Piece” Ono sits on the floor fully clothed, silent and expressionless. She places scissors on the floor in between herself and the audience and invites them to cut her clothes, if they would like. Varying performances show varying results.
32 Like many other members, Carolee Schneemann was excluded from the Fluxus group by George Maciunas. According to a 1991 letter from Schneemann, Maciunas printed a note expelling Schneemann for her “expressionist tendencies” (Stiles, “Between Water and Stone” 98 n80). For more about Maciunas’s reasons for excluding members from the group, see Maciunas’s famous chart, “Fluxus (its historical development and relationship to avant-garde movements)” 1966 [Silverman V.A.1.1] which lists this information as well as the names of other members kicked out for different reasons. Also see chapter one of this dissertation for a discussion of Maciunas’s politics along these lines.
and nestled inside a built environment in her studio, as she holds still for her audience. The end result of the piece was a series of photographs of Schneemann’s nude body in carefully contrived scenes. She writes about this work:

In 1963 to use my body as an extension of my painting-constructions was to challenge and threaten the psychic territorial power lines by which women were admitted to the Art Stud Club so long as they behaved enough like men, did work clearly in the traditions and pathways hacked out by the men.

(Schneemann 40)

By putting her body at the center of the art, it was difficult for either artist or audience to take the modernist disinterested critical stance. As Schneider claims, Schneemann “had become the artist and object, both eye and body at once” (29). She is the see-er and the seen within her constructed environment, a bodily eye; Schneemann writes that she established her body as a “visual territory” (Schneemann 52). At the same time, the act of Schneemann declaring her body as part of the art along with other materials also questions notions of medium specificity, or the supremacy of material in modernist works. Additionally, it is important that Schneemann constructed a series of seemingly vivacious ritual environments in order to be still in them. In this landmark work, Schneemann constrained her body to be more like painting or sculpture. The art materials are varied and the snakes she uses to cover her body recall a lineage of linking women’s sexuality to serpents.

This notion of ritualized constraint was pervasive. For example, the Yugoslavian, New York-based performance artist Marina Abramović’s early oeuvre
focused on the repetition of violent acts performed on her nude body in front of an audience—sometimes cutting herself with knives, sometimes starving herself for hours—based on a seemingly arbitrary process-based set of rules. Her piece Thomas Lips (1975) recalls event scores, but with a flare for procedural rigidity. The original program notes include the following sequence of directions: “I lay down on a cross made of ice blocks. The heat of a suspended heater pointed at my stomach causes the cut star to bleed. The rest of my body begins to freeze. I remain on the ice cross for 30 minutes…” (Turim 100–101). These painful, dangerous, and explicit performances were a way to more deeply understand the parameters and limits of control of the body and its sensations. Likewise, her piece with Ulay, Relation in Space (1976), where Abramović and her male partner (both nude), run into each other repeatedly for a one-hour duration, comments on bodily limits within a gendered framework. As the two bodies collide at full speed in an unrelenting egalitarian mode, we are forced to notice sexual difference as both polar, or heterosexual in the two bodies, and also radically contingent, or, in effect “staged” by their relation.33 The emphasis on impact and messiness through exactitude can be thought of as a literal enactment of the Oulipian clinamen—the atoms are the bodies, which both collide and swerve. Their impact allows for possibility outside the rules that generate the piece. At the same time, the importance of mathematically based durational periods is crucial for both Thomas Lips and Relation in Space. As Schneemann held very still amongst her

33 The Judson Dance Theater was creating similar works that showcased egalitarianism through dress and gesture—male and female dancers wore the same costumes and performed the same dance steps, which highlighted sexual difference while also showing an equality through action. See Wark 48–40.
materials, the opposite of how we might think of “live art,” Abramović’s pieces are careful to rely on preset periods of time recalling, but remaining separate from, the more open construction of the everyday. These limits help accentuate the radical aspects of the art practice—within the period of thirty minutes or one hour the art practice must be exercised to its most extreme.

The Austrian artist VALIE EXPORT, who was a part of this global network of feminist performance as well as the Viennese Action Group, describes the aim of her work as rendering “our amputated sense of perception capable of perception again” (Mueller 3). EXPORT’s modes of making perception “capable” include performances such as Genitalpanik (1969), when she entered a movie theater with the crotch cut out of her pants, walking through the hallways and standing next to movie-goers. Importantly, the story of the performance is later embellished—both EXPORT and critics will argue about whether it was a pornographic movie theater and whether EXPORT was also carrying a machine gun.34 When the piece was performed again in the early 2000s by Abramović as part of her task of performing famous and historical pieces of body art, it includes a machine gun in the artist’s hands; this shows us that the gun is very much in the performance of the piece’s history, if not in the original piece itself. It may not be immediately apparent the way that work like this is connected to constraint, though it clearly works to take women’s anatomy off the screen and into the audience. For a woman—not dressed up as a woman, and in fact

34 See Valie Export for this debate (Export and Centre national de la photographie). Young and Spahr discuss this performance as happening on a subway. Export’s performance give Young and Spahr the title for their book.
looking quite androgynous—to allow her genitalia to be seen as she walks around, mobile and embodied in a public setting, is a striking divergence from the notion of women’s bodies to be seen in order to be penetrated and fondled by a male subject on screen. This performance critiques and unmakes the conventions and rules placed around the use and representation of women’s genitals within a theater. It also provides a new realm of perception with which to understand women’s genitals.

EXPORT’s goal of critiquing social rules with aesthetic rules coincides with Oulipian notions of constraint. Furthermore, allowing *Genitalpanik* to fit under the rubric of constraint-based work, enables us to see that constraint-based works can be used as tactics of activism.

Many works of this period more neatly fit into constraint-based processes, even if they less clearly provide new modes of perception. Examples include *Leah’s Room* at Womanhouse (1972), where a performer worked to constantly apply, remove, and then reapply makeup in a nightmarish cyclical routine meant to recall the absurdity of the feminine traditional toilet. Where an Oulipian method like N+7 robotically works to replace noun after noun, in this room, makeup becomes an arbitrary and unrelenting “generative process.” Similarly, works by Hannah Wilke, and later Cindy Sherman, show the constructed nature of the feminine face and pose by use of excessive constraints, over-posing, or over-falsifying the appearance.

35 Laura Mulvey’s famous essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” published only a few years later in 1975, provides an apropos theoretical supplement to this work. By explaining the objectifying power of the male gaze in cinema, the essay seeks to create new possibilities for women in film. Mulvey writes, “It is said that analyzing pleasure or beauty destroys it. That is the intention of this article” (Mulvey 8).
Likewise, Wendy Geller's *48-Hour Beauty Blitz* (1982) takes a weekend-long regimen for a beauty makeover from *Glamour Magazine* as its source text. Geller goes through the process of the imposed constraints of the suggested makeover, but also under the increased constraints of poverty. In the rooming house she lives in, the constraints of the *Glamour* makeover become absurd, but she performs them anyway exposing the disconnect between constraint paradigms. At one point, when the bathroom she shares is occupied, she performs the required facial with a chipped bowl of water and a rag, “casting glaring light on how her ideological purchase on femininity is determined by the limitations of her economic purchase on consumption” (Wark 99). The fact that she still goes through the *Glamour* beauty rituals despite her limited “ideological purchase” shows that the realities of class constraints and time constraints are no match for the unrelenting social constraints that construct the feminine ideal. In the same vein, VALIE EXPORT has said the following about her work:

> historical scars, traces of ideas inscribed into the body, stigmata to be exposed by actions with the body. If they are interpreted as pathologies of self hatred, poor self-esteem, sorrow, subjugation, or even identification with the oppressor, then they are part of the truth of women's history. And the myth is such that only very few women are ready to scrape away the veneer. Many prefer the illusion of meaningless glamour to the sovereignty of the fully exposed pain and to the painful energy of resistance.

(Quoted in Mueller 30)
We can understand “meaningless glamour” as imposed rules that are not restrictive. Under the Oulipo paradigm, these would be the rules of normative grammar, literary tradition, and “inspiration.” EXPORT compares these rules to a different sort of rule—what she calls “the painful energy of resistance.” The “painful energy of resistance” refers to the role of the body in performance art. The body is shaped by resisting constraint, or by contortion through the procedure. This constraint can be the very limits of the flesh, as in durational performances of pain like Abramović’s, or it can arrive by way of all the social implications the body brings with it, like the strong imposition of class in Geller’s piece, which reminds us of the ways that bodies are constructed by capitalism. In Oulipo, a similar “painful energy of resistance” comes from the playing out of a literary constraint. In the N+7 example discussed above, Jean Queval’s body is contorted and displaced, disallowing a story to unfold in a normative way.

Works like Eleanor Antin’s *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972) show a specific corollary to constraint-based processes from literature. This artwork consists of the rigorous documentation of a diet that the artist underwent; 148 photos document Antin's ten-pound weight loss over a 37-day period. Antin took four clinical photos of herself per day from varying angles. This piece comments on notions of “traditional” sculpture; Antin is both the artist and the artwork, like the technique of chiseling bits of stone away to create a form, she is “carving” her body

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36 Interestingly, philosopher and performance artist Adrian Piper created a similar work of art in 1971, though it was not made public until 1981. Piper’s piece, *Food for the Spirit*, consists of nude photographs of the artist as she underwent a period of fasting and reading Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. 
through constraining the amount and type of food she can eat. In the photos, she faces the camera and turns her body to each side without modesty or adornment; it is only upon close-scrutiny that we can see the body change at all. This level of methodical numbers-based constraint as applied to the body is remarkable for the way it blends a kind of literary formalism with understandings of embodiment. Whereas Spahr and Young discuss numbers-based constraints as male, and particularly when it comes to Oulipo, as apolitical, here the politics of the piece relies on numbers. The artist’s decision to lose ten pounds (an exact number, but also a benign number—a common amount of weight one might want to lose), paired with the precision of the documentation of the diet recalls literary constraints as well as more formalized ways of displaying information. And the rigidity of these numbers involved also points to their arbitrariness. For critic Sianne Ngai, the category of “the interesting,” which is crucial to describing how we relate to each other under late capitalism, is characterized by interest in the ways in which information can be displayed. Ngai’s most extended example of this type of “interesting” is conceptual art, which she claims can be “deeply pedagogical” by its move to create “the act of showing art that depicts the act of showing” (171, 159). Antin’s Carving is invested in depicting the act of showing—the constraint is laid bare in the number of photographs and the description of the work, but it also suggests that what is being shown is commonplace, an everyday symptom of patriarchy; it’s just a woman on a diet. In a sense “borrowing” this constraint from everyday patriarchal systems, Antin exposes the
political efficacy of constraint-based work to critique societal discourses surrounding the body.

Antin’s *Eight Temptations*, a companion artwork to *Carving*, consists of photographs of Antin heroically denying herself food that is not allowed in the diet she performed for *Carving*. These images depict the constraint itself, as the diet is both the generative device as well as the product. The project calls our attention to the myriad areas of women’s lives that are constrained—her yogurt is a “temptation”—but the title also recalls the eight temptations of man, a precursor to the seven deadly sins. The added drama and stakes assigned to the forbidden food works to show the arbitrary nature of women’s desired waistlines. It also shows the constructed nature of the very diets mostly white, middle and upper class women enforced on their bodies. The heroic nature of the poses is perhaps a subtle ironic gesture toward the heroism of formal constraints themselves. It is like the writer of an English sonnet boasting proudly that he has not included a single line of tetrameter. Likewise, if Oulipians felt themselves to be the “opérateur” of a constraint until the work is completed, Antin’s work makes us think of the artist as a very product of the constraint.

For Antin, even notions of identity were entirely constructed and performed in her work. She famously developed personas in her artwork, which included archetypes or characters like the King, the Ballerina, and the Nurse. She writes:

I am interested in defining the limits of myself, meaning moving out to, in to, and down to the frontiers of myself. The usual aids to self-definition—sex, age, talent, time and space—are merely tyrannical limitations upon my
freedom of choice… But gratuitous or random choices, as well as quick violent forays to the edge, are equally limitations on my understanding. I wanted to work with nuclear images, magnetic gravitational fields—geocenters of the soul. My sense was that they had to be permanent and mobile, not immutable, or fixed, repetitive, like the parts of the Freudian allegory. I needed core images, something like Jungian archetypes that couple, uncouple, and transform. (Antin 59)

This notion of taking up images as “permanent and mobile” is crucial to her work. Just as Oulipians belittle chance-based writing, Antin is discouraged by “random choices.” Yet Antin finds power in archetypes. In Carving, the constraint itself is the archetype of the diet that her rules and limits expose and transform. In her work 4 Transactions (1972), Antin made written and notarized plans to perform certain actions with her women's encounter group. These actions were uncharacteristic (like wearing a dress), rude, or at least socially awkward (only addressing people from the rear) (Fox and Los Angeles County Museum of Art 28–39). The carrying out of this list of instructions not only mimics Fluxus scores discussed in my first chapter, but also speaks directly to constraint-based literature, like Oulipo. We can think of the detailed table of instructions for Calvino’s Mr. Palomar, for example. Another work of Antin’s, California Lives (1969), cataloged women’s lives by objects that belonged to them. Each arrangement of consumer goods was accompanied by a short blurb with key facts about the woman it presented. In a similar vein on the Oulipian side, for his project 107 âmes (1987), Oulipo member Jacques Jouet distributed a
questionnaire to people he did not know. Based on the information gathered from the questionnaire (it included questions about birthplace, education, monthly earnings, a major life event), Jouet wrote one poem per person. He used the “braised rhyme” or “rime berrichonne” method, an Oulipian constraint reliant on a mixture of assonance and consonance for end words, to write the poems. Antin’s work is in dialogue with, and clearly builds from traditions of constraint-based work, but in a different vein from Oulipian work; Antin’s art ultimately challenges the audience to interact with the imposed constraint. In *California Lives*, this interaction takes the form of touching these women’s belongings; in *4 Transactions*, it means interacting with a “transaction.” In *Carving*, this interaction takes the form of recognition that a woman on a diet is a body under constraint, or in fact being “carved,” in Oulipian language, she is “slenderized.” In the creation of these works, the procedure becomes difficult to separate from the events and spaces of everyday-life. Furthermore, constraint becomes the political agency behind the artwork, which exposes and critiques the unlivable aspects of social life. If Oulipian literature hopes to liberate us from societal rules by imposing unexpected rules, Antin’s artwork imposes expected rules to point out the oppression that women already face. Her work is ideological critique, with expressive effects. It doesn’t weigh in on whether liberation is possible or impossible; rather it moves the object of the constraint to show that constraint is everywhere.
Gins and Arakawa’s Procedural Architecture: The Constraint Is On You

Poet and architect Madeline Gins and painter and architect Shusaku Arakawa began collaborating in the 1960s on Mechanism of Meaning, a research project and exhibition. The purpose of this work was to entirely revamp the way we make sense of the world and our place within it as well as to create new pathways of perception. The project is dedicated to “no more passive reading,” the key that Gins and Arakawa believed could unlock new types of thinking, perceiving, sensing and living. To that end, the experiments that make up Mechanism of Meaning are divided into sections that resemble new types of perception. Within each section are games, constraints, and riddles that attempt to enforce audience interaction. The first section focuses on the “neutralization of subjectivity,” which Gins and Arakawa take as a given in order to do any of this work; the remaining fifteen sections include “splitting of meaning,” “texture of meaning,” “construction of the memory of meaning” and other topics that are meant to rebuild and refine logic and thought.

Later, after they had begun their next project, Reversible Destiny, which continued for the remainder of their lives, Gins and Arakawa returned to Mechanism of Meaning and wrote a new preface. Here they explain major changes in their terminology. They are no longer interested in “a model of thought” in their work, but rather a more encompassing “field of sensibility” that they would like to rebuild and reorder. The purpose of Reversible Destiny and all of their work after Mechanism was based on the premise that art, and architecture specifically, could “participate in life and death matters”(Arakawa and Gins, Architectural Body xi). More specifically,
Gins and Arakawa decided not to die. They meant it. And when they looked back on Mechanism from this new project, they saw Mechanism as the first step in the larger endeavor of learning how to live in a “maximally invigorated sensorium” (Reversible Destiny 247). They write in their 1988 preface to Mechanism “We remain convinced that ‘subjectivity’ is largely made up of false constructs that must be neutralized, if ever anything is to begin ‘to live unconditionally’” (Mechanism 1988 preface).

Ultimately, Gins and Arakawa’s lifelong project is to ask how constraint of the body leads to awareness. This begins with thought experiments in Mechanism, but it leads to architectural sites such as the Site of Reversible Destiny—Yoro, a large park in Japan, which is akin to an obstacle course, several houses that defy normative understandings of shelter such as the Bioscleave House, a “lifespan extending villa” on Long Island that has an uneven floor, many overlapping levels, and unexpected sharp angles. The active mode of attention required to navigate these architectural spaces is not unlike the mode of reading required to make it through Mechanism. Importantly, each of the projects within Mechanism is constraint-based. Furthermore, they fit into a larger constraint, which is this decision not to die. In other words, Gins and Arakawa’s projects work to constrain the reader, or the viewer, in order to unlock the reader or viewer’s potential. The constraints include manipulating logic, sense-making, and also the body and its surrounding area (they call the body and its surrounding “the architectural body”). The potential that Gins and Arakawa believe can be reached through these constraints is as benign as resetting perception and as radical as resetting mortality.
The focus of my discussion of constraints has shifted. The chapter began with an acknowledged centrality of the author or artist as he creates the work in Oulipo. I then examined constraints on the artist and author as the same as constraints on the work itself; I discussed the artist and artwork assemblage as inseparable from the political urgency of feminist art. Here, in my last section, I examine the constraint as it is focused on the viewer, reader, or audience member. The shift in the chapter’s focus highlights not only that there are multiple possibilities for the object under constraint, but also that in each section rules are employed for different effects.

Though the reader may be constrained with Oulipo works, the “potential” of the literature is a liberated writerly space. In other words, the constraints themselves are kept in a compendium with futurity in mind. This sense of emergence is entirely absent from the feminist body art, which obviates the possibility of futurity within the work. It is focused on critique of the moment, not in any potential outside it. In Gins and Arakawa’s decision not to die—they “have decided not to die,” which is in the past perfect tense—creates a very certain and specific future. This is crucially different from “we decide to live.” “We have decided not to die” is the imposition of a rule for a sense of emergence of possibility. The imposition of the rule is on “we.” This language tells us that you and I have decided not to die. And thus with the work of Gins and Arakawa, the constraint is the imposed mode of reading. In the pages that follow, I examine several exercises from *Mechanism of Meaning* in order to locate the work of readerly constraints and their implications for the reading body and the spaces in which we live.
The second exercise in the first section, which is entitled “Neutralization of Subjectivity,” asks the viewer to manipulate images of lines, making some lines “tighter” and some more elastic. Though the instruction could imply that we are able to perform this action only by thinking it—these could be perceptual functions—they are also tactile functions that the viewer is unable to perform on a static, two-dimensional canvas without defacing it. The imperative mode of the directions makes us wish to act out these instructions, knowing that we cannot complete them, at least in a physical manner. As if this instruction did not make us feel as though our hands are tied, the last two exercises ask the viewer, “without pointing, count these lines.” In the first image, there are so many varying shades of lines overlapping that this action seems impossible. By using only our eyes to separate the lines from each other, we are unable to keep track of a number. The last panel at first strikes us as easy—there is only one visible line on the canvass—we do not need to point to know the number. However, we also know that it is possible that this one line is made up of many overlapping lines—it could be covering many lines that are impossible for us to see. We understand that in this instance what the text asks us to do may be impossible. Through this exercise of being constrained, we see the limits of a reading practice that excludes the body. Meaning-making, or as Gins and Arakawa call it, the “mechanism of meaning” includes an assemblage of many parts and faculties. However, the only way we can arrive at this notion is by isolating them, scrutinizing their limits, thereby enlivening them. In this particular exercise we see the weakness of the faculties of our rapidly moving eyes.
In an attempt to isolate senses, other instructions ask the viewer to connect dots on a canvas using only the back and forth movement of your eyes, and to decide
before lifting a fabric “whether you have ever seen what is underneath” (Arakawa and Gins, *The Mechanism of Meaning* 25, 33). And in a seeming attempt to undo the way minds are connected to language, one canvas asks us to “say one think two”; another asks us to imagine the most “logical shape for any particular color” (Arakawa and Gins, *The Mechanism of Meaning* 42, 78). These constraints test the limits of our judgment, function, and faculties, and through these trials we can see the testing and critiquing of limits as a critique of modernism. As critic Mark C. Taylor explains, by questioning logic and its limits—the mark of the modern in Kant and Greenberg—Gins and Arakawa attempt to “reverse the seemingly irreversible destiny of the modern subject” (M. C. Taylor 128). It is important that the testing of limits is constant. This testing does not end—it is always in flux. F.L. Rush argues that Gins and Arakawa’s work shows us that “…all privileging of modes of thought spell conceptual tyranny and are to be avoided. We must continually remake ourselves in as inclusive a manner as possible at any given time. The ‘end state’ of cognitive growth would be one in which varying conceptions of the world were obtained in plurality and not assert preeminence” (Rush 52). No mode is privileged and all modes are needed. Indeed, the work of Gins and Arakawa critiques the limits of modernization itself. Instead of progressive, forward growth, the epistemology suggested is experimental, plural and continuous. Here reading is a new phenomenon because of these imposed and evaporated limits.

This unending testing of limits points to the reader’s fatigue, vulnerability, and weakness. If all our senses are constantly active, we are always in a state of
activity. As Arthur Danto points out in conversation with Gins and Arakawa, “there are no places to rest in your architecture” (Danto, Gins, and Arakawa). The reading or participating body is exposed, even scrutinized, through these limits—there is no escape. Gins and Arakawa’s work moves the constraint to the reading body in order to critique the dominant paradigm of science with its endless experimentation, to catalog failures or impossibilities of the body, and to unlock hidden bodily potentials harnessed through activity.37

In making our way through Mechanism of Meaning, as tired as we are, we may notice the ways in which the work attempts to build a new subject, or audience, by the end. In the fourteenth section, near the end of the project, we come across a number of experiments about memory. The section is entitled “Construction of the Memory of Meaning,” and the tagline reads, “A study of memory: its operations, its scope, its role in the realization of meaning. Toward the construction of a total situation in which memory can remember itself (its own operations)” (Arakawa and Gins, The Mechanism of Meaning 81). Each of the examples focuses on the color blue and depicts messy line drawings. The last image of the section depicts a sort of rubric for understanding that dots correlate to words or concepts. These maps of dots and concepts shift and become brighter or softer, they “revolve” and “resolve.” The information is presented to us in such a way as to have us believe that the next logical

37 Joshua Schuster defines this political aesthetic as “biotopian.” We writes “what biotopic offers—as summed up in the not ordinarily human phrase ‘we have decided not to die’-- is a provocation to research as to how new forms of political freedom might arise from new understandings of the relationship of biological and aesthetic change” (Schuster, “How Architecture Became Biotopian: From Meta-Biology to Causal Networks in Arakawa and Gins’ Architectural Body” 111).
conclusion is the last image, a knot of tangled lines and several other lines next to it. At this point, we don’t have many other options aside from believing the imperative voice of the text that nestled within this unfathomable diagram is the representation of “a room, a window, a floor, a door, a table, a cup…” (Arakawa and Gins, The Mechanism of Meaning 86). They indicate that if we read actively enough, we can construct the very reality of these concepts. The notion of “memory remembering itself” seems only to lend to this radical hypothesis—the total awareness and self-consciousness of all our faculties will lead to a sort of freedom to create new pasts, presents, and futures.
Figure 9: Part of a page from the “Construction of the Memory of Meaning” section of Arakawa and Gins’s *Mechanism of Meaning* (1979).

This notion of active reading is not only part of Gins and Arakawa’s art, but also part of their architecture. At one point, late in *Architectural Body*, a text about their architectural theory, they ask the reader to “begin to construct a multilevel labyrinth” by placing her fist on the seam of the book and following a few procedures (Arakawa and Gins, *Architectural Body* 87). They claim that “the reading process is a coordinating skill, a space of procedural knowing in an active mode that has critical
dimensions”; by the same turn, the reading process also “removes more critical dimensions than it preserves” (Arakawa and Gins, *Architectural Body* 87). For this reason, Gins and Arakawa have us use the book as an object, not necessarily as a readable text, in order to construct something, a multilevel labyrinth. It is important to note that in order to arrive at this “active mode,” the reader must use more than her mind or her attention. There is an imperative to participate with the materiality of the text. They write, “Press your fingertips into the book’s seam and step out of the reading process and back into the world-at-large once more.” Of course, one cannot participate in these instructions without reading the book. After a series of mundane instructions that advise the reader to count lines on the page, hold the book away from her face, level it to be as vertical as possible, Gins and Arakawa then ask us to do what may seem impossible:

Now expand this page to fit on an 8x11 sheet of paper, seeing it as if it were a manuscript page. Breathe through this first expansion now while you still have it. Breathe into its crevices; breathe through and right through the 8-inch-wide blank rows that evince tentativeness because that is what is holding them open…Scale the image you are holding up to the height of the tallest tree you can imagine. Difficult? Then let go of that image. Instead scale the page up to the height of the room that you are in. That’s it then.

(Arakawa and Gins, *Architectural Body* 88)

The instructions continue, asking the reader to take the characters and letters out of the book and spread them around the room and then construct a hula-hoop type
labyrinth with distinct levels. The directions imply a tone of certainty that one can breathe into the crevices of a book, and likewise with the sheer power of the body and brain, “scale the image” to be the size that one is directed. Through their theory as a whole, it is not certain if one can succeed in these aims, but it is clear that through the effort of trying, we become the “architectural body,” full of potential and “what if.” This state of perpetual enlivened action is the most important part of their theory. The book ends with a series of instructions for “daily research” that are obtuse and, like the passage above, potentially impossible. The reader is left with directions to further constrain herself as well as further potential to unlock.

We may find Gins and Arakawa’s litany of impossible instructions in *Mechanism of Meaning* and *Architectural Body* exhausting at best and deeply frustrating at worst. When listening to Gins and Arakawa in conversation with Arthur Danto and an audience of academics from various disciplines, it is clear that frustration with their work is common, and that it is perhaps part of the cultivated mode of attention that Gins and Arakawa espouse (“Radical Freedom: We Have Decided Not to Die”). As cognitive linguist George Lakoff claims about their work, they “force” you to create new connections as well as mental and physical configurations “by systematically removing and reconfiguring your old ones” (Lakoff 118). It is a painful and baffling process. Yet by categorizing these experiments that perform “removal and reconfiguration” as constraint-based work, I believe we are more readily able to read them and to endure—even to appreciate—the uncomfortable modes of attention they require.
Most constraint-based work flirts with frustration. For those who encounter Oulipian work as more puzzle than poem, the frustration lies in finding the “key,” or “answer” in the constraint. And once the constraint is unveiled, the frustration may lie in their very categorization as literature—if the work explains the constraint, many contend that it ends there. I hope to have shown that because of the consistent return to the theme of authorship in the scholarship and reading practices surrounding Oulipian works, readers are able to avoid this frustration. In this paradigm, instead of being asked to do something difficult, readers know that at some point the author did something difficult, which makes the text a sort of byproduct of the difficulty. I also hope to have shown the ways that we can productively attend to the bodily contortions behind these practices by thinking through readership. Further, I propose that we use the notions of purposeful discomfort in the body art to help think through this potential of frustration in readership, especially as it pertains to the work of Gins and Arakawa. When the artist puts constraints on herself in body art, much of the art produced causes a pressure on the audience as well. In *Eye/Body*, for example, Schneemann’s use of her “body as an extension of [her] painting” also required a profound stillness (Schneemann 52). In order to comprehend her natural or “actual body” Schneemann adopted seemingly unnatural poses with very little movement, in fact likening herself to flat, still art (Schneemann 52). As viewers, we register this discomfort and take it to be an integral part of the work; it is the discomfort of producing art that allows the artwork to exist in this case. So too with the works of
Gins and Arakawa, we become attuned to our bodies and their sensations through contortion.

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In the end of *Mr. Palomar*, Mr. Palomar dies. He dies at the moment that he banishes death from his thoughts. In the last paragraph of the twenty-seventh and final section of the novella, he decides to no longer think about dying, and to instead use his energies to attempt to describe every instant of his life. It is possible to read Calvino’s constraint as described in the index to the book, as well as all the episodes in the book itself, as part of Mr. Palomar’s attempt at complete and ordered description. We see that to make it a closed system, he must die. Furthermore, we can understand the tragedy of the book as the impossibility of achieving ordered harmony through descriptive means. Mr. Palomar can never fully experience the world because of his obsession for ordering and describing it.\(^{38}\) Because of this obsession, tragically, Mr. Palomar never authentically participates in his life.

Gins and Arakawa might say that this obsession with description rather than action makes Mr. Palomar a passive reader. Indeed, another way to frame our predicament as readers—a framing more in the spirit of the work of Gins and Arakawa—might be to see Mr. Palomar as an example of the reader who is unable to fully engage with the text because of his reading practices. There are parallels between Mr. Palomar and the reader, particularly in the way in which both are constrained by their understanding of the world. In *Mr. Palomar*, Mr. Palomar’s predicament in terms of what Agamben considers “trivial modernity.” Franchi describes the tragedy of the book: “Mr. Palomar is able to carry out his everyday affairs, he can buy his cheese and he can hear the blackbirds, although in an inauthentic way. When he tries to overcome such inauthenticity, however, he is projected onto a metaphysical seesaw that bumps him alternatively from a cosmos where everything is ordered, but from which he is excluded, to a disordered universe where every experience means nothing” (Franchi 773). I contend that what Franchi describes as Palomar’s “impossibility of reaching a full experience of things” or his “inauthentic” relationship to life—and even his death—is, to put it bluntly, due to his bad reading practices—reading practices that are based on an assumption that everything must be ordered or it means nothing.
Arakawa—is to imagine our active and constrained reading as a decision not to die. In this frame, passive reading is death. It is death because in reading passively we suggest that language exists only as language. Passive reading allows no power to create change, movement, or possibility. By reading actively, however, we suggest that language creates spaces, subverts spaces, and even engenders unlikely iterations of the “topos outopos” that Agamben suggests is locked within every poetic iteration. This is a reading practice, but it is also the more ethical way to live, and to let others live. We must allow reading itself to function as poesis—the space-creating, world-making labor that is often relegated only to writing—and Gins and Arakawa show us that we need our bodies to do it.

The notion that the language on the page will not create worlds by itself does not mean that language is not powerful. Rather, it means that by allowing our bodies to connect language to spatial practices through our active reading engagements, we begin to unwind the constraints that dictate our normative world structures. This is an activist sort of reading—a mode of reading that disrupts. It includes growing and shrinking a book in our hands, and saying one and thinking two. It also includes exposing the institutional constraints of patriarchy of the 70s as unlivable through forms of bodily protest. As I show in chapter one of the dissertation, it includes

39 Flatly, we could say that Mr. Palomar should have let his topless sunbather be a subject—or even be the artist Carolee Schneemann. As Joshua Schuster’s argument about the biotopian aspects of Gins and Arakawa’s work maintains, “one of the most urgent prospects for Arakawa and Gins's work is how it might suggest an alternate model of living where Life is not used to exploit life” (Schuster, “How Architecture Became Biotopian: From Meta-Biology to Causal Networks in Arakawa and Gins’ Architectural Body” 111). More broadly, we can think about reading and experiencing without exploitation.
enacting what we read. It also includes critiques of capitalist structures through sweaty bodies having sex in New York City’s water supply (see my discussion of O’Hara in chapter two), and as my next chapter will show, it includes resistance to capitalist consumer culture through exposure of accumulation as inhuman, untenable, and exhausting. Ultimately, constraint-based reading shows us that we must read, and read hard. In writing about the relationship between Gins and Arakawa’s architectural theory and poetry, Alan Prohm suggests that Gins and Arakawa’s work maintains the goal of much experimental poetry—a continual opening, tentativeness, or a rejection of closure—but brings this goal beyond the limitations of language. He writes, “In [Gins and Arakawa’s] view the true poem of the overcoming of dying, the poem they claim all poets are after, will continue to elude those who rely on language's limited efficacies to achieve this ultimate of all outcomes. Only the body— that which does/is the living, as opposed to that which articulates it and describes—presents a medial base broad and deep enough to change life in the one way they claim every poet, and person, really wants” (Prohm 72). Prohm’s suggestion that Gins and Arakawa’s work falls within the tradition of experimental poetry is helpful—the notion that it distrusts language is misguided. It is only through reading under constraint, through making lines tighter with our eyes or forcing memory to remember itself through a series of instructions, that we are able to see that the spaces we inhabit are in jeopardy, our bodies are implicated, and our future depends on reading.

As the pairings of this chapter have shown, the processes of constraint-based works, though they may be formal in nature, are also messy, bodily, and open for
interpretation. This messiness allows us to imagine new categories of reading and new critical practices that are corporal. They may be uncomfortable, but they also allow us to see the ways that reading creates our bodily practices and spatial practices through activities. And once we allow constraint-based works to be messy and bodily we can see that these works are more relevant to reading practices and writing practices today. These works may not all be feminist, what Spahr and Young consider “foulipo,” but if we pay attention, we see that they all work to revise the ways that bodies are constructed in spaces under dominant paradigms.
Chapter 4

Reading Not Appropriating: The Encounter of Conceptual Writing

My previous chapters have argued that preoccupations of experimental writing—contorting bodies, undermining and expanding architectural sites, redrawing the limits of enactment and media through unexpected encounters—reshape what it means to interpret a literary text. The focus of this chapter is today’s literary landscape, which is marked by “the conceptual.” This category, both a symptom of globalization and a way to describe its effects, has been forged by these previously described preoccupations.¹ Tan Lin, a conceptual writer and new media philosopher has said that today’s reading is like a “type of integrated software.” He explains that the modes and genres of reading vary considerably—and to think about contemporary reading is to consider “an application that processes or assembles varied kinds of material” (Genusa, “A Book Is Technology”). Conceptual writing, or conceptual poetry as it is also called, is this act of reading, or, act of assembling. At its simplest, “conceptual writing” is a recent term for poetry that privileges an idea. Usually, the conceptual poem privileges an idea or concept that requires a source text from which the conceptual poem was created.² Often, it includes transcribing, organizing, or assembling that source text. On a more complex level, conceptual writing is part of

¹ In a recent article, Fredric Jameson revised his theory of postmodernism to include the term globalization. He writes, “it was globalization that formed, as it were, the substructure of
² For lists of definitions of “conceptual writing,” see Notes On Conceptualisms, forums on the Poetry Foundation, and “Paragraphs on Conceptual Writing” (Place and Fitterman; Goldsmith, “Conceptual Writing”; Goldsmith, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Writing”) among many others.
our everyday practice, something we do without knowing it. Conceptual writing consists of the ideas we take into our reading and that we take from our reading. It is a mode of reading, and also a mode of poetic production. Lin writes that we should behave like insects when we read, readily absorbing our reading into our bodies (Lin 82). Indeed, conceptual writing relies on methods of accumulation, absorption, and combinatorial processes to sift through literary and unliterary texts such as post-it notes, bank statements, surveillance data, novels, canonical poems, historical court documents, and email. It contends that these materials are capable of being sifted, and productively organized not just by a curator, artist, or critic, but also by any reader. Conceptual writing asserts that the straightforward assemblage of material can inform our present, not by recuperating the past but by reading it.

Conceptual writing arrived with the new century. Kenneth Goldsmith, by turns the poster-child for conceptual writing and its most controversial figure, had been producing books that by any standard would be considered conceptual writing in the 1990s. But it was projects like Fidget (1999), the recording of all of the author’s bodily movements in the space of one day, Soliloquy (2001), the transcription of all speech in the space of one week, and Day (2003), a retyping of a single issue of the New York Times in book form, that put work of this kind on the intellectual map. In the case of the early 2000s, the intellectual map was, for the most part, digital. The poetry industry of the Internet—which includes institutionalized blogs and magazines

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3 Goldsmith’s 73 Poems with Joan La Barbara used overprinting techniques (1993). His 111.2.7.93-10.20.96 is a collection of phrases with a loose “r” sound organized by syllable count and alphabetized (1996).
like The Poetry Foundation, The Academy of American Poets, The Paris Review—contains the experimental poetry industry of the Internet, and it was in this corner of cyberspace that Goldsmith’s work usurped the stage, occupying more space than any other type, school, or author of poetry. As his works gained fame, other works in the same vein became more visible. Poets and critics argued about the reasons for the emergence of conceptual writing, and this type of work gained a definition through tracing conceptual writing’s influences, ultimately building its history.4

The key players identified themselves quickly, and from 2007 to 2009, much of the strength of the experimental poetry community went to defining this type of work.5 The writing of poets like Harryette Mullen, Kathy Acker, John Cage, Bernadette Mayer, and Claudia Rankine, which had employed techniques of conceptual writing before the name, became an integral part of the category. In 2011 and 2012, two major anthologies of conceptual writing arrived on the scene, presenting themselves as ways to navigate and understand this new mode of literature (Bergvall et al.; Dworkin and Goldsmith). By the summer of 2012, conceptual poetry was declared dead by Johanna Drucker. This declaration started a string of performances by Vanessa Place who announced that poetry is dead, and that Vanessa Place—or, conceptual poetry—is responsible for its demise (Drucker, “Beyond

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4 The term “conceptual writing” was coined in 2003 for the online archive UbuWeb in the title for The UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing (Dworkin, “A Note on Conceptualism”).

5 In 2008 a conference called “Conceptual Poetry and Its Others” was held at the University of Arizona Poetry Center. In 2009, Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman’s slim volume Notes on Conceptualisms entered the scene (Place and Fitterman). Marjorie Perloff’s Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century (2010) helped codify conceptual writing as a serious genre for study.
“Poetry Is Dead, I Killed It”). Around this time, the category of conceptual poetry also grew famous outside of its little corner of the Internet and outside of the academic focus on experimental literature (perhaps further evidence of its “death” to the avant-garde scene). In the spring of 2011, Goldsmith visited the White House to read his poetry. He then made appearances on The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, where Stewart showed a clip of his White House Reading to make fun of his suit jacket, and The Colbert Report, where Goldsmith told Colbert that he never writes any of his books, but rather, he transcribes them (Common Performs at the White House; Kenneth Goldsmith on Colbert). Goldsmith also gained a residency as “poet laureate” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in 2013. Conceptual writing—at least through Goldsmith’s representation—had gained mainstream traction. It may have been something to laugh at (Goldsmith’s funny suits and the notion of transcription as poetry are outside the norm), but people knew about it. If conceptual poetry had in fact “died” to the poetry community, poet-critics in 2013 resurrected it in order to stage a battle over its value. The product of this public argument was a plethora of questions; it was understood that conceptual poetry was controversial but it was still up for debate if this work was avant-garde, if it was political, and if it contained feeling.⁶

⁶ See “Against Conceptualism,” where Cal Bedient argues that, with conceptual writing, concept “trumps feeling” and that the consequence is apolitical, tame, anti-revolutionary work (Bedient). Also see “The Beauty and the Beastly Po Biz,” “Charmless and Interesting: What Conceptual Poetry Lacks and What It’s Got,” “Notes on Safe Conceptualisms”; “Why Cry?”; “doggerel for thematics; or the endgame of ‘détournement? I don’t believe you!’”;

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As I began writing this chapter in the spring of 2014, an online magazine, *The Volta*, had just released a feature on conceptual writing. The essays in *The Volta* charted new territory on the topic at that time by discussing race, gender, and the “post-conceptual.” They also expressed overall annoyance with the sensationalized nature of the so called “conpo debates”; *The Volta* hoped to remedy this problem with attention to specific works. Now, as I am revising and finishing this chapter in the spring of 2015, there has been a significant change in the way conceptual writing is discussed. In fact, at the moment, the conversation about conceptual poetry mostly centers on issues of race. This change in focus is in part a response to Kenneth Goldsmith’s public reading at Brown University on March 13th, 2015. As part of the conference Interrupt3, Goldsmith read an edited version of the autopsy report of Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year old African American who was shot and killed by a white police officer in August 2014. At the reading, Goldsmith stood in front of a projected image of the teenager and read the revised report unflinchingly. He changed the report so that it ended with a description of Brown’s genitalia after his death. He called the poem “The Body of Michael Brown.” Goldsmith, a white man performing this violence anew hurt and offended many people, and it horrified the

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“Conceptualism As Affect: or, A Defense of Both at Once”; “Lyric Conceptualism” (King, “Beauty And The Beastly Po-Biz, Part 1”; King, “Beauty And The Beastly Po-Biz, Part 2”; Johnson; Gallagher; Beasley; Schultz; Queyras). *The Poetry Foundation* published a roundup of this debate in July 2013 (Harriet Staff).

7 The violence is multifaceted: Goldsmith displayed the brutalized body of Brown allegorically. He also took the official, or state sanctioned report of this body as his the source text, eschewing other reports of the incident from Brown’s family or community, for example. The editing of the report to accentuate elements of violence for aesthetic effect is another violence. Just after it occurred, poet-critic Somalz Sharif tweeted ten ways that this performance is violent (“Solmaz Sharif (@nsabugsme) | Twitter”)
poetry community. Understandably, the protests that had erupted around the country in response to the non-indictment of Darren Wilson, Brown’s killer, haven’t ceased. The decision came out in November, and in March the country continues to be wounded and outraged at the absence of justice for Brown, but also for black men and boys who are repeatedly profiled, harassed, and killed by police officers. Alongside this outrage, Goldsmith’s offensive reading has raised the stakes in a recent conversation around race and conceptual writing. Several critics have declared conceptual writing itself to be a racist category. These critiques of conceptual writing—made both before and after the Goldsmith reading—have suggested that because the category, as it is often defined, suffers from unmarked whiteness, and from unmarked male-ness, conceptual writing is irrecoverably white supremacist and sexist.

These critiques of the way race is demonstrated in conceptual writing are crucial. However, in this dissertation, conceptual writing is not a white supremacist category, nor is it an unmarked category. Racial politics, aesthetics, histories, and experiences are central to my formulation of conceptual writing. Techniques of

8 The hurt and angry responses are myriad. See Goldsmith’s twitter and facebook profiles for a history of response and conversations about the event (“Kenneth Goldsmith (@kg_ubu) | Twitter”; “Kenneth Goldsmith”). At first Goldsmith retweeted angry responses, but after a few days, he stopped. He then asked Brown University not to release a video of the reading to the public and claimed he would donate his honorarium for the reading to the family of Michael Brown. See blog posts by Amy King and Stephanie Young for a sharp critique and also a round-up of other commentary (King, “WHY ARE PEOPLE SO INVESTED IN KENNETH GOLDSMITH?”; S. Young).

9 See “Why We Won’t Wait” for an articulation of the scope and urgency of this issue (Kelly).

10 For example, see the Boston Review forum, which began just before the Goldsmith reading and conversations on “The Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo,” a site devoted to “the destruction of white supremacy and its ‘aesthetic questions’” (“Race and the Poetic Avant-Garde | Boston Review”; “The Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo”).
conceptual writing have been used to interrogate issues of race long before conceptual writing’s categorical inception. Likewise, experimental, formal, and multimedia–based techniques have always been a part of the conversation about racial aesthetics. If critiques of the whiteness of conceptual writing end with discarding the category, they risk silencing the treatments of race—and the writings of people of color—that have been an integral part of conceptual writing from its beginning. This chapter focuses on writing by women that critiques sexism, and writing by people of color that critiques racism and the violent histories of slavery. (I will write at length about NourbeSe Philip’s Zong! and Wendy Davis’s Let Her Speak.) In the way that I configure the category, these are central, not marginal, examples of conceptual writing. They are central because, as I will argue, techniques of conceptual writing help to reread and recapitulate histories and constructions of race and gender in North America. Furthermore, I argue that if we read these works as conceptual writing, they reveal the ways that conceptual writing techniques expose how race and discrimination are imbricated with media, historical documents, and formal constraints. In their way of conveying, or assembling, the present moment these examples of conceptual writing perform ideological analysis. Just as these events of the early 2000s launched my dissertation, they have likely launched a dozen others. And the events of this spring have surely launched a dozen more. In that spirit, knowing that the category itself is flexible, I begin this chapter by briefly describing

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11 Evie Shockley argues that NourbeSe Philip’s Zong! should be considered within the realm of conceptual writing for similar reasons. Shockley argues that in addition to asking us to consider the raced and gendered body, Philip’s Zong! urges us to consider something beyond the body, the “spirit’ or ‘soul’ that calls for and is nurtured by ritual” (Shockley).
why conceptual writing is important, and why it made these waves in the poetry community and the academy in the last few years.

Conceptual writing has hit a nerve because it speaks to contemporary conversations about changes in reading practices in the age of increasing globalization, digitization, and abstraction. Indeed, it calls on us to better read these crises of our moment and to see them in line with historical and localized crises of racism and gender oppression. However, conceptual writing’s potential to address these issues through new possible reading methods has not been the central way that the conceptual turn is discussed. Prior to the recent conversations about unmarked whiteness, critics discussed conceptual writing in terms of “appropriation.”\(^\text{12}\) Those inside and outside of the movement argued that what is important about conceptual writing is its step away from the doctrine of attempting to create something “new.” Goldsmith, for example, calls it “uncreative” writing because it does not create anything original (Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*). In this notion, conceptual writing simply appropriates something old, usually a source text of some kind. Likewise, in a celebratory tone, Marjorie Perloff writes, the poet’s role is to “redistribute the language that is already there” (Perloff, “Towards a Conceptual Lyric: From Content to Context”). Using the “already there” is a provocative writing practice. As many have pointed out, it destabilizes ideas of genius, discrete expressive subjects, high and low writing, and what constitutes an autonomous oeuvre. This work of destabilization began with modernist experimentation and continues in conceptual writing. Indeed,

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\(^{12}\) Notably Marjorie Perloff, Paul Stephens, Craig Dworkin, Kenneth Goldsmith.
much of the conversation about conceptual writing centers on its critique of notions of novelty, original authorship, and genius, or its refusal of sentiment and privileging of intellect. This focus is largely the result of examining appropriation as both the method and the motivation behind this category. The frame of appropriation fixates on the gesture of stealing the work—of taking it for private property or for a new purpose (OED)—but this fixation on appropriation often elides discussions of the source texts themselves, or what happens to them after they are appropriated.

Both anthologies of conceptual writing solidify this frame of appropriation, albeit in distinct ways. Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith’s introductions to Against Expression, An Anthology of Conceptual Writing claim that appropriation and constraint are central tenets of this literature. For Dworkin and Goldsmith, appropriation is used for the purpose of avoiding authorial subjectivity. Each piece of conceptual writing that appears in their anthology is introduced by a headnote that describes how it is unemotional or non-expressive. For example, a short piece by the late-modernist writer Samuel Beckett (not otherwise a conceptual poet) is included because it lacks emotion. The editors write about a passage from Molloy, “Although the first person singular I is invoked, it reveals nothing of the narrator’s subjectivity or emotion. Rather, the body is reduced to another cog in a machine” (Dworkin and Goldsmith 73). Because nothing is revealed of the narrator, the short piece is “conceptual” by these editorial standards. The editors are not “against expression” in general, but they are against the narrator showing expression; their fight is against the lyric or authorial I, which they consider “expressivist.” This is further evidenced by
the headnote to Walter Abish's “Skin Deep”: “Like many works of conceptual writing…the result [of his writing process] is neither depersonalized nor unemotional. Rather, the formal conceit attempts to discover or more closely approach emotional conditions by avoiding the habits, clichés and sentimentality of conventional expressivist rhetoric” (Dworkin and Goldsmith 8). Emotion at large is interesting to the editors, as long as it is not attached to a subject; personal emotion is “conventional” and has no place in conceptual writing.13 If the emotion is appropriated from elsewhere, it singularly avoids being personal.

*I'll Drown My Book, Conceptual Writing By Women* offers a different approach. Editors Caroline Bergvall, Laynie Browne, Teresa Carmody, and Vanessa Place strategically make it difficult to pin down one definition of conceptual writing. Each author is invited to provide her own definition of conceptual writing in relation to her work, and three editors write different definitions in the paratext. To further obscure a unifying definition, they divide the contributions into categories. The categories overlap and many of the works could fit into multiple sections.14 For example, Kathy Acker’s work, “I Recall My Childhood,” from *Great Expectations*, a rewriting of the opening of the Dickens novel, is listed under the category “Process,” with the subheading “Constraint, Mimicry, Mediation, Translative, Versioning.” Yet it could have also been listed under the category “Structure” with its subheading “Appropriation, Erasure, Constraint, Formula, Pattern, Palimpsest.” Or, perhaps it

13 Poet-critic Cathy Park Hong sees this emphasis as part of the white supremacy inherent in the category (Hong).
14 Browne admits as much in her introduction, explaining that the editors attempted “to place works in the category which is most dominantly displayed in the piece” (Browne 16).
could have been listed in any of the sections, considering that this work also deals with aspects of “Matter” and “Event,” the other categories. It is clear that Bergvall, Browne, Carmody, and Place’s definition of conceptual writing is purposefully multiple, collaborative, and porous. To confirm what we may suspect from examining the form of the anthology, Laynie Brown introduces the works included in the book by stating, “in all of these works collective thinking is primary” (Browne 16). Her definition of conceptual writing includes an “assemblage of voices,” and all the editors are interested in undoing the “false construction” which may claim that process-driven work is not expressive (Browne 15). For Bergvall, who writes the second introduction, textual plagiarism is important to these works; however, her description of textual plagiarism is very different from that described in Against Expression. Where Goldsmith argues that textual plagiarism has become a dominant category because “the computer encourages us to mimic its workings,” or because originality is over (Goldsmith, “Why Conceptual Writing? Why Now?” xvi, xx), for Bergvall, textual plagiarism “provides [in Kathy Acker’s work] a way out of a societal status quo that must silence or symptomatize the female, minoritarian or differential writer” (Bergvall 18). In almost a complete reversal of Goldsmith and Dworkin’s definitions, conceptual writing is a political and expressive act that ultimately allows a singular authorial or narrative voice to be heard against hegemonic patriarchy. Taking multiple voices or works into a single work allows for empowered critique.
The writings anthologized in the two collections, as their respective paratexts would suggest, are somewhat divergent.\textsuperscript{15} Yet they have many overlaps as well.\textsuperscript{16} Though these two anthologies provide different ways of understanding the production of conceptual writing, here I hope to shift the definition of conceptual writing to center on the process and products of reading. In other words, both collections use authorial appropriation as the claimed focus of conceptual writing; in \textit{I’ll Drown My Book} appropriation can paradoxically reveal expression and in \textit{Against Expression}, it can help expand expression beyond authorial clichés. I argue that this frame of appropriation is too narrow. While keeping the body of work the same, here I hope to shift the focus away from appropriation as the central device, or driving force of conceptual work. These conceptual works are not uncreatively stealing texts in order to create art; they are fixated on exposing how we may consume or read texts today.

Goldsmith has repeatedly suggested that conceptual writing does not need to be read in order to be understood, and other conceptual writers have echoed this sentiment.\textsuperscript{17} Although many critics and poets urge us to understand that this

\textsuperscript{15} Craig Dworkin discusses the different aims of the two collections: \textit{I’ll Drown My Book} was more inclusive of “creative” work than the criteria for inclusion in \textit{Against Expression}. He writes, “Rather than scold us for sexist exclusions, \textit{I’ll Drown My Book} confirmed the integrity of our inclusions. Of all the contributions to \textit{I’ll Drown My Book}, there are only two I regret omitting — Hannah Weiner’s \textit{Code Poems} (which we had in fact considered) and Rosemarie Waldrop’s mashups of Wittgenstein sentences, which we overlooked” (Dworkin, “A Note on Conceptualism”).

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Against Expression} includes thirty women, fourteen of whom are included in \textit{I’ll Drown My Book} as well.

\textsuperscript{17} See the \textit{Believer} interview with Goldsmith for a clear statement of this (Mandl). See also Goldsmith’s tweets from kg_ubu and reports on many public readings. Most recently Goldsmith shed light on this older argument with a tweet: “When you say a text is unreadable, you guarantee yourself a readership.” Here he implies that the “argument” of unreadability was actually an advertising tactic (Goldsmith, “When You Say a Text Is Unreadable, You
suggests the conflict is bombast or provocation rather than doctrine, the attitude has worked to solidify a notion that undoing authorial creativity through appropriation is the point of these works. In other words, many critics understand conceptual writing to be about the simple fact of its project, which we can easily glean without running our eyes over pages. Despite the polemical nature of the title of this chapter, I do not think that “reading” and “appropriating” are competing frames through which to understand conceptual writing. I do think that the frame of authorial appropriation has been a red herring in understanding the way conceptual writing operates. Among other problems, it centers the work on the author, artist, poet, or curator rather than on the objects in the collection. Many of these works are re-readings of texts—both inside and outside the category of literature. Where Diana Hamilton’s Okay Okay uses the text found on Google searches about “how to stop crying at work” to construct its pages, Harreyette Mullen and Angela Genusa both rewrite Gertrude Stein’s Tender Buttons. These works seem to revise Goldsmith’s statement—these source texts need to be read in order for the work to be made. The conceptual projects ask, how should we read these source texts today? We can only begin to answer this question by attending to the conceptual writing itself. We must ask: how precisely does this work assemble its source texts? And what is the effect?

It is no surprise that this set of questions about the purpose, reason, and function of reading is being asked now. Most simply put, conceptual writing takes up

Guarantee Yourself a Readership”). Place and Fitterman, drawing on notions of “thinkership” (rather than readership) as the audience for conceptual writing argue, “Pure conceptualism negates the need for reading in the traditional textual sense—one does not need to ‘read’ the work as much as think about the idea of the work” (Place and Fitterman 25).
our contemporary indecision surrounding the nature of reading. In much popular media, this discussion inevitably leads to eulogies for the printed book and for the type of reading that went with it. Of course, projects like printing out the entire Internet (Kenneth Goldsmith), publishing courtroom transcripts as poetry (Vanessa Place), writing the grammatical elements that make up sentences (Craig Dworkin), and other such conceptual ventures respond to questions about the ethics and politics of our reading practices as much as they make us think about “stealing.”

This set of issues about reading in the digital age is not only explored by popular media and by conceptual writing. Recent literary scholarship has focused on the changing meaning of the practice we know as reading as well. An early key moment in this scholarly discussion was Eve Sedgwick's “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You” (2003). In this essay, Sedgwick criticizes what she sees as a trend toward paranoid, or symptomatic reading in literary criticism. This germinal article was followed by many others on the topic, including the Fall 2009 special issue of Representations “The Way We Read Now,” the 2011 English Institute Conference on the theme “Reading,” and the 2004 conference “Polemic: Critical or Uncritical.” A more recent but important addition to this conversation is Heather Love’s “Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn” (2010). Love’s piece and others like it are also in conversation with Franco Moretti’s suggestion that comparative literature is interested in the category of World Literature through “distant reading,” a way to analyze many texts at once and notice historical patterns without the need for
training in national or local literatures and languages (Moretti). In sum, these essays are concerned with how deeply we read when we read critically. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus promote “surface reading,” which is “an embrace of the surface as an affective and ethical stance” in response to Marxist and psychoanalytic notions that the most important aspects of the text are hidden and need a reader to “uncover” them (Best and Sharon Marcus 10). While centering on the way we think about approaching our work as critics, these conversations also have to do with the way changing technology affects reading practices. Although the articles mentioned above do not discuss reading on screens, they are imbricated in the debate about digital practices. As skimming websites has become ubiquitous, arguments about the place of skimming in academia have high stakes. While skimming, or, its cousin “shallow,” reading happens in the world, certain areas of the academy consider it degraded and hope to keep these practices far away from scholarship. It is in this spirit that others respond, explaining the benefits of the “surface” or problems with the depth model of classroom-style hermeneutics. For example, when Michael Warner sets out to define what “critical reading” as a classroom practice means, he discovers that it is specialized to universities, largely undefined and highly historically specific. Pointing out that the only “style of actual reading that we can observe in the world counts as uncritical” (15), Warner suggests that we reconsider the boundaries of how we teach students to read.

Recently, *The Changing Profession* forum in *PMLA* entitled “Reading in the Digital Age,” embodied the same spirit as the frightened *New York Times*’s “Future of
Reading” series. Where the Times asks “R U Really Reading,” implying that there may be something unpalatable about reading Internet-speak, as opposed to the more elegant text we might read in literary books, critic Jim Collins sums up this issue in the sentence, “there’s reading and then there’s reading.” Many do not consider what we do on our tablet screens or iPhones as reading. Collins explains that “when people talk about the future of reading, they’re worried about whether readers worthy of the name will continue reading literary fiction in the twenty-first century” (Collins, “Reading, in a Digital Archive of One’s Own” 207). Collins, as well as the other essayists in this forum, point out that this fear that reading is over, or has changed so radically as to not “really” be reading, is ahistorical. Each forum essay points out that reading has been changing over time and has changed drastically many times before (Baron; Hayles; Collins, “Reading, in a Digital Archive of One’s Own”). A shift away from the codex and toward the computer screen or the e-reader may not be a more drastic change in practice than the move from reading sacred texts aloud to reading them in silence (Koepnick 233), or the introduction of the index to read scripture discontinuously (Warner, “Uncritical Reading” 23), let alone the innovations of Gutenberg (Manguel 134), for example. Today’s shift is just one among many historical shifts in reading, these scholars point out.

This sort of scholarly historicizing makes it clear that the fears that fuel this debate (that print-books are disappearing, that literary reading is becoming obsolete), are not as interesting as the discussions they have produced. These fears have produced the opportunity to examine how our reading practices are changing, to
describe what they look like now, and to develop an understanding of what ways of reading are appropriate to textual production today. This is the crucial discussion into which conceptual writing enters. In a sense, every free e-book, Amazon audio book, Kindle purchase, or Twitter novel, enters into this dialogue about changing reading practices, but conceptual writing does it from the unlikely position of books of poetry.

Though conceptual writing enters the debate, these books of conceptual poetry do not communicate a singular position about today’s changing reading practices. Where some conceptual works require sustained attention to read (if we do crack the book), others comment on notions of skimming. Many comment on the commodity of the book form. Matthew Timmons’s work, *Credit*, was one of the first conceptual writing books on the print-on-demand service Lulu.com. It is 800 pages of virtually unreadable plagiarized text, including redacted letters, scanned envelopes, mangled type, virtually blank pages, and gibberish. But since the appearance of Timmons’s book, many examples of conceptual writing have popped up on Lulu. Furthermore, PDF publishers like Gauss and Troll Thread provide all works for free download or affordable purchase from their website. This work can be widely circulated very quickly. In 2013, *Kill List* by Joseph Kaplan caused a great stir in the poetry blogging community. Free for download, it listed, in alphabetical order, conjectures about the financial status of famous (or semi-famous) poets in quatrain stanzas:

Vito Acconci is a rich poet.
Gilbert Adair is comfortable.
Rachel Adams is comfortable.
Etel Adnan is a rich poet.

(Kaplan 1)
The “source text” is the poets’ names and public personas that have been, in a sense, reassembled according to a theme. Importantly, this poem is not meant to be “read” in a literary sense. Instead, it proposes a way of reading that consists of skimming to understand the aims and scope of the project. If we are embedded in the community, we perhaps also skim to find our own name or names of those we know on the list.

Joyelle McSweeney compared the list’s imposed reading practice to contemporary drone warfare—it requires a quick reading over before focusing in for the quick and easy “kill” (McSweeney). Surely this piece says something about the ethics of reading today—the only way this poem can be read is if we become more computer-like, or more drone-like in our practices. The poem asks us to process this information in the service of the systematic project, in this case, the “kill list.” In addition to a critique of the war industry, or of a certain sort of militancy, questions about prestige abound. Who is famous enough to be included? What does it do for us to see “Acconci” next to “Adair”? If we hadn’t heard of both these poets, are we on the outside? Questions about labor and wealth accumulation are obvious: How much money do you have to have to qualify as a “rich poet”? Questions about authenticity are posed as well: is this list true? Is the Lebanese-American poet, Etal Adan, wealthy?

In its suggestion to consider the category of skimming, Kill List takes part in the popular debate about reading. Yet this poem, in this way exemplifying the category of conceptual writing, brings the category of poetry into the debate. Each quatrain is on its own page and many scan in iambic pentameter. As much as it
deviates from the category of poetry—perhaps as a “list”—Kill List also participates in it. It is notable that this debate is largely about reading literary fiction, as Collins rightly notes above. A poetry book is the most rarefied of the media that might appear in this popular conversation about reading, the type of text and accompanying practice that seems the farthest away from the activity we do when our eyes move across the screen of our iPhone. By embodying the very entity at the far end of the debate, conceptual writing uniquely positions itself to explain something about reading in the largest sense of the word. Kill List flew around the Internet overnight and within a week of its posting, there was a response book that contained a long and fairly scandalous comment thread of Facebook posts written by poets talking about the poem (Yearous-Algozin). Kill List offended people and it delighted people, and it seems that those who read the whole book thought carefully about drones and labor, but most people didn’t read the whole book. Why would they? Reading the whole book was clearly not the point here. Yet with a fast-circulating PDF, Kaplan makes us think about how we are reading as much as a forum on the subject does.

The works I discuss below are book-length and I contend that they are meant to be read in their long form. Also unlike Kill List, each work reads a prior text in its long form, engaging in a rewriting or remediating of an earlier work. The most famous example of conceptual writing is Goldsmith’s Day, a book of poetry that consists of the transcription of the New York Times on one day (September 1, 2000).

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18 Barrett Watten sees it as an anti-communist act of naming names, while others like Magdalena Zurawski claim that, for better or worse, the poem is a sort of Marxist critique, uncovering, or “outing” of wealth status (Watten, “Entry 9: On Naming Names”; Yearous-Algozin 3).
The project is over 800 pages long. Goldsmith did some of this copying by hand but did most of it using Optical Character Recognition Software (Goldman; Wershler-Henry). This work was a watershed for the category of conceptual poetry because it was an early and extravagant example. Because it lacks any discernable political conviction, dissenter of the conceptual poetry scene used it to claim that the whole category consisted of a type of trivial performance. It became a focus of Goldsmith’s famous and much uttered statement that conceptual writing does not need to be read, despite his “reading” of the entire newspaper to do it. Ultimately, Day produced close readings and much textual-critical labor. Indeed, conceptual writing sheds light on changes in reading caused by digital information gathering and disseminating, globalization, and changes in print culture.

In the remainder of this chapter, I demonstrate how conceptual writing engages both a crisis of reading and a crisis of media culture, and it shows the way these two crises are related. Furthermore conceptual writing demonstrates how poetry can be an active force in navigating these issues. Here I keep conceptual poetry within the frame of “readable texts” strategically, aware that conceptual poetry often works as a sort of limit case for this category, as well as a testing ground for varied (and often uncomfortable) reading practices. This chapter works as both the culmination and the frame for the earlier chapters of the dissertation. Throughout this

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19 See “Uncreative is the New Creative: Kenneth Goldsmith Not Typing”; “Re-thinking ‘Non-retinal Literature’: Citation, ‘Radical Mimesis,’ and Phenomenologies of Reading in Conceptual Writing”; *Nobody's Business: Twenty-First Century Avant-Garde Poetics*; and *21st Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics.* (Wershler-Henry; Goldman; Reed; Perloff, *21st Century Modernism*)
chapter, reading methods that were previously discussed will be reintroduced and complicated by conceptual writing experiments. The enactment required to read Fluxus scores (chapter 1) is here morphed into a sort of reading-writing. Like the open, unending ambiguity surrounding the performance of a Fluxus score, each work of conceptual writing is appropriated, copied, translated, manipulated, and ultimately remains open for further steps in this process. The local argument about conceptual writing and its interrogation of reading both complicates and sheds light on my discussion of the reading-enactment required to encounter a Fluxus score. In a similar way that Fluxus works beckon us to do the artwork, these conceptual works will suggest that conceptual writing is about the process, perhaps, of conceptual reading. My second chapter, “I do this, I do that: Poetries of Event” served to show how real and virtual spaces in experimental poetry create new categories of reading. With the conceptual poetry I will discuss below, these spaces and places of the “real” morph into spaces and places of the virtual without much poetics involved—many of these works also thematize traversing spaces of the Internet or focus on creating fraught maps of cyberspace. A consideration of embodied reading practices, also crucial to understanding constraint-based works (chapter 3) will be a part of this chapter’s discussion of the transcript *Let Her Speak*, a piece of conceptual writing in which a woman’s body is also manipulated and constrained like the feminist body art of the 1970s. By considering contemporary conceptual writing here, I build on these historical moments in art and literature to answer some of the broadest questions about reading today.
In my readings below I shift the conversation from the dominant critical focus on how conceptual writing displays techniques of authorial appropriation to focus instead on the way conceptual writing teaches us to read.\textsuperscript{20} I will make this shift by examining a work excerpted in both conceptual writing anthologies, \textit{Zong!} by M. NourbeSe Philip. This text is a literacy narrative—it asks if it is possible to encounter horrific documents of history that we are not equipped to understand—and it plots the process of learning to read historical violence. Philip does not give us a program with which to read history, but a series of attempts that reveal something about the encounter with history itself. I then explore works of conceptual writing that transmediate between genres in order to “reframe and rebuild” previous works. Whereas Philip asks how to read history, the works I discuss in the second section ask us how to read our contemporary moment. Through manipulations of media, these works show the way that changes in reading are inextricable from changes in technology. Lastly, I ask the question: \textit{why poetry}? I hope to show that conceptual

\textsuperscript{20} Other critics have recently embraced the connection between reading practices and conceptual writing. In the \textit{Boston Review}, Lindsay Turner asks, “can conceptualism be a springboard for ways of reading poetry” and ultimately answers yes to this question through a reading of Steven Zultanski’s \textit{Agony} (Turner). Recently Jacquelyn Aram, in examining the role of the alphabet in conceptual writing “through a formal lens,” contends that conceptual writing should be read closely (Ardam 133). Judith Goldman finds that what is important about this kind of work is its performance of “radical mimesis,” which is a political act of reading-writing (Goldman). Brian Reed claims that despite the argument that this poetry is unreadable, or that you don't need to read it, “avant-garde poetry of this kind remains a solidly language-based art, one sincerely concerned with what happens when words are communicated via different media” (Reed 69). Paul Stephens, in examining works of conceptual writing that use listing and indexing as their main constraint and trope, argues that by adopting these strategies, “conceptual writing demonstrates considerable self-reflexivity with respect to the conditions of its own existence and dissemination in an era of instantaneous global information flows” (Stephens, “Vanguard Total Index” 753).
poetry is involved in politicizing the act of reading poetry in order to comment on the state of abstract capital and technological advancement in the early 2000s.

M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* and How to Read History

M. NourbeSe Phillip’s *Zong!* is a collection of disjunctive, difficult, experimental poetry. It falls within a body of work that uses documentary evidence, and court documents in particular, to create poetry. Also within this tradition falls Muriel Rukeyser’s “The Book of the Dead,” a chronicle—using testimony from congressional hearings, letters, interviews and financial documents—of lung disease caused by unfair labor practices in the mines in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia (1938); Charles Reznikoff’s *Testimony: The United States (1885-1915)* and *Holocaust*, which created long poems from court testimony (1965, 1975); Heimrad Bäcker’s *Transcript*, a book of concrete poems made from bureaucratic documents of the Nazis and their victims (2001); and, most recently, Vanessa Place’s work, which is based on her notes from rape case testimonies (2010-2011). But one might not know that Philip’s book is based on a courtroom document, or that it hails from this long tradition of court documentary poetry without “Notanda,” the penultimate section in the book. In fact, without the “Notanda,” the work seems too difficult, too “creative” perhaps, to be conceptual writing. Whereas most of the conceptual writing in the anthologies appears repetitive and streamlined—a reader can often tell at a glance that constraint was involved—Philip’s text looks like difficult poetry from an earlier age. The poems of *Zong!* resemble poetry written in the Language tradition, poems meant to disrupt
standard rules of language, or meant to show the aesthetic materiality of words. But we discover quickly (if somehow we missed the print release, or the blurb on the book jacket) that although these poems work against grammar, order and empire, they are importantly not Language poetry.\footnote{Philip writes about this in the “Notanda”: “On their surface the poems approximate language poetry; like the language poets I question the assumed transparency of language, and therefore, employ similar strategies to reveal the hidden agendas of language. In my own work, however, the strategies signpost a multifaceted critique of the European project” (Philip 197).} They are written under constraint; the text of *Zong!* uses only the parts of sentences, then words, and alphabetic letters that were previously used in a court document. In other words, it employs a very short court document as a “word store.” Here I will analyze *Zong!* with attention to the way it requires the frame of readership to be in the forefront. By reading several passages closely, I explore specific lessons about reading that *Zong!* can teach us. Lastly, I acknowledge the important material nature of the text—*Zong!* teaches us to read through the medium of a poetry book.

In the “Notanda,” Philip explains that *Zong!* is written from a source text; it is created from a report of the decision of an English legal case of 1783, *Gregson v. Gilbert*, in which the captain of the slave ship *Zong* ordered 150 enslaved Africans to throw themselves overboard for the purpose of collecting insurance money after their deaths.\footnote{Though Philip writes about 150 Africans killed, based on the court document’s account, the exact number is historically unclear. Ian Baucom cites the number of murdered Africans as 132 (Baucom 8).} After the insurers refused to pay, a jury found them liable for compensating the ship’s owners for the murdered slaves. The insurers then appealed the decision, after which three justices decided that a new trial should be held to determine the
ultimate fault. The court document that states the judges’ decision provides the
language Philip uses for the poems. Constrained by this short document, her poems
are thus reiterations and meditations on the historical event. In the “Notanda” we also
learn additional historical background; the voyage of the slave ship Zong took much
longer than expected and many enslaved people died through illness and lack of water.
Captain Luke Collingwood assumed that, since his “cargo” was insured, if the
Africans were thrown off the boat, he would be able to collect money, whereas if they
died of natural causes, restitution was not guaranteed. Historians of transatlantic
slavery know this horrific case as an important step on the way to abolition.23

The “Notanda” also explains that Zong! was the result of Philip’s obsession
with the Zong case. She was haunted by the story (she reads, re-reads and researches
the case and its evidence), which forces her to enter into a “different land, a land of
language” and also an understanding of silence (Philip 195). She explains that, after
reading the case, she feels that she must tell the Zong story, but also cannot imagine it
in narrative form. She employs only the words that were used in the courtroom
transcript to create the poems “Zong! #1-26,” which makes up “Os,” the first section
of the text. Then Philip writes “translations” of these highly compacted first poems to
make up the subsequent sections. In other words, in the “Notanda,” Philip explains
that Zong! is a way of telling history, or learning history, while also engaging with
history. The Zong case, as Philip explains, is a “story that cannot be told, yet must be

23 See James Walvin’s Black Ivory. Ian Baucom’s Specters of the Atlantic makes a larger
claim about the Zong case, arguing that it is central to our understanding “not only to the
trans-Atlantic slave trade and the political and cultural archives of the black Atlantic but to
the history of modern capital, ethics and time consciousness” (Baucom 31).
told” and in order to reckon with history, we must be haunted by it, we must examine its language; as Philip explains, we “want the bones” (198, 201). The question of *Zong!* is: how do we historicize atrocity? Or, more precisely, how do we engage with documents of history that elide the very atrocity that they historicize? The answer, which Philip illuminates, is a sort of reading-writing that is crucial to conceptual writing.

Though they repeat a telling of the same event, the poems *Zong!* #1-26, each have different lineation and a different logic. By isolating phrases or grammatical elements of sentences, a new way of telling appears: the gaps and holes that language usually lets stand become illuminated as absence. For example, “*Zong!* #26,” which begins, “was the cause was the remedy was the record was the argument/ was the delay was the evidence was the overboard was the not was the,” contains no subject (Philip 45). It probes at the philosophical meaning of what “was” through its list; reading it is so opaque that what “was” on the ship is elided, though its effects are felt. Under the poems, below a line at the bottom of the page, are lists of African names—from “Notanda” we know that these are the names that Philip gave to the murdered slaves because, as she found in her research, all historical documents left them unnamed.

The sections that follow “Os” consist of “Sal,” “Ventus,” “Ratio,” “Ferrum,” “Ebora” and include words in Arabic, Dutch, Fon, French, Greek, Hebrew, Italian,
Latin, Portuguese, Spanish Shona, Twi, West African Patois, and Yoruba. They are written from multiple points of view and are often very obscure. Words are scattered across the page, broken so as to force the eyes into a halting, undulating movement. “Ebora” contains type that oversets type in addition to the undulating patterns; it is illegible, for the most part. Before the “Notanda,” Philip includes a glossary of “Words and Phrases Heard on Board the Zong” and the section “Manifest” presumably lists the ship’s cargo. But as we know from the constraint, the “Manifest” is a list of the words Philip could create from the extant text. We realize she may have started here, drawing out words from a text, a process that would illuminate what could be told and what could not be told. The list is divided into “African Groups & Languages,” “Animals,” “Body Parts,” “Crew,” “Food & Drink,” “Nature,” and “Women Who Wait.” From these categories we gain guidance to the backstories Philip has created using the language of the source text. For example, under “Women Who Wait,” Ruth and Claire are listed; in the poems these two women appear repeatedly in what may be correspondence from a white crewmember. After the “Notanda,” Philip reproduces the original court document in full at the end of the book.

The poems are constraint-based, but they figure the importance of readership foremost; following the poems, the long “Notanda” provides a hermeneutics of the

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24 The titles of the book are in Latin, emphasizing the estrangement of legal language and the language of poetry.
25 We learn from the “Notanda” that this initial style of type overlaying type could have occurred from an error that Philip’s home printer created. She was interested but baffled by the effect.
poems’ reading practice as well as a rationale for the book and a way to understand it. After the “Notanda,” Philip provides her reader a glimpse of the raw materials; the unaltered judgment is printed in full. By exposing the judge’s document, after the long struggle not to reproduce the judge’s document in the pages that precede it, *Zong!* challenges the reader to try to read the case in its many forms, to be haunted by it. This case, though it may look clear, short, and comprehensible, also contains absences and elisions. We know this because of the work that preceded its reproduction. Without broken language scattered across the page, we know that this court case contains the haunting and horror of each moment of attempted understanding we have experienced in the 209 pages that precede it. It may look like language we know, but by the time we reach it, we know that it too is broken.

The “Notanda” and the reproduction of the source text are controversial, as far as conceptual writing is concerned. “Notanda” features an “I,” and it exposes expression and authorial intent, elements that Dworkin and Goldsmith eschew in *Against Expression.*

Likewise, in her afterward to *I’ll Drown My Book*, Vanessa Place claims that much of the work included in the anthology does not fit her personal definition of conceptual writing (the other editors excluded) because “much of it dictates its reception, contains within its writing the way or ways in which it should be read” (Place, “Afterward” 447). It is clear that she is discussing work like Philip’s,

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26 After *Against Expression* was published, poet Gregory Betts coyly asked NourbeSe Philip if she was “against expression,” and she said “no.” The answer to this question allowed Betts to rightly argue that Philip “uses constraints in her writing not because she is a constraint-based poet, but because we are all constrained by the communal history of our shared language, because that language has participated in the sickening constraints (mental, physical, and spiritual) of people in our midst” (Betts).
whose “Notanda,” if taken at face value, offers heavy-handed guidance about the way the work as a whole was created, should be read, and can be understood. Yet, if Philip reveals her authorial intentions and reception preferences in her “Notanda,” she also undermines the possibility that her “true” authorial voice appears anywhere in the text. Even the term “notanda” indicates this impersonal aspect, or suggests an authorial relinquishment. The word, now rare in English means an “observation” (“Notandum, N.”). It is also the Latin perfect passive participle of the verb “noto,” meaning “to be noted.” If we were to translate this word from the Latin (Zong!’s other titles are in Latin), the exact translation would be “these things must be noted,” a passive, impersonal, non-authorial suggestion. In discussing the work of visual artist Stan Douglas, Philip reflects on creating Zong!: “In allowing myself to surrender to the text—silences and all—and allowing the fragmented words to speak to the stories locked in the text, I, too, have found myself absolved of ‘authorial intention.’ So much so that even claiming to author the text through my own name is challenged by the way the text has shaped itself. The way it ‘untells’ itself” (204). She goes on to write that there were many authorial decisions that were made for her—the clearest voice in the text is a white male, and Philip’s “‘authorial intention’ would have impelled [her] toward other voices” (205). In other words, despite her authorial appearance in the “Notanda,” this work is not hers. Furthermore, there was a technological constraint that helped make the poem when Philip’s printer superimposed or “crumpled” several pages on to one.
The “Notanda” makes it clear that Philip is a reader of a text (*Gregson v. Gilbert*), not the author of a text (*Zong!*). Vanessa Place and Philip are both lawyers. Philip likens the language of poetry to the language of law: “the right use of the right words, phrases, or even marks of punctuation; precision of expression is the goal shared by both” (191). In a sense, Philip was assigned to the *Zong* case; she describes being compelled to work on it, not wanting to work on it. Place may argue in a similar tenor about literature and law, but her work never reproduces un-authored documents or shares the constraint that produced it. Indeed, even Place’s poetry readings contain no introduction or explanatory remarks; she wears black, appears radically unfeeling, and drops papers on the floor when she has finished reading them. The blank, or hard nature of her performance makes a stark contrast to the graphic rape testimonies she reads. It seems that, for Place, the complete illegibility of the authorial hand is crucial. For Philip, this matter is slightly more complicated—the author is just one reader among many. Philip charts her experience with the note at

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27 In addition to the work in the “Notanda,” Philip includes the name of Setacey Adamu Boateng – an African spirit and ancestor – as co-author on the book's dust jacket, indicating that the story was told to her through another medium. See Jacket2’s “First Reading” based on *Zong!*, and especially Kathy Lou Schultz’s essay for other readings of this gesture.

28 In a 2013 *Tarpaulin Sky* interview with Eireene Nealand, Place stated, “The law, like poetry, engages in grossly overt fashion with the transformation of the real into the symbolic via a kind of Eucharistic metamorphosis. Works, like some might argue the spiritus sanctus works, by way of words. Words, as many have noted, never quite fit. But they will do” (Nealand). Like Philip, Place suggests that words must be precise in these endeavors, yet the right words may not be possible.

29 When I asked Philip why she included so much paratext (the “Notanda” especially) in *Zong!*, she answered simply that the publishers wanted her to do so. Philip did not include a statement in *I'll Drown My Book* about the way her work intersects with conceptualism.

30 See “Shock and Blah: Offensive Postures in 'Conceptual' Poetry and the Traumatic Stuplime” (Lee).
the end, but it has no more power over the text than our experience may. The “Notanda” illustrates that the reader and the author are almost inextricable in *Zong!*

I teeter between accepting irrationality of the event and the fundamental human impulse to make meaning from the phenomena around us. The resulting abbreviated, disjunctive, almost non-sensical style of the poems demands a corresponding effort on the part of the reader to “make sense” of an event that eludes understanding, perhaps permanently…I am forced to make meaning from apparently disparate elements—in so doing I implicate myself…And since we have to work to complete the events, we all become implicated in, if not contaminated by, this activity. (Philip 198)

Both reader and writer are “implicated” in the same activity of making sense. The work divulges no more or less because we are told that we “attempt to wrest meaning from words gone astray,” because the author experienced the same process.

Furthermore, here in the “Notanda,” this process has not stopped. Despite the relative tidiness of this narrative—the author is obsessed by a historical case—we continue to read “Notanda” for gaps and absences as well. The “teeter[ing]” described above seems suspicious; we are unsure if we can take this paragraph to mean anything about Philip’s process in particular. But it does aid us in describing our own process of reading.

Our reading of *Zong!* engages the very process of encountering historical texts, not by providing a key to understanding moments of history, but by enacting the very absences, opacities and frustrations that go along with encountering the documents of
history. “Os” (which is made up of Zong! #1-26) excepted, this is a difficult text to read because so much work goes into connecting words across blank space in order to attempt meaning or sense. It is almost impossible to do the critical analytical work of deciding who is speaking, or following a narrative at the same time as we connect these phrases. In a sense we must learn to read all over again; or, we must become a different kind of reader. As we try to do this, the moments of understanding bits of text or constructing pieces of “sense,” come only after intense exertion. They are fulfilling in the sense that perhaps the book is not “lost” on its reader, but they are also incredibly fatiguing because of their content. Take for example figure 10, a reproduction of page 114 in the “Ratio” section. The reader realizes here that she is reading part of a rape scene, as remembered by a crewmember on the boat while he is writing to his wife in England. This realization is precious (we understand a narrative moment!), but horrifying. We do not want to exhaust ourselves again only in order to find a small, ugly part of a horrific historical event at our fingertips.

The entirety of Zong! is fixated on one horrific moment—the moment of murdering the enslaved people on board Zong!. Limited by the words and then by the letters used in Gregson v. Gilbert, Zong! too, is limited, fixed. In an almost exaggerated sense of constraint-based literature, it will not unfold into a narrative. In writing about Edouard Glissant’s Poetics of Relation, Toni Morrison’s Beloved, and several other works that like Philip’s deal with the Zong massacre, Ian Baucom argues that each of these writers shares with Walter Benjamin the “paradoxical insight that the labor of an engaged philosophy of history is not to free the present of
the violence of the past but to discover in the very brutality of what-has-been the
responsibility and promise of a transverse, a relational now-being” (Baucom 317).

This moment of violence in the history of modernity is repeating itself in our present;
if we understand this, we can see that history accumulates. It does not pass.

According to Baucom, after Benjamin, it is the job of the reader of history to seize on
this crystalized moment, and allow it to live into our present, to show that “history is
never, in this sense, ‘history,’ never something that is purely past, done, finished with,
distant, all worn out… certainly not this repeating moment in the history of trans-
Atlantic slavery, this moment of drowning, and drowning, and drowning” (Baucom
330). Baucom argues that Philip’s work shows this past in our present by quoting
Zong! #4, “this is/ not was” (Philip 7). Indeed, the text explores fixed duration and
cycles. The second epigraph to “Ferrum” is from St. Augustine, “The past is ever
present” (Philip 126). 31

The past is ever present, but it can never be fully recovered. Philip’s work
shows this fixation, or circling back, this enlivening of ghosts, of “bones” as Philip
would say, throughout the text and in many complex ways. Despite displaying voices
and scenes from the ship, there is no movement of time or duration in the text. The
scene described above and printed in figure 10, the scene of a man throwing a woman
overboard whom he has previously raped, is written more than once; we see it again
on pages 62, 123, 146 and 157. In the “Ferrum” section we read these moments
repeated only with a slight difference. These pieces of text don’t seem to uncover

31 This quotation comes from Augustine’s Confessions, 11:20:26.
anything special about the incident—we perceive the atrocity of rape, murder, and slavery from the first time we read it—and none of the references that follow show us anything redeeming about the scene. This is a nightmarish cycle of repetition; the incidents accumulate. Likewise, the event of the mass murder seems to happen in every section, but the reader can never be sure. Each episode of the murder seems too opaque, too dead or flat to be a climax of this story. I suspect that the mass murder occurs on pages 87-88, or 130, and on countless other pages as well. Perhaps it happens in every word of this text. We read the way the moment lives on repeatedly in the guilty prayers of the captain, in the letters to his wife, in the repeated lines in which the “oba sobs.”

The repetition that I have described shows present engagement with history in its reassembly of historical artifacts, but it also resists recuperative or redemptive readings of the text. In a particularly philosophical part of the text, we read: “you take/this negro to be/your slave we/make good/time the wind/is/with us/a se/rect race/we/differ/are/we/mad/or/merely men/without/maps in an/age/where/truth is rare and/we dem cam fo me/dare da man in de fez” (90). This moment of introspection differs from many other glimpses we see of the captain and crewmembers’ subjectivity, which are fraught with guilt and fear. This moment captures a present-theory of history in its pastness. A reader seeking to repudiate slavery and perhaps feel redeemed about its pastness, may know that she is reading about “an age where truth is rare.” But this glimpse in the text lets us see that an

32 From the “Glossary,” we know that Oba means king or ruler in the Yoruba language.
active agent of this historical moment may have seen it that way as well (the “we” of
the slave-owner). In other words, present engagement does not empathize,
condescend, or explain the past. Rather Zong! simply presents the past, and in this
unusual moment, the past performs judgment on itself. Despite this moment of
judgment, just like in figure 10 (page 114), there is not a depth to this history—it
remains an accumulation.

In describing a method of reading that she calls “close but not deep,” Heather
Love builds on Best and Marcus’s “surface reading.” She sees this reading method as
part of a “turn to description” in the Humanities. Like Morrison’s Beloved, which
Love reads as a primary example of this shift toward “flat” hermeneutics, Zong!
“indicates the act[s]” of horrors of history without asking for “ethical repudiation” of
the perpetrators (Love 385). In other words, Philip attends to the legal text closely in
order to create action-filled lines like those above, but she does not fully decode or
explain the actions listed—rather, the dehumanizing violence of slavery is described
through the very material of that dehumanization. The perspectives represented above
are those of the enslaved person (“dem cam fo me”), the slave traders or crew (“we
are merely men without maps”), and also the voice of the narrator, Boateng or Philip
speaking to us in the present through the language of the past (“you take this negro”).
Yet, they are jumbled on the page and undifferentiated. This sort of indecipherability
performs an act similar to Love’s “method of textual analysis that would take its cue
from observation-based social sciences” (Love 375). Because it does not create, but
rather reads or gathers, it “leaves little room for the ethical heroism of the critic, who
gives up his role of interpreting divine messages to take up a position as a humble analyst and observer” (Love 381). Just like Philip in her writing practice of adhering to the words of the case, readers can only work with the materials given to us.

*Zong!’s “Manifest,” is an example of a “flat” rather than “deep” document. It consists of a list of words that Philip has made from the letters of the short text of the decision of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, showing a deliberate repetition, a moving over the text again and again in order to find body parts in these many languages. These words, made from other words (words in the source text of *Gregson v. Gilbert*), are sorted and alphabetized. There is a brutality in this:

**BODY PARTS**

arm  
*bras*  
cunt  
ear  
eye  
feet  
finger  
fist  
hand  
head  
heel  
hip  
leg  
lips  
*mano*  
heel  
hip  
leg  
lips  
*mano*  
nail  
nose  
*ongle*  
paps  
*perna*
But despite the brutality of the process of forging atomized body parts from other bits of language, the product is banal; it is a simple index or record. We are tempted to skim this list, to read it fast, to read it on the surface. *Zong!*, like many other works of conceptual writing, involves compulsive, tortured listing. This is a meditation on a singular event so terrible that it cannot be thought of in any singular form. Unlike *Kill List*, for example, *Zong!* requires our full attention, and our complete reading. We continually reference this glossary as we read the poems in order to understand more of the text (for example, we may need the words translated, or wish to reference a list of the crew, which might help to differentiate voices). The list points out, through its difficulty, that listing is a form of reading itself. It is a difficult re-reading that, as Love writes about Morrison, “registers the losses of history rather than repairing them” (Love 386).

Techniques of listing, quantification, and the close study and reinvention of bureaucratic documents are crucial to conceptual writing and to the “descriptive turn.” In a different vein, these practices are central to conceptual art as well. In his essay, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” Benjamin Buchloh argues that first Pop Art and then conceptual art replaced the modernist aesthetic with a distinctive bureaucratic aesthetic. In other
words, these forms replaced “an aesthetic of industrial production and consumption with an aesthetic of administrative and legal organization and institutional validation” (Buchloh 119). For Buchloh, this movement of artistic forms mirrors the stages of capitalism in the U.S. in order to critique it. In conceptual art, the “administrative aesthetic” meant less interest in studio skills or in the art object itself, and more interest in compulsive listing. Compulsive listing and a preoccupation with administration links this art to a simulation or a critique of white collar labor. This tendency in the art world is what Lucy Lippard calls a “dematerialization” of the art object (Lippard, Six Years).

Here we see that conceptual writing is tied to conceptual art, and we also see the ways in which it is crucially divergent. Projects with an administrative aesthetic do not meditate on reading. The artwork that Buchloh cites as using representational chronicling or listing—first Ruscha’s Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations, and Warhol’s Thirteen Most Wanted Men and then Alighiero Boetti’s The Thousand Longest Rivers and Robert Barry’s One Billion Dots—are not engaged in hermeneutic difficulty, nor do they ask us to consider multiple ways of reading. Even Joseph Kosuth’s tautologies, though made of language, do not ask us to think about the place, purpose, or method of reading in capturing history or poetry. Buchloh persuasively shows that a work like Five Fives is a meditation on the postwar middle class, whose identity is formed around “merely administering labor and production (rather than producing) and of the distribution of commodities” (128). Thus, despite the aesthetic similarity inherent in some projects of conceptual art and some conceptual writing, there is not
much overlap in the way we should interpret them. Instead, the overlap with Fluxus interpretation and production is much more fruitful. Recalling chapter one, readers will remember that Fluxus is distinct from conceptual art, albeit an influence for conceptual artists. An active reading practice was a necessary part of production and reception of the Fluxus score; these works show the possibility of the rupture of existing social fabrics in the performance of everyday activities through reading. Of course it is no coincidence that the index sized “event cards” also recall the aesthetic of a mid-century bureaucratic organizational system. However, unlike the conceptual art piece, *Card File* by Robert Morris (1962), they use language to suggest event, rather than as rote recording or linguistic representation.

With *Zong!*, the reading and manipulation of the historical text is material. Part of Philip’s process involved scissors and glue, white out and black out (Philip 193). Each time *Zong!* is printed, it is copied—the lineation, in other words, is impossible to duplicate on the page. This means that the sections of the text that are printed in anthologies look like reproductions, or, like PDFs.\(^{33}\) Their pages are darker than the others in the book and they are printed smaller, so that a reader can tell where *Zong!’*s page ends and the anthology page borders it. Pages from this text, when taken out of their material context stand out to comment on the anthology. Furthermore, these pages show that this is a type of reading and a type of writing that cannot be

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\(^{33}\) Lisa Gitelman explains that a PDF “works like print” or has the “look of printedness” (Gitelman 114–115). A PDF is meant to look the same on any kind of computer or printer, and for the most part it is not meant to be modified. Thus we can think of it as a sort of print-version on screen, or at least as a representation of such. Gitelman writes that the PDF form “looks back toward the analog of print artifacts” (Gitelman 131).
easily produced on a screen. It is bound to its material medium, its bookishness, and comments on its very fact of book as such.

In studying experimental novels published since 2000, Jessica Pressman discovered a trend that she describes as “the aesthetic of bookishness.” According to Pressman, books that engage this aesthetic “appropriate characteristics of digital technologies and Web 2.0 reading practices into the book-bound novel in order to enhance the book's status as an innovative medium” (Pressman). These books are in conversation with digital reading practices but remain attached to their book-form, ultimately illuminating the unique place of the book. This description would hold true for Josef Kaplan’s Kill List, which though it is a PDF, or a printed book, sets our eyes skimming across its pages as though it were on a screen we could forever scroll down. The expediency of Kill List was also a crucial part of this project—a PDF, while maintaining the look of print, can travel faster than anything in print. It is less clear the way that Zong! might enter into this conversation. However, while working with a singular bookish concreteness, Zong! also engages our expectations of technology. While reading the later parts of the book, our eyes undulate because of the breaks and columns that split up phrases and words. Several critics have suggested that this undulation is in mimicry of the ocean on which Zong sails. This mimetic reading is evocative, but there is not textual evidence for it. About the nature of the broken, undulating lines, we could also say that it is unlike any print form we know. Our eyes are forced to learn to read again entirely. This form of reading is not described by the PMLA articles or the New York Times debates. It defies previous bookish categories
from its bookish form. The pages on which words are transposed over each other (the entirety of the “Ebora” section) is the most difficult to read, drawing our attention to the technologically mediated aspect of the work. We feel as though we see the very will, or agency, of the printer that Philip used to print this text. This sort of “crumpling” mistake could not happen continuously and then be employed as aesthetic practice on a screen. Rather, the materiality of the “crumple” remains an element of a PDF (which stays the same from screen to screen), or a printed book.

About novels that display these practices, Pressman concludes, “Works that adopt an aesthetic bookishness respond to their contemporary, digital moment by showing how literature retains a central role in our emergent technoculture as space for aesthetic expression and cultural critique. They harness the power and potential as well as the fears and frustrations of new media into print and onto paper” (Pressman). Philip’s work comments on its own production as a source of its effect. It is an “untelling” that radically works within and against its printed form. In the last section of the chapter, I will discuss the ways in which it is important that Philip’s text, and other conceptual writing projects like it, must be books; they must be books of poetry. Before I do, however, I would like to explore other works that take concerns around media culture and books as part of their impetus.
The Politics and Waste of Contemporary Media Transfer in *Let Her Speak*

The broad themes of Philip’s text are not unique in the genre of conceptual poetry. Many works consider how to read history while also attempting to read through several types of media; much conceptual writing shows us how both history
and media shape the way we read. For example, Goldsmith’s most recent book, *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* (2013), is about encountering historical artifacts with attention to media. It is a transcription of historic radio broadcasts, television reports, and one declassified FBI document that chronicles notorious moments of violence as they occur. The title and the subject matter are echoes of what is known as Andy Warhol’s *Deaths and Disasters* series of prints. Using newspapers and police photo archives as source material, Warhol silk-screened repeated images across large canvasses. The seven events that make up Goldsmith’s book include the John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, and John Lennon assassinations; the space shuttle Challenger disaster; the Columbine shootings; 9/11; and the death of Michael Jackson. When asked why he didn’t choose to transcribe the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, or other events of the Civil Rights era or even racist violence of more recent years, Goldsmith said that he was interested in events that were reported in full on the radio or television as they happened, and the simultaneous media coverage for violent civil rights events, for example, do not exist.  

Goldsmith’s avoidance of racist violence is especially notable because Warhol’s work famously depicts racial violence along with the everyday gore of car crashes. Though he has been criticized as ignoring important issues of race in this

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34 In the afterward to the book, Goldsmith writes about the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, “no media were present during those shootings; by the time the reporters arrived on the scenes, the language was more flatly characteristic of standard reportage: confidently and deftly delivered” (Goldsmith, *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* 174).

35 For more on the social content in Warhol’s *Deaths and Disaster* series, see “Warhol Paints History, or Race in America,” and “Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol”
media-centric focus, what is not included in this project tells us something about the elisions, absences and manipulations that we must take into account when we read documents of history. This focus on media is a hallmark of conceptual writing, but it is sometimes divorced from history entirely. This is because conceptual writing projects often focus on the reading practices involved in encountering radically contemporary documents. In other words, instead of asking about how to read historical documents, as Zong! does, many texts of conceptual writing ask how to read aspects of our everyday digital environment. An early example of this type of work is Noah Eli Gordon’s Inbox, which prints the entire contents of the author’s email inbox on 9/11/04 in reverse chronology to mirror the set up of his email program. Since then, other examples include Nada Gordon’s “Abnormal Discharge” where she prints the subject headings of the online Young Women’s Health Forum message board, or Leevi Lehto’s Päivä which categorizes Internet news releases.

This work may be boring, as Noah Eli Gordon himself professes (Gordon 4), and no doubt boredom is part of the point. These works are in conversation with Tan Lin’s theory that reading is a sort of background noise to set a mood. In our moment of mediated global capitalism and information overload, reading is just part of our environment. As he writes in Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004, The Joy of Cooking: Airport Novel Musical Poem Painting Film Photo Landscape, ideally, (Wagner; Crow). In “Death in America,” Hal Foster focuses on the way these repetitious images captured the pathology of a mass subject (Foster 50).

36 Sueyeun Juliette Lee points out that this attention to history as a history of media, without attention to race, is a particularly white endeavor that offends minority audiences (Lee). Indeed, reading Seven Deaths as a document that exposes anti-black racism, might be the most generous reading.
“all novels would aspire to the condition of Muzak” (Lin 82). In Lin’s ideal reading practice of ideal literature, nothing stands out in what we read. It is an inexact practice, where “all words would flow outwards like soft data” and there would not be “content” to speak of (Lin 82). Lin claims that literature should be like a pattern or a diagram, repetitious and indistinguishable from itself in other forms, like the streets of gated communities (Lin 66). Many conceptual writing experiments seem to acknowledge this fact—that reading now serves as a background mood. Yet by extracting texts usually read as background (email, chartrooms, etc.) out of their usual context, and placing them in different media, they become something other than “Muzak.” The process of rewriting these works as books is an active reading practice. Thus, conceptual writing ushers in an active type of reading. It is attentive to bored or passive engagement as reading, but it also suggests that regardless of the content, another type of engagement is possible, in most cases, through another medium.

These reading-writing projects raise questions about the role and effects of mediation itself. How do these different media change the way we read? How is reading email in a book different from reading it on a screen? Brian Reed and others have named this type of work, which travels or translates content from one medium to another, transmediation. Writing of this kind comments specifically on issues of multiple media, new media, and the way forms of media connect with reading. For the purpose of this chapter, I am also interested in works that traffic between genres, or works that contain a transfer of content from outside the category of poetry into the

[37] This is a humorous exaggeration of Walter Pater’s famous line that “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music” (The Renaissance).
category of poetry (Gordon’s inbox was certainly never poetry before he published
*Inbox*). And it is in this way that conceptual writing responds to what we think of as a
crisis in reading on one hand, and on the other hand, to what we can call a crisis of
print culture. Furthermore, conceptual writing shows the way these two crises are
related by showing how any given medium is a constellation of media. Here I am
interested in conceptual writing that directly addresses this issue of digital waxing and
material waning (whether or not this specific “crisis of print culture” really exists). I
argue that these works of transmediation work to concretize otherwise abstract
capitalist structures. In other words, transmediation works alongside capitalist
structures, opening fissures in hegemonic delineations of what constitutes useful
material and wasteful material.

To pose these questions precisely, first I will discuss Matthew Timmons’s
*Credit*, a large expensive hardback, which prints credit offers from the 2007 bubble,
and then credit rejections from the 2009 crash. Then I look to Kenneth Goldsmith’s
crowd-sourced project to “print out the internet,” and the discourse surrounding that
particular statement (“LABOR| Kenneth Goldsmith | Printing Out The Internet”).
Lastly I will examine *Let Her Speak: Transcript of Texas State Senator Wendy
Davis’s June 25, 2013, Filibuster of the Texas State Senate*, a print version of Davis’s
10-hour filibuster to thwart anti-choice legislation, printed and published by
Counterpath. Timmons and Goldsmith’s texts pose important questions, and Davis’s

38 Counterpath has published other transcripts as poetry. Most recently it published Ron
Silliman’s *Against Conceptual Poetry*, a “transcript, chopped into mostly Silliman-like six-
word lines, of a 3-hour 12-minute interview that Eric Schmidt, ex-CEO of Novell and Google,
will set the political stakes. These three projects point out that our late-late capitalist era trades in waste, and critique it by producing more. They explore a crisis in reading and print culture by magnifying the issues, by producing so much of the issue that it’s impossible to ignore. Through these localized examples, I suggest that contemporary conceptual writing in fact changes our very notions of the politics of waste.

Though Zong! operates in a different historical register, it also engages issues of excess and waste. Zong! is a 209-page book that was created from a two-page court document by “adding” nothing. Just as Ian Baucom examines the Zong case as central to our understanding of “modern capital, ethics and time consciousness” (31), the ways in which Zong! shows us how to read the Zong massacre can tell us much about our contemporary moment through the history of capitalism; it urges us to now encounter these documents in the spirit of accumulation, abundance, and excess. Like the projects that will be discussed in detail below, Zong! shows us that our readerly stake in historical events produces a massive, long-form text. As Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman write in Notes on Conceptualisms “capitalism has a knack for devouring and absorbing everything in its path—including any critique of capitalism” (Place and Fitterman 30). Knowing that any anti-patriarchy or anti-capitalist literary


39 For discussions about the connection between waste and our current stage of capitalism, see “The Anatomy of a Dumpster: Abject Capital and the Looking Glass of Value”; “Waste, Commodity Fetishism and the Ongoingness of Economic Life”; “A Portrait of World Historical Production and World Historical Waste after 1945” (Giles; Herod et al.; Farina).
output will be digested and excreted, I examine why these experiments, in their lengthy, wasteful way, actually cut to the chase: by transferring media, they allow us to see something that we otherwise could not.

Matthew Timmons’s *Credit* is an early example (2009) of conceptual writing’s relationship with the online publishing service Lulu.com. Ending at 800 pages and retailing for download at $299 or for material purchase at $199 from Blanc Press, the press website boasts that it is the longest, most expensive book publishable through the digital print on demand service. Then follows an origin story:

In late spring 2007 as an irrational exuberance and promise of financial fortune hung in the air, mailboxes were filled with generous and gracefully worded offers of credit. Just over two years later, in midsummer 2009, the shape of the financial environment changed radically and mailboxes still filled up with statements of credit. Something had to change, offer turned to obligation. Retailing for $199.99, *CREDIT* is a book the author himself lacks the cash or credit to buy.

(“CREDIT by Mathew Timmons – Insert Blanc Press”)

With this sound-bite explanation of the book, Timmons paints a portrait of the poet as both suffering from the crisis of capitalism that we experienced in the early 2000s and as a capitalist exploiter himself. The project trades in a sort of serious irony—on the one hand, from the rhetoric of the origin story we understand that capitalism, in an unexplained way, is bad for all of us. On the other hand, the artist’s answer to the recession is for us to consume (at an unreasonably expensive price) his poetry, or,
product. This sort of trick of the artist-cum-capitalist is codified in the recent work of Vanessa Place, through her website vanessaplace.biz, with its proud tagline, “poetry is a kind of money.” The site itself appears to be both “the kind of money” and the poetry. From this site the poet sells products such as “Poetry Pays,” an art object in the l’art pour l’art tradition, and a book project called $20, which consists of 20 single dollar bills sold for 50 dollars. These products sold out immediately and vanessaplace.biz has not produced more. This shows that the statement of the website is the art itself—the artist, from the very beginning of the project has, in fact, “sold out” (pun intended).40

This type of work angers people. It especially angers poets who feel that poetry should be self-expression, not plagiarism or catchy tricks, but it alsoangers people who have no problem with the “death of the author” and its after-effects. Critics like Amy King wonder how it is possible to genuinely critique the institution while also gaining from it or even wildly manipulating it for personal gains.41

Established conceptual poets have indeed gained both enormous art- and poetry-world acclaim (as previously mentioned, this means residencies at MoMA, readings at the Whitney, and tenure positions at major universities) as well as some hard cash from this work of “critique.” In other words, Credit still costs $299.

40 The inverse of this project would be Money by Maker from Troll Thread. Free for download, it scans hundred dollar bills along with perforation lines for cutting them out. 41 See Johanna Drucker’s Sweet Dreams for more on this subject. In discussing avant-garde tendencies in the art world, Drucker sees the attachment to oppositional models of the avant-garde as hypocrisy because “the appearance of radicalism cloaked the careerism of many artists.” She explains that since the 1990s, “The rhetoric of opposition often allowed elite practices to pass themselves off as politically useful” (Drucker, Sweet Dreams 7).
Though both book prices are unreasonably expensive, it is significant that the version for download costs more than the print copy. These acts of transmediation are retrograde to techno-economic structures. Whereas in a progress model, we should be “updating” from book to video, or from expensive print book to cheaper e-book—indeed, on Troll Thread, the downloads are free, the purchase of a book through Lulu is usually an attainable price in the $20 range—Credit, does the opposite. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin use the term “remediation” to refer to the representation of one medium in another. They argue that this process is a defining characteristic of new digital media, which often remediate their predecessors and represent themselves as a newer and better representation of older content. This is sometimes done with irony or critique of the older media and sometimes done in earnest. Occasionally the new medium attempts to absorb the older medium. They write that “the very act of remediation, however, ensures that the older medium cannot be entirely effaced; the new medium remains dependent on the older one in acknowledged or unacknowledged ways” (Bolter and Grusin 47). In addition to a great conversation-stopper for the death of the book debate, this theory provides a way for us to see the intricate ways in which Credit is subversive. Whereas the economic dimension of remediation is to repurpose older material, also therefore changing the older material, Timmons’s project throws a wrench in our understanding of media “reform.” Neither iteration of Credit updates the other; neither iteration of Credit updates the original junk mail of its content. Timmons’s project is about the transfer itself; it asks what happens in the in-between. And both iterations are too expensive to own. At the same
time, projects like Holly Melgard’s *Black Friday*, a 734-page book with black pages, and her *Reimbursement*, a 228-page book of scans of lottery tickets, are both available for purchase and for free download from Troll Thread.

Which leads back to a point mentioned early in this chapter: these projects exist as statements—statements about the fact of their material—but statements none-the-less. Does it make a difference that *Credit* is available in print, even if we do not read it? Or do we just need to know that there’s a print object out there? These projects are sound bites, websites, gestures, common sense might tell us. But what if we took their materiality seriously? A similar question follows: what if we were to honestly try to read them? Could this work of transmediation, which is in the same genre as *Zong*!, be read as thoroughly?

When Kenneth Goldsmith decided to print the Internet via crowdsourcing, the idea was met with uproar. Some critics were concerned about the art’s impact on the environment, some critics violently felt that the project was “dumb” (Goldsmith, “Printing out the Internet”). Goldsmith himself is dismissive of critics who claim the environment as their crusade. He argues that it is democracy that they are angry at—the notion that anyone can be an artist by typing “control p” (Goldsmith, “Printing out the Internet”). Though this project was inspired by Aaron Swartz, a free information advocate, it fits squarely with Goldsmith’s previous projects and what he has maintained from the beginning of his conceptualist career: that his work deals in appropriation, “uncreativity,” and plagiarism. As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, Goldsmith claims that his work, as well as the work of other conceptualists,
seeks to destabilize notions of genius and creative authorship. Thus, he maintains that the interesting thing about this project is that he can call it art—or even call it poetry. In addition, surely the project comments on the notion of waste itself. Like the credit rejections turned moneymaker in Timmons’s project, most of the Internet is waste—chatrooms, old blog posts, pornography. And printing it out? An abundance of waste—hardcopy, real-life waste. Long before Kenneth Goldsmith’s project to print out the Internet, he wrote lovingly about conceptual writing: it is “nutritionless language, meaningless language, unloved language” (Goldsmith, “Journal, Day One”). In Goldsmith’s terms, part of the aim of conceptualism is a celebration of the waste within a wasteful world. This project, by simply changing the medium of the work, becomes a different substance, an obviously “nutritionless” substance. Yet the project has all the elements of an empty marketing campaign. Suddenly everyone is talking about Goldsmith’s work—everyone on the blogosphere has an opinion that they need to share. Wikipedia’s real marketing campaign, the crowd-funded PediaPress is surprisingly close to Goldsmith’s art project (“On Indiegogo”). With Goldsmith, as with Wiki, the performance is perhaps the work itself. And the object? Only a kind of score or post-snapshot for the performance. What good would wading through all that paper do us?

One might think that Let Her Speak: Transcript of Texas State Senator Wendy Davis’s June 25, 2013, Filibuster of the Texas State Senate is simply a post-snapshot of the event. When Texas State Senator Wendy Davis staged her filibuster to thwart anti-choice legislation in 2013, she decided to use her time on the senate floor reading
testimony from people who were unable to testify. There was a long list. After waiting up to ten hours in order to speak about abortion, many were denied the chance because, in House Committee Chairman Byron Cook’s words, the testimony “had become repetitive.” These individual women’s stories were, for Cook, all the same. Yet, if we read Let Her Speak, we know that these stories are incredibly different from each other, despite the fact that they all involve women, embryos, fetuses, and babies. The book is a print version of Davis’s 11-hour filibuster to block a bill that attempted to close many women’s health clinics in Texas, illegalize certain types of abortions, and force restrictive oversight on others. The text was transcribed from the video of the filibuster on the Texas State Senate website. To use the logic of Representative Cook, why this repetition? Why do we need a book and a video? Why do we need an abundance of the same? If the point was to waste hours, why waste those hours again on paper? Indeed, many books of conceptual poetry show a desire to tell what has already been told in a different way and with a new context. This is not the same as the desire to tell and then tell again.

If you think of Texas State Senator Wendy Davis as a hero, you have that opinion because of the material facts of her performance on June 25, 2013 in Austin, Texas. The material facts are 1) she decided to stall a bill that would ban abortions taking place 20-weeks after fertilization, shut down most women’s health clinics by setting new regulations, and enforce restrictions on doctors who perform abortions 2) in order to stall out the bill, she had a catheter inserted so she could stand up publicly for many hours without food or water in front of a predominately male senate, each
member waiting to disqualify her filibuster on shadowy grounds, and 3) that she was required by law to read something in order to continue the special session and so she read testimony on the subject of women’s health. After the prepared testimony ran out, Davis read testimony that was sent to her office. Some of these accounts were about rape, some were about being diagnosed with cancer, finding out about birth defects or health risks, and some were about losing a sister or a daughter because of lack of access to safe care. It was Wendy Davis’s gesture—in fact a series of painful, complicated and brilliant gestures that of course included the gestures of many others—that mattered for the state of Texas.

Many watched this event unfold on streaming news sites, televisions, and YouTube. Yet as Counterpath editors noticed, Davis’s reading of a long-form text made this political event possible. This was a historical moment in women’s reproductive rights and it was organized around the reading of a text. In contrast to Zong! and to the many other books of conceptual poetry that manipulate a courtroom transcript or legal document as a source text, Let Her Speak is an unaltered printing of the senate chamber proceedings. As stated in the book’s only paratext, Counterpath used Amazon’s Mechanical Turk to transcribe the entire eleven hours of speech from the Texas Senate website video. After the Texas State Senate claimed that no official copy of the transcript existed, the editors turned to the crowd-sourcing Human Intelligence Task (HIT) website. They eventually got a full transcription done by posting the video in 10-minute chunks, paying $5 per HIT to anonymous transcribers and later double-checking the text for errors (Roberts).
Any translation, between media or otherwise, brings up questions of fidelity to the “original.” In the case of *Let Her Speak*, you’d expect its infidelities to the video to reveal something. For example, you might think immediately that this transcription would take Senator Davis’s body out of the act itself. If her blond hair and pink tennis shoes gained attention in the news, the book would disembody her—perhaps providing a clearer, textual body for the women whose testimonies she read from. And if one were to just read about *Let Her Speak*, and not read the book itself, that would be a fine assumption. Yet, this book is very much about bodies—and eventually very much about Wendy Davis’s body, which becomes a sort of synecdoche for the body of all the women in the state of Texas.

It is on page 153 of a book with fairly small type that Davis’s body appears in the text. Senator Tommy Williams claims that Senator Davis “violated a rule” when Senator Rodney Ellis helped her put on a back brace during a pause. This begins a long discussion, which reminds the reader that Davis has been standing for 10 hours without food or water, that she has not sat down, or even “leaned on the desk,” which she knows would disqualify her (Davis 157). The President of the senate reminds her once again that she cannot sit down and then another long discussion between the senators about these rules continues for pages. Several senators argue that rules regarding filibusters have been fudged in the past. There are references to the passing of ice chips and candies to filibustering senators.

Yet this time, it is made clear that in the case of Senator Davis, the rules will be followed to a T. The word “respect” comes up multiple times in regard to Davis’s
body, and she is “respectfully commended” by Senator John Whitmire for being “very statesman-like.” He goes on to ask if there is not a “greater good of respecting a woman?” (Davis 160). He means that the decorum of the senate floor should be respected without senators becoming unkind—that Davis should be allowed to filibuster without nasty tricks and gross restrictions to stop her. However, as attentive readers, we cannot help but see this line as drawing specific attention—just in case we had not seen it before—to the synecdoche that Davis performs in her discomfort before the senate. This is a bill about respecting women’s bodies, after all. Senator Eddie Lucio states that though he wants the bill to pass and the abortion clinics to be shut down, “Senator Davis does have the right to oppose this bill until she drops” [emphasis mine] (Davis 162). This spectacle of violence against a woman on the senate floor recalls the violence that occurs in the stories that Davis has been reading.

Let Her Speak includes different tones, styles of diction and paces of speaking in the stories Davis reads. There is only one place where I noticed a repetition in the stories—“Jane in Austin” (73) makes a very similar statement to that of “Jane Keytee” (47). They are so similar, in fact, that I am fairly certain that they are the same person who testified twice. In other words, their similarity stands out to an attentive reader because each of the other stories, though they are in some sense acts of repetition, are not the same. Each story is so vivid in language and narrative that the recurrence is glaring. To have one glitch in the system of unique stories recalls the Oulipian practice of the clinamen. We can read the two Janes as the “swerve,” or mistake that illuminates the rest of the project which, as a whole, serves to differentiate individual
women. Furthermore, like the accumulation of retellings of the murder in *Zong!*, the echo of the Janes—who both repeat “shame on you” to the senators who support the bill—show the importance of the multiple. Iteration, expression of the multiple, drives our reading toward an understanding of the overall project.

*Let Her Speak* complicates the genre of conceptual writing; this is a repetition that is not repetitive. The articulation of these voices over several media allow us to see more of their contours. The text, as opposed to the online video, makes us aware of the spectacle of violence involved in the filibuster; it also puts us into contact with the real, material lives of the testifying women, beyond their singular representation as one woman, Davis herself. Just as the law required Davis to read something in order to run out the clock and make material change, it is now our turn to read something for the same reasons.

Davis speaks in a slow repetition. After she makes it clear that she intends to “speak for an extended period of time on the bill,” she says:

As we began to debate this bill on the senate floor last week, we talked about the fact that we were here on this particular motion because we had taken extraordinary measures to be here, and I want to talk about that for a moment, how we wound up at this moment, on this day, on the senate floor, debating this bill. And we wound up here because extraordinary measures were taken in order to assure that we would land here. (Davis 1)

The repetitions of deictic markers “this” and “here” create a lull reminding us repeatedly of the filibuster’s material existence. Davis repeats verbal decorum of the
court alongside various verbal stalling techniques throughout the filibuster. This type of repetition makes the women’s stories that she tells seem more differentiated and singular. Readers of modernism may also be reminded of Gertrude Stein’s prose. The rules and language of the senate perform a musicality; repetition of “Senator Ellis,” “Senator Davis” and “Mr. President” before, and sometimes before and after, each member speaks is striking. The repetition of these proper nouns is reminiscent of the beginning moment of Stein’s “Melanctha” when Rose Johnson and Melanctha Herbert’s names are repeated for many pages in sentences displaying similar grammatical structures. Likewise when we read Let Her Speak, we experience a sort of pleasurable irritation that Laura Frost, in discussing Stein, recently likened to being tickled (L. Frost).

The aesthetic effect is vaguely frustrating, and similar to Zong!, it resists a sort of depth reading. In a typical move of conceptual writing, this book puts us in the curious position of noticing the aesthetics of an authorless event—in this case we must also notice the aesthetics of a politically charged event. Counterpath, a small press specializing in conceptual writing, does not tell us how to read the book. Yet by agreeing that Let Her Speak (and perhaps other books of conceptual poetry like it) should be read, we disagree with Byron Cook’s logic about the testimonies becoming repetitive. The reading of the text is, of course, different than the event itself.

Perhaps the print object makes us notice issues that other media may not. Brian Reed has argued that publishing work as print (which is perceived as a more lasting medium) makes us slow down, concentrate on each word, and see these words
in a new light (Reed). Yet could this be true in the case of *Credit* and *Printing out the Internet*? Goldsmith claims that he wants to “reenvision cultural production” (Higgs), which could mean that he would like to provide a critique of capitalism with this room full of paper. Perhaps these expensive and wasteful piles of print are like hurdling blocks, which serve to slow us down on the way to an inevitable, frenzied consumption. To use Christopher Nealon’s vocabulary and framework, these conceptual projects show how “selves are solicited” and also how communities are solicited by capitalism (Nealon 146). They expose the ways in which we are implicated by capitalist structures by simultaneously creating and exposing capitalist overload. *Credit* takes capitalist waste and makes it individual artistic waste. Goldsmith takes digital waste and makes it into a spectacle. Counterpath takes an extended political gesture of waste, and produces a charged community around it.

Texas Senate Bill 5 did not pass on the night of June 25th 2013. Shortly after 10pm, Davis was ruled to have gone off topic, ending the filibuster. But in a couple hours of ecstatic energy, protestors then helped run out the clock until midnight. Then less than a month later the bill was signed into law, gaining a majority vote in the second special session held by Texas Governor Rick Perry in light of the “breakdown of decorum” in the first. Because this historical episode has passed, there is not much reason anymore to keep our eyes peeled on Davis’s reading of this testimony on YouTube. Yet Counterpath’s *Let Her Speak* records the event and makes the transcript available for us to read.
As I stated in the beginning of the chapter, these conceptual writing experiments work at the intersection of a crisis about reading and a crisis about print culture, allowing an exploration of these two issues as it reverses the order of ‘technological progress’ by moving from digital to print. The relationship is clearly mediated by capitalism, more specifically the excess that has come to be the hallmark of late-, late-capital. My first two examples describe how this crisis in reading and print culture through capitalism is explicit. If finance capital consists of virtual transactions that more or less never materialize, these projects work to make what is abstract concrete, or, material. By way of waste, they point out that in some cases the very possibility of reading is lost due to a planned and deliberate obsolescence of its medium (Timmons’s book is more expensive than the download).

I hope to have shown a payoff of reading—and attending closely—to large-scale transmediation projects in my reading of the Davis transcript. Tending to the material text allows us to take away an alternative understanding of the materialism of the “original” event or medium. When it comes to re-materializing capitalism and state violence against women, conceptual writing allows us to read material acts in a different way, a way that reorients a spectacle. In each case, the exposure to what I called capitalist overload (these large, difficult to read, and overly expensive projects) renews attention to the material conditions that prevailing systems try to make invisible in the first place, like the flow of capital or the background of patriarchy and state violence.
In other words, this work evokes multiple media, together with a network of political engagements. In *No Medium*, Craig Dworkin expands Lisa Gitelman’s assertion that media is a nexus of “social, economic, and material relationships” to argue that media are not objects but activities; they are “commercial, communicative, and, always, interpretive” (C. Dworkin 28). Media are only recognizable as “collectives” and furthermore media “only make sense in certain contexts” (30). The context that Dworkin discusses includes technological historical specificity, genre, and readerly expectations. He makes it clear that media exist within “a recursive structure” (32). To illustrate this, Dworkin uses the example of a compact disc; to acknowledge a CD as a medium, we must acknowledge many other media: a CD player's recognition of binary code on a disk, and then also the listener's recognition of the playback as music, not to mention electrical outlets (32). In order to uncover how the above transmediation projects change our encounter with content (and with literature), we have to acknowledge that they are not a simple transference from one medium to another. Each iteration of content holds its own interpretive network. In order to acknowledge a streaming video as a medium, not only must we acknowledge the various technological apparatuses that allow it to operate (hosts of servers, the Internet, personal computers and smartphones, etc.), we also acknowledge the political structures that made it a possibility. To understand a video of a filibuster, we must recognize the Texas senate and its rules, the desire for news media transparency, as well as a host of other rules and norms. When the Davis transcript is put into a book, this constellation changes slightly. It is in this change that we glimpse the lived,
material conditions of the women involved in the case. We are able to confront the spectacle of violence against women with a critical eye. When the transcript is in book form, we must acknowledge a set of assumptions about book-as-medium (it’s permanence as opposed to a live-stream, for example), as well as bend those assumptions according to the aims of conceptual writing. The transference of media is also the transference of a network of political discourse.

Each medium presented provides a different set of recursive political attachments. In the case of *Printing Out the Internet*, by transferring live linked images and text to dead paper, we see waste afresh. We see the literalized space of our engagements over email, chatrooms, porn, and code. In Goldsmith’s project, people mailed in their printed matter—instead of pressing a button to upload something to a network, each transference was slowed down and thus it morphed quickly into waste. The transfer brought the political issues of waste to the fore. We think of the (im)possibility of preserving our abstract, cyber attachments. We may also think of the (un)likelihood of truly accessible free information. In the name of Aaron Swartz, the free-information activist to whom this project is dedicated, we may wonder how it is possible to *find anything* as well as preserve anything. Swartz committed suicide after he was convicted of computer fraud and abuse for stealing academic articles from JSTOR. In this case, how would one find the academic articles in the midst of the mess? These issues only arise when the Internet is paper, or, in the absence of hyperlinked connections and navigational systems. And likewise, conceptual writing, as genre, requires us to allow a courtroom transcript to be read as
in the midst of the mess? These issues only arise when the Internet is paper, or, in the absence of hyperlinked connections and navigational systems. And likewise, conceptual writing, as genre, requires us to allow a courtroom transcript to be read as a book. It makes visible one of Dworkin’s central claims: “Those objects that are causally referred to as ‘media,’ accordingly, are perhaps better considered as nodes of articulation along a signifying chain: the points at which one type of analysis must stop and another can begin: the thresholds between languages; the limits of perception” (Dworkin, No Medium 33). In a manner similar to the blank media Dworkin examines in his book, conceptual writing exposes these nodes or thresholds. But conceptual writing’s exposure of “limits” has profound political effects in the discussion of reading in our digital epoch. My next task, and the subject of this dissertation’s ultimate section, is to consider the implications when literature makes our material conditions visible. How can we characterize a reading practice for conceptual poetry? To put it another way: what are some techniques for wading through all that paper?

Why Poetry Now

The previous section showed that conceptual writing’s active shifting between media opens up a set of political and ethical issues. Here I hope to make it clear why these works of conceptual writing are shifted into the category of poetry. Though reading “poetry” can be thought of simply as one strategy of reading among many, the introduction to my dissertation makes a case for the robust category of poetry to include active engagements of our era. The close examination of conceptual writing
and instrumentalization; this can be compared to avant-gardists like Mallarmé who resisted information and the language of the press, thus insisting on the separation of capitalism and poetry. The contemporary resistance of the category of reading as poetry is not just because the market for, or the value of, poetry is scant, or because, in the words of the Situationist International, “it is not a consumable substance (according to the modern criterion for the consumable object” (qtd in Stephens 159), but more importantly because poetry, and conceptual poetry especially, occupies positions of marginality, interstitiality, or even, near complete exteriority to the dominant spaces of capitalist discourse. Even while using some of the broader elements of the economy of attention in contemporary capitalism, it offers an alternative ethics of relation to the type of communication that helps to ideologically sustain capitalism. The dissertation began with the rise of late-capitalism, and our current historical moment has entered a further area of abstraction of capital. Indeed, the category of poetry has changed with the historical stages of capitalism, now embodying a more conceptual or abstracted mode. However, a reading practice in which we attend to these works “as poetry” is as valuable for conceptual writing as it is for Fluxus, Oulipo, or New York School experiments. In fact, it is conceptual writing that opens the possibility for this lens by so shockingly extending the category of poetry. Poetry includes not only legal cases and transcripts but also texts from different historical periods.  

42 Several critics have pointed out what they see as an ahistorical aspect of conceptual writing. Most notably, Barrett Watten has claimed that the category of conceptual writing does not contain the historical framing or historical narrative device, but rather insists on what Watten
the importance and the flexibility of the category in a significant way. This generic nominalism changes the work. As Craig Dworkin claimed in an interview, “what I think conceptual writing shows is how much the category of ‘poetry’ is willing to take in” (Fitch). Why is the category willing to take in so much at this time?

The answer to this question relates to the increasingly marginalized role that poetry has come to play within the crisis of reading and the way that new media—and “old” media—circulates through the market. As the conversation about the “death of reading” continues, there is a simultaneous commodification of the act of reading through Amazon, Barnes and Noble superstores, and the popularity of book clubs—all perpetuated by new media and commerce. Jim Collins argues that this convergence of eulogy and commercial boom has produced the literary category of *Lit-lit*. Collins uses the term *Lit-lit* to describe novels published in the early 2000s featuring “a highly self-conscious celebration of the transformative power of the written word and equally impassioned advocacy of the need for aesthetic beauty” (Collins, *Bring on the Books for Everybody* 222). These novels are about reading; Collins explains that they contain a “lived intertextuality” because authors often exist *in* the book and are “situated within the universe of literary fiction” (223). He shows that much award-winning and bestselling literary fiction between 2004 and 2008 fall into this category including the *The Line of Beauty*, *On Beauty*, *Author Author* and

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considers false claims of presentism or newness (Watten, “Presentism and Periodization in Language Writing, Conceptual Art, and Conceptual Writing”). However, the category’s interest in history is clear in the works themselves, which often consider philosophies of periodization, systemization, and historical order. Furthermore, the category’s claim to a multitude of works across the postwar era is not an undoing of history, but rather another shifting device, or proposed way of reading.
The Master, but additionally, there are Lit-lit novels that are not as celebrated as to win the international prizes that these books took home. Collins argues that these “devoutly literary” books are as much a category of literature now as any type of genre fiction.

He suggests that the popularity of books about books has to do with the notion of becoming cultured through reading as a type of commodity. More now than ever before, what books you appreciate says something about your tastes (Collins does an extended reading of a list of recommended books in the Sundance Catalogue); these novels appeal to other “like-minded” individuals with literary tastes (Collins, Bring on the Books for Everybody). When you read a novel that features Henry James as a character (both Author Author and the The Master do this), or is about good readers (The Brief Wonderous Life of Oscar Wao, Special Topics in Physics, Jane Austin Book Club, The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society, and many more) you are welcomed by those with good literary tastes—perhaps (hopefully) those just like you. Collins describes what readers want: “novels about passionate readers just like themselves, who have a taste for the finer things in life” (247). For Collins, these sometimes less than artfully written displays of aesthetic good taste are a small part of “a discourse that valorizes the beautiful for its own sake and makes its appreciating something that all can experience with the heart of consumer culture” (243). This trend is about the ability to buy culture, as it is fading away. It is clear that the early 2000s, which marked the height of this type of literature, was also the height of the death of reading argument. After 2008, the Lit-lit craze lessened to make way for
prize-winning literary fiction about historical figures, rather than literary ones. Yet recent bestseller lists show that this genre has not gone away. Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013 Man Booker Prize shortlist, 2014 National Book Critics Circle Award), which centers on the reading of a stranger’s diary, is a nuanced example of this category.

This rise of *Lit-lit*, or what has derisively been called “writ[ing] literature about literature” (Hornby), has something to do with conceptual writing, which appeared around the same time. Although different in tone from novels taking Henry James as their protagonist, or books that argue for a taste for the finer things in life, conceptual writing is often *about* literature. For example, *Against Expression* alone contains recent conceptual writing that is based on Shakespeare’s sonnets (Bervin; Mohammad), that rewrites Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (Fitterman), and that gives different language to Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* (Wertheim). There have been several conceptual writing projects that take Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* as their focus. Harryette Mullen’s *Trimmings* (2006) is an homage and a rewriting of Stein’s work; Mullen expands the critique that *Tender Buttons* makes of patriarchy in 1914 to a critique of constructions of race, capitalist structures, and patriarchy today. Each of Stein’s short recipe-like definitions is manipulated and reworked by Mullen using advertising lingo and commercial products from contemporary grocery stores (this

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43 Historical fiction appears to be gaining popularity and accolades. Hilary Mantel has won two Man Booker prizes for historical fiction since 2009. *Cloud Atlas, The Testament of Mary*, and others have been in the finalist category.

44 There are many examples that work outside the English-language canon as well. For example, Parasitic Ventures reads Proust, Mallarmé and other French texts under constraint; See *All the Names of In Search of Lost Time* in *Against Expression* (471).
work is included in both anthologies). Likewise, Angela Genusa’s *Tender Buttons* (2013) is a primary example of conceptual writing. When we look it up on the online publishing venture Gauss PDF, we are presented with the option to download the book for free—there is no blurb or other paratext. Upon opening the text, we read something that looks like symbols or code. It appears illegible; the fist line is "WüéWΘηʔs\q ráéÁÆ$L°]\^dö.) (Genusa, *GPDF062* 1). Those very familiar with Stein’s work will notice that the blocks of text appear to be in the same places, or on the same lines as Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, but that is the extent of our recognition. There are unreadable titles and unreadable poems. The last section—“Rooms” in Stein’s text, “Θ=CπuU=!” in Genusa’s book—is, faithfully to Stein’s text, more like prose than the rest of the book. On her website, Genusa writes the following about her work:

I “translated” the text of Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*—her 1914 book of prose poems that were to some unintelligible yet whimsical—into mojibake. Mojibake [from the Japanese 文字 (moji) "character" + 化け (bake) "transform,"] is incorrect, unreadable characters when software fails to render text correctly according to its associated character encoding.

(“Angela Genusa”)

Fitting to Genusa’s style of authorship, the second sentence in her blurb is also the first sentence of the Wikipedia entry for “mojibake”; she must have read it. Similarly,

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Genusa’s other works created in 2013 include print-outs of Wikipedia articles (*Twenty Six Wikipedia Articles*), collections of spam emails (*Spam Bibliography*) a printing of physical
Holly Melgard’s *The Making of the Americans* deletes all the repetition from Stein’s book of that title. Like *Lit-lit*, conceptual writing is obsessed with literature.

Yet conceptual writing takes a different stance—a counter argument—to that of popular fiction. Fleshing out the following distinctions between conceptual poetry and *Lit-lit* will help make clear the ways in which conceptual writing is uniquely positioned to show us something about reading in the digital era: 1) Conceptual writing is very often free, or, of no monetary cost, 2) it is not concerned with literary tastes, and 3) perhaps most importantly, it is poetry. The following paragraphs are devoted to explaining these distinctions.

Conceptual writing is often free; yet even when it costs money, it serves to critique capitalism. In *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)*, J. K. Gibson-Graham (the pseudonym that political philosophers Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson share) argue that capitalist structures should not be discussed as all-encompassing. In fact, they argue that by representing capitalism as dominant, we are doing violence to the smaller economies that exist outside of the hegemonic structure. For Gibson-Graham, these economies include working from home (where one does not accumulate surplus labor, for example). Following J.K. Gibson-Graham’s suggestion that we acknowledge economies that do not take part in capitalism in the very way we talk about the capitalist structures, here I suggest that conceptual writing is one of the many sites of exchange that is within but not a part of the hegemonic system of capitalism. Websites like Gauss PDF and Troll Thread always provide the option of descriptions of anonymous, numbered women” taken from eBay dealers’ descriptions of vintage Barbie dolls for sale (*Jane Doe*).
either free download or purchase. Lulu.com often offers the same deal; although the author herself can set the price for both printout and PDF (per the earlier discussion of Matthews). Goldsmith and Dworkin both curate online archives of avant-garde content made free to the public. It is for these reasons that Stephen Voyce compares conceptual writing to open source software platforms and development. He argues that conceptual writing is part of a larger turn toward a new understanding of the commons (Voyce). Regardless of whether these works are truly “in common” in a larger societal way (it certainly takes access to a computer to have access to these texts), conceptual writing circulates as another form of relation within but not part of the larger discourse of capitalism. Gibson-Graham argue that part of what perpetuates capitalism is the violence of this very discourse of capitalism (Gibson-Graham 12), and these works disturb that discourse. Even when books are published and sold through the market—as in the case of Counterpath’s transcripts or any of Goldsmith’s books from powerHouse Books, Coach House Books, or others—they operate under a different economy that is within but not a part of capitalism, the economy of the small press. Counterpath, for example, is a nonprofit press. Small presses that are for-profit companies still often engage in many different types of exchange, including trade and barter. Thus, these titles are detached from the market principles that drive standard book publishing, and they ultimately shed light on these larger structures.

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46 See Eclipse (http://eclipsearchive.org) and UbuWeb (http://www.ubu.com).
47 See Omnidawn interview with Brian Teare for an explanation of how the “micropress” works alongside capitalism (“Poets, Presses & Periodicals”).
48 As previously mentioned, the authors of these books get “fringe benefits,” including grants, residencies, promotions, and jobs at universities and museums. Without suggesting that the
Conceptual writing has a varied relationship to taste-making. Whereas the world of Lit-lit divides the category of literature into those who are readers and those who are really readers—or a recognition of those who are “just like us”—conceptual writing acknowledges that everyone is a reader. Lin’s argument that aligns reading with Muzak purposefully does not degrade this form of engagement—and conceptual writing requires various types of reading and reading environments. The texts that rewrite Gertrude Stein’s work are illustrative of this point—Stein is not a character in these texts. Rather, Tender Buttons is read, translated, and reproduced in these texts. Thus both Tender Buttons and its conceptual writing revisions celebrate varied and obscure ways to encounter a difficult text. In other words, whereas Lit-lit makes everyone an author, conceptual writing makes everyone a reader.

Because conceptual writing is “willing” to expand the category of poetry, it also expands the category of reading. One of the arguments of my dissertation has been that much post-60s poetry proposes forms of engagement, encounter, or enactment. These works increasingly show that reading poetry can also be action in the world. In some ways, conceptual poetry is the culmination of this increasingly engaged and enacted practice of reading. With conceptual writing, we have reached a stage of complete separation of the practice of reading the poem from the poem itself; transmediation illustrates this by bringing almost anything into the category of poetry. We can read almost anything—importantly, we can read the documents of abstract capital—with the benefit of poetry’s framework. There is nothing inherently precious status of these benefits are anything less than institutional, the fact that they are classified as nonprofits holds them outside of the hegemonic capitalist system.
about poetry; it is reading a given work “as poetry” that matters. Reading “as poetry” means the active sort of engagement with bodies, spaces and architecture, and notions of event that I have shown here. It means a careful attention of the type that Philip gave to the decision of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, and that I have given to *Zong!* Likewise, it means reading *Let Her Speak* for the aesthetics and politics inherent in the event of the text—it means noticing the two Janes. This act of reading thoroughly—reading “as poetry”—does not mean that we should root for deep symbols in these texts. At the same time, this type of reading is differentiated from notions of abstraction, non-material understandings of “thinkership,” or figurations of these texts existing as purely ideas (Jameson, “The Aesthetics of Singularity”; Place and Fitterman). Rather, I suggest simply and provocatively that we allow conceptual writing to exist as texts to be read.

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Despite the fact that poetry is not much discussed in the contemporary debate about reading in a digital era, or as part of the humanities “crisis,” the category of poetry has gained a multimedia-based flexibility. It reaches across disciplines. Whereas arguments about media-specificity and autonomy of form were important to modernism, these issues were complicated at the mid-century by works like Fluxus scores, the New York School poetry, constraint-based art, and other radical acts of interdisciplinarity. Genre distinctions also were troubled by new types of work that focused on enactment in the early 1960s. Arts media were no longer necessarily specific or autonomous; art became art “in general” (de Duve). Yet as I have shown,
this moment of the “crisis” of the inter-arts was a moment of experimentation for the category of poetry as well. All of the poetry in my dissertation explores the boundaries of this category, often taking a perceived crisis of reading—and of reading poetry—as part of its subject.

By learning from recent media studies scholarship and by attending to arguments about media specificity, it becomes clear that this moment produces a radical shift in reading. Only recently has scholarship approached the shift in reading via media studies. For example, when examining modernist texts through a media studies perspective, Mark Goble considers the media specificity arguments and “crisis” at the mid-century, despite the fact that the trends in modernist studies often ignore this history. Goble suggests that we take this critical history into account in order to shed light on media and communication studies in general. He asks “what it meant for so many writers and artists to surrender to their medium at a moment when new practices of communication were making the experience of technology itself an occasion for aesthetic experiment and historical reflection” (Goble 11). In other words, past critics have pushed aside the medium specificity that interested modernists themselves in order to reveal something about history and technology. In my engagement with arguments from Greenberg and Fried in previous chapters, I have attempted to attend to the rich history of philosophies of media autonomy and interdisciplinarity. The autonomy of art forms has been questioned from the beginning of this dissertation, despite my insistence on treating poetry as a category
in its own right. It is, in fact, this “crisis” which produces the type of poetry I examine here.

Produced in the midst of a different “crisis,” the crisis of the “death” of reading and the “end” of print culture, conceptual writing should also be perceived through a lens of media fluidity. Conceptual writing’s emphasis on the transfer between media introduces a set of concerns that differs from modernist practices. Modernist practices, from a Greenbergian lens, attempted to achieve full autonomy in their form; conceptual poetry attempts to achieve fluidity between the multiple forms that it takes. In a similar vein, whereas new critical reading practices saw the importance of the poem as existing “on the page,” conceptual writing expands the bounds of poetry elsewhere, illustrating poetry’s complete break from static lyric essentialism. The poetry book is the medium at hand, but its contents hold readings of almost every type of multimedia “literature” in our current environment. The book of conceptual poetry, viewed through our contemporary discussion about reading, sheds light on our technologically mediated system of increasing global capitalism. The poem is not “on the page,” (as the New Critics might say) but in our practice of attending to it. Poetry is, at last, a form of enactment.
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