Poetry in the Age of Consumer-Generated Content

Craig Dworkin

"Oh well. Whatever. Nevermind."

—Kurt Cobain[1]

In the last years of the twentieth century, a *soi-disant* "conceptual writing" seemed newly relevant because of the way it read against the contemporaneous emergence of database-driven cultures of surveillance, finance, and communication. Although it was not necessarily published online and did not exploit the advantages of computational analysis or pursue the affordances of digital tools, such work could be considered new media poetry because it exhibited the structural logic of the database. Adhering to Lev Manovich's definition of "the new media avant-garde," this first-phase conceptualism privileged methods of accessing, organizing, and visualizing large quantities of previously accumulated data, rather than creating original material or pioneering novel styles.[2] To be sure, the reign of the database is still in the ascendant, but the underlying technical structure of the internet—not to mention its cultural semantics—has changed. Accordingly, one way to map the development of conceptual writing over the

1. Nirvana, "Smells Like Teen Spirit," *Nevermind* (DGCD-24425, 1991).

2. Quoted in Lev Manovich, "New Media from Borges to HTML," *The New Media Reader*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort (Cambridge, Mass., 2003), p. 22. See also Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002). I elaborate this argument about conceptual writing in Craig Dworkin, "The Imaginary Solution," *Contemporary Literature* 48 (Spring 2007): 29–60.

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course of the last two decades would be to attend to how certain works come into dialogue with their changing cultural background—establishing feedback loops of reflexive resonance with nonpoetic texts and structures—while others, accordingly, fall out of sync. If the texts of first-phase conceptualism aligned with the early internet in fraught ways, certain recent works exploit both the themes and forms at the heart of the social-media networks that predominate in and structure online culture today, and they signify with heightened urgency as a result of those congruencies.

Consider, for instance, the distance between two passages, published over a decade apart:

 undeviated, unaccountably, undaunted, unmurmuringly, unimpressed, uncertain, untouched, unwinding, unmanned, unless, unfrequented, unvarying, unearthly, unappalled, unaccompanied, unprovided, undignified, unless, unwinding, undertaker, unprincipled, under, uncertain, unknown, unknown,

unexpected, unite, unknown, unmisgiving, unfrequently, unenervated, undue, unconditional, unsettling, uncertain, unseen, unless, undeviating, unerringly, unheeded, unearthed, unless, unmomentous, under, unprovided, unusual, untrackably, uncommon, unrigged, unhinged, unspeckled, unyielding, untottering, under, unearthly, unsounded, under, unsuspecting, undiscoverable, under, unastonished, unharmed, under, unintermitted, unrestingly, unabated, unprecedented, under, unseen, unfearing, unseen, unmindful, uncommon, untraceable

untouched, unconquerable, under, unmeasured, under, underling, uncertain, unchangeable, under, uncommonly, unpitying, unprepared, ungraduated, unappeasable, under, unwinking, under, unsurrendered, uncracked, unconquering, undulated, unharming.[3]

Flush feverish stepping laying respectfully addressing impressed re gift emptier ore correctly exasperating thankful disregarding profit-

3. Judith Goldman, "Dicktée," *Vocoder* (New York, 2001), p. 54.

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ing irregular scissors sharpening sharpened knife scissor preferring
sharpen some-time humble reels eloquent adequate spirituality
transcending solving intelligible enjoyable intensified demonstrat-
ing origin noisily drearily joyously boisterously despondingly frag-
mentarily roughly energetically repeatedly funnily hesitatingly
dreamily doubtingly tilling boastingly delightfully touchingly
quaintly flatly transparent trunk tenderly uninteresting daintily
ruined jumping landing distance desolating jumped jump frighten
exchanging explanations astonishes doubtful quarrelsome talkative
breathless thank toss tossed rhythm regularity struck fully minding
uninterested contradicting smelled gloominess noise noises disgust
displease unlike buried everyday expository recognising regretted
HISTORY A FAMILY'S PROGRESS similar similarly.[4]

Both texts sort vocabulary from famously lengthy American novels. The
first comes from the conclusion to Judith Goldman's "Dicktée" and results
from an attempt to sequentially record every word in Herman Melville's
Moby-Dick beginning with *un*. The second comes from the conclusion to
Holly Melgard's *The Making of the Americans* and results from an attempt
to distill a version of Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* in which
only the first occurrence of words and punctuation is permitted. While
Goldman's poem exemplifies an algorithmic imagination perfectly suited
to the computer programmed filtering of a digital database, it was in fact
composed longhand. Melgard's poem, in turn, might conceivably have
been composed by hand, but the scale of the project speaks to what results
when the conceptualist impulse behind a work like Goldman's poem en-
counters the affordances of scripting languages such as Perl and Python.
If, from a sufficient distance, the literary differences between such works
appear insignificant, a more focused look at the specifics of their economic
and technologic cultural context, and the minute particulars of their modes
of production and distribution, provides us with a means of distinguishing
their divergent significations.

   If nothing else, the configurations of the World Wide Web have morphed
over the period that separates the two texts. In the broadest terms, the
Web has become less static and humanly curated and less focused on dis-
cretely structured databases. Although the fundamental technologies have
not changed as starkly as a nomenclature like Web 2.0 would suggest, one
can track the developments that have made the typical internet browsing

   4. Holly Melgard, *The Making of the Americans* (Buffalo, N.Y., 2015), pp. 23–24.

experience more algorithmic, interoperable, ephemeral, mobile, affective, and narcissistic.[5]

To begin with, one might note those general trends that can be correlated to a change in the ratio of users to content creators. In fact, the very distinction between the two has begun to blur, since what used to count as use itself now qualifies as the creation of content. Concurrently, users have increasingly become the products rather than the clients of internet businesses. In the case of something like Facebook, for instance, one does not go to the site for the special content generated or curated by Facebook's experts; rather, one goes to the site to see what other users have written and clicked and to create content for them, reciprocally, by posting and commenting in turn. In the process, users' activities and data are commodified. Although we may imagine ourselves as customers consuming the product of Facebook's platform, our data, harvested as we use the site, is the actual product sold by the company; our individual visits to the company's web pages are among the initial stages in a commercial economy rather than its final transaction. Similarly, one does not so much google something, as one is googled in the process; again, Google's business model is predicated less on providing customers with data than on gathering their data as raw material. This relay is a specific example of the general condition diagnosed by Tiqqun wherein consumers have themselves become commodified.[6] Both the object and the subject of advertising, this second-degree consumption (a consumption of consumption) reifies human relations—such as the network of social media "friends"—as commodities, which are already understood in the Marxist tradition as negotiating and defining social relations. In the resultant *mise-en-abîme*, one discovers "rapports humains qui masquent des rapports marchands qui masquent des rapports humains [human relations that mask market relations that mask human relations]."[7]

Two measurable benchmarks in webpage architecture corroborate this change in online business models. First, the number of hyperlinks pointing to external domains has decreased. Instead, one finds increasing numbers of links to other pages within the same domain or to an embedded element loaded within a single portal page.[8] Second, the number of

5. See Graham Cormode and Balachander Krishnamurthy, "Key Differences between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0," *First Monday* 13 (June 2008), firstmonday.org/article/view/2125/1972

6. See Tiqqun [collective], *Premiers Matériaux pour une théorie de la jeune fille* (Paris, 2001).

7. Ibid., p. 78.

8. See Mark Tremayne, "Applying Network Theory to the Use of External Links on News Web Sites," in *Internet Newspapers: The Making of a Mainstream Medium*, ed. Xigen Li (Mahwah, N.J., 2010), pp. 49–64.

account-creation and login requirements to use a site or to access a page has increased. Both instances are evidence that the new business models do not so much require selling a product to users as they depend on keeping users on the site, recording their data and commercializing their presence. Further indication of this mutation can be read at a scripting level. The promiscuity of file formats across platforms is possible because of the dynamic interaction of multiple databases through public Application Program Interfaces (APIs), those protocol specifications that allow various software components to interact with one another. For example, a YouTube video might be embedded in a Facebook page, allowing a user to watch it without leaving one site for the other. Or a search engine that has been queried for the name of a business chain might return its usual summary of webpage results as well as automatically generating an interactive map of the nearby franchise locations with proximity to the user's server, overlaying real-time traffic information with estimated travel times. Indeed, one could also look to the changed status of the unit of the page itself as an HTML construct. Those changes in promiscuous scripting were enabled by the coordination of technologies, such as AJAX and XHR, that permit the separation of dataflow from page presentation, so that parts of an HTML page can be dynamically exchanged without the entire page, as a single object, being trashed and refreshed wholesale.[9]

Concurrently, the structure of web pages themselves and the ways in which their designs organize information have accommodated those dynamic, asynchronous communications between multiple off-site databases. In the 1990s, interfaces tended to present a uniform and stateless view of the site. That is, a website looked the same regardless of who accessed it, and it would look the same—unless there had been an explicitly authored owner update—if it were called it up again the next day or the next year. Today, in contrast, many sites present different information, and different pathways to linked pages within a site, depending on the navigation histories and activities of each unique user in relation to others. These newer web pages display data "related to items you've viewed" or "inspired by your shopping trends" (to take phrases from Amazon.com). The con-

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9. See Cornelia Györödi et al., "Web 2.0 Technologies with JQuery and Ajax," *Computer Technology and Computer Programming: Research and Strategies*, ed. James L. Antonakos (Boca Raton, Fla., 2011), pp. 99–110. The application program interface XMLHttpRequest (XHR) employs web-browser scripting languages in order to send a request to a server and load the server response data back into the script for responsive display without having to reload the web page; the client-side application Asynchronous Java Script and XML (AJAX) uses an XHR object in order to transfer variously formatted data with server-side scripts, communicating in both directions without altering the overall display of a web page.

tent of categories such as "recommendations for you in books" or "customers who bought this item also bought" changes with every click the user makes and with every click every *other* user of the site makes as well.

One final development worth noting has to do with how search engines themselves have changed as they navigate the Web. As Richard Rogers demonstrates, the decade between 1997 and 2007 encompasses an evolution of search engine architecture which promotes algorithmic processes and automated procedures while reducing human-curated indices.[10] Following Rogers, one can trace this change in both in the front-end design of menu choices and options for how users search, as well as in the back-end mechanics of the actual search mechanisms and logic processing. Ask Jeeves provides a perfect object lesson. Founded in 1996, the company tried to capitalize on Web search queries and other questions answered, as they publicized, by real people (hinting at the pressure the internet's automating interface had already put on the notion of the simulation of *unreal* people). By 2006, however, Jeeves—like a character from *Downton Abbey*—had "retired," and the parent company left the search engine business altogether in 2010 in the face of Google's algorithmic search dominance. A related symptom of this same transformation can be gleaned from the lost Web of static lists: owner-added links; hand-posted blog rolls; guest-curated top-ten lists. These artifacts of deliberate, individual human selection have now been largely replaced by dynamically generated galleries of targeted advertisements, statistically related searches, automatically linked socially networked profiles, and the whole host of data sorted and rendered by probabilistic algorithms and automated scripting sequences.

The replacement of the consciously curated Web by a more automatized, algorithmically driven network mirrors the evolution of the financial markets alongside which it has developed in the modern information economy. The investment market segment of that economy has been adapting to the realization that the curatorial choices of professional money managers and actively managed funds could not outperform randomly indexed big-data sampling of the market as a whole. Recognizing the significance of this paradigm shift, Paul Stephens has written with keen insight about "strategies of *passive indexing*" in the economic world of big data and its correlation to conceptual writing practices.[11] Stephens illustrates the self-reflexive relationship between a certain mode of conceptual poetry and

10. See Richard Rodgers, *Digital Methods* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013).
11. Paul Stephens, "Vanguard Total Index: Conceptual Writing, Information Asymmetry, and the Risk Society," *Contemporary Literature* 54 (Winter 2013): 753.

"the conditions of its own existence and dissemination in an era of instantaneous global information flows," contextualizing the ways in which the indexical forms taken by so many works of conceptual literature point both to source materials and to the embeddedness of those materials in a changing global economy of privatized risk.[12] Following Stephens's lead, we might note three other areas in which technological, economic, and literary trends overlap: affect, junkspace, and platform.

In economic terms, *emotional* or *affective* labor was first formally analyzed in the 1970s by Italian autonomist writers and developed by *postoperaismo* theorists such as Maurizio Lazzarato as one aspect of *lavoro immateriale* ("immaterial" or "invisible" labor),[13] or what feminist sociologists would come to materialize as labor in the "bodily mode."[14] The explicit integration of such emotionally signifying activities into the commercial sphere has come to be seen as an constitutive stage in postwar economic development. Positing that production becomes industrialized and then industrialization becomes informationalized, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri sketch the recent reconfiguration of the dominant mode of production by which the model of material manufacturing has been displaced by a governing mode of service—which is to say, according to their analysis, as affective industries. "Services," they explain, "are characterized in general by the central role played by knowledge, information, affect, and communication. In this sense many call the postindustrial economy an informational economy."[15] That informational economy, now dominated by the internet, binds affect to new media. For Hardt, writing elsewhere, modern economic production at the turn of the millennium was defined in part by a "combination of cybernetics and affect" and in part by its vision of the biopolitical context as "the productive relationship between affect and

12. Ibid.

13. See Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Michael Hardt and Paulo Virno (Minneapolis, 1996): 133–47. "Emotional Labor" is the term used by Arlie Russell Hochschild in *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley, 1983).

14. Dorothy Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Toronto, 1987), p. 81. For a prehistory of these concepts, see Kathi Weeks, "Life within and against Work: Affective Labor, Feminist Critique, and Post-Fordist Politics," *Ephemera* 7 (Feb. 2007): 233–49.

15. Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), p. 285. In Lazzarato's terms, "if Fordism integrated consumption into the cycle of the reproduction of capital, post-Fordism integrates communication" so that "consumption is no longer only the 'realization' of a product, but a real and proper social process that for the moment is defined with the term *communication*" (Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," pp. 140, 141). For a more nuanced account, see Jason Read, *The Micro-Politics of Capital: Marx and the Prehistory of the Present* (Albany, N.Y., 2003), pp. 122–34.

value."[16] According to this logic, the informatics and economics of data processing are interlocked by affect. For those who can still imagine an aspect of life somehow separate from the empire of capital, that hinge might hold an immanent potential for the solidarity of human bonding against the bondage of labor—a fulcrum to be exploited in leveraging the force of the human against the heartlessness of profit.

The reality, however, seems decidedly darker. Rather than an effective weapon to be mobilized in the fight against capital, affect has instead been one of its most sedulously colonized territories. With particular relevance for my topic here, affect itself has recently been commercialized as a key element of the business model of internet corporations in the age of social media. In the current emotional discourse of the Web, affect is figured as evaluation (the radio-button "Like" input on Facebook offers a prime example), and one's affective fluctuations are converted to commercial potential in the short circuit between the exhibitionist branding of one's own affective register ("Look at me! this is me defined by what I like") and the assimilation of that putatively individualized identity, socially consolidated and promoted, to the aggregated brand of the trademarked, commercially promoted corporate platform.[17] Affect, under the regime of social media, takes part in the capitalization of cathexis: tweeting and retweeting, in a ventriloquizing echo of the bluebird of happiness. Indeed, the idiomatic resonance of Twitter's mascot is not coincidental, and the ominous obligatory modal in the song that popularized the phrase might serve as a caution to those of us in a nascent world of social media: "we are in a world that's just begun / And you must sing his song, as you go along / When you find the bluebird of happiness."[18]

Alternately, in contrast to the shiny, happy veneer of a chirping "like" or an approving thumbs-up, the evaluative function of affect also often registers demonstrative lament to the same exploitable ends. As Divya Victor writes: "public performances of outrage and mourning synthetically rebrand

16. Hardt, "Affective Labor," *boundary 2* 26 (Summer 1999): 97, 100. See also Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt, "In the Social Factory?: Immaterial Labour, Precariousness, and Cultural Work," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 25 (Dec. 2005): 11.

17. For a more insidious relation between capital, affect, and social media, see the early warning by Mark Coté and Jennifer Pybus, "Learning to Immaterial Labour 2.0: MySpace and Social Networks," *Ephemera* 7 (Feb. 2007): 88–106. One might productively read that article alongside Marie Buck's *Life and Style* (New York, 2007), in which she aims "to situate a gendered, lyrical subjectivity within the language of MySpace" because "its form dictates so overtly as to nearly narrate the continual collapse of all forms of identity into identities of commodification & commodity consumption" (p. ii).

18. Edward Heyman, and Harry Parr Davies, "Bluebird of Happiness," www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Sandor-Harmati-Edward-Heyman-Harry-Parr-Davies/Bluebird-of-Happiness. See also Maurice Maeterlinck, *L'Oiseau bleue* (Paris, 1909).

and mask one's social identity—one's class, one's institutional position. . . .
Our tear ducts are banks that weep out gold."[19] In the "'social factory,'"
wherein the demands of labor have been extended throughout the twenty-
four seven colonization of time—an endless workday in which even con-
sumers are tasked as producers—social media converts recreational free
time into free labor.[20] However, whether deriding or liking, trolling or en-
couraging, any social media use whatsoever predicts declines in a user's
well-being; irrespective of users' moods and activities, they become less
happy the longer they stay online.[21] The amalgam is disorienting: an ex-
periential realization of the negative affects produced by social media and
a widespread discourse of negative sentiment published and proliferated
on social media runs up against the insistent rhetoric of positive affect about
social media propagated by the corporations that would seek to commodify
any trackable affective response, whether positive or negative.

  This volatile admixture makes the subject of affect especially resonant
when it is taken up by poetry sourced from online networks. And here is
one point at which the divergence of first- and second-wave conceptual
poetry can be easily discerned. As Felix Bernstein notes: "in distinction
to conceptual poetry . . . post-conceptual poetry attempts to explicitly
bring affect, emotion, and ego back into the empty networking structures
that govern us."[22] Robert Fitterman's *No, Wait. Yep. Definitely Still Hate
Myself*, for instance, contains hundreds of first-person avowals of desper-
ate loneliness, alienated angst, abject self-loathing, and isolated despair—all
apparently culled from online message boards, blogs, and comment streams
and all marshaled back into the empty governing structure of a James
Schuyler poem.[23] Carefully smoothing the transitions between voices, Fit-

  19. Divya Victor, interview with Caleb Beckwith, in Victor et al., *Reconfiliating: Conversa-
tions with Conceptual-Affiliated Writers*, ed. Beckwith (Laramie, Wyo., 2015), p. 60. "We are
these glassy lachrymatoria—our tear ducts are banks that weep out gold" (Victor, "The Next
Big Thing," interview with pub., Les Figues Press, 7 Feb. 2013, lesfigues.blogspot.com/2013/02
/the-next-big-thing-divya-victor.html).
  20. See Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," *So-
cial Text* 18 (Summer 2000): 33–34.
  21. See Ethan Kross et al., "Facebook Use Predicts Declines in Subjective Well-Being in
Young Adults," *PLoS ONE* 8 (Aug. 2013), journals.plos.org/plosone/article/file?id=10.1371
/journal.pone.0069841&type=printable. See also Morten Tromholt, "The Facebook Experi-
ment: Quitting Facebook Leads to Higher Levels of Well-Being," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior,
and Social Networking* 19 (Nov. 2016): 661–66. Furthermore, some of social media's negative
psychological effects are demographically disproportionate; see Leonard Sax: "Why Do Girls
Tend to Have More Anxiety Than Boys?" *The New York Times*, 21 Apr. 2016, well.blogs
.nytimes.com/2016/04/21/why-do-girls-have-more-anxiety-than-boys/
  22. Felix Bernstein, *Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry* (Los Angeles, 2015), p. 38.
  23. The structure of Fitterman's book maps its incrementally longer lineated segments
onto the mannequin of James Schuyler's *The Morning of the Poem* (New York, 1980), which in

terman merges his found texts into an aggregate chorus of cri-de-coeur confessions loosely sorted into themed sections and sustained for a slowly churning, unrelenting eighty pages leavened only by self-deprecating irony and the occasional snarky snap of the syntax of chats and social-media postings. Whether one reads the result as soliloquy or dramatic monologue is indicative of one's attitude toward online dialogue, but in either case it serves as a lineated sociolinguistic investigation into the public idioms of private sentiments and the language of what we might call ambient relationships (to adapt Leisa Reichelt's description of the "ambient intimacy" of social media and portable technology).[24]

In many ways, the pedigree of *No, Wait* traces directly back to conceptualism in an earlier mode, but its collocation of affect and social media is instructive for the poetic concerns of the current moment. As one strophe puts it: "In the modern world, where / technology connects us to people we will never meet, / Who may not even exist, it's easy to feel alone."[25] Other sections continue the theme: The

> mobile phone on the table beside me is also silent. It hasn't rung,
>   beeped or throbbed, probably since yesterday, maybe
> The day before: no calls, no emails, no Facebook notifications,
>   no tweets, no texts, and there's nothing blinking on
> The answering machine, because the landline hasn't rung since
>   December, except people in call-centers who can't
> Pronounce my name. All of these methods of communication and yet
>   nobody's communicating with me.
>   [*N*, pp. 48–49]

In some verses the connection is implicit: "I always feel lonely and am / always sitting in my room / On the internet trying to kill the time" (*N*, p. 11).[26] Others posit explicit correlations: "I'm pretty sure that a lot / of loneliness

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this context one might hear as the *mourning* of the poem: the lament, rather than the dawn, of verse. Fitterman's prosodic molding of carefully polished, appropriated online content into a specific poetic precedent recalls Steven Zultanski's *Bribery* (New York, 2014), which models its paragraph breaks on Bruce Andrews's *I Don't Have Any Paper, So Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism)* (Los Angeles, 1992). See also Miles Champion, *Three Bell Zero* (New York, 2000).

24. See Lisa Reichelt, "Ambient Intimacy," *Disambiguity*, www.disambiguity.com/ambient-intimacy/

25. Robert Fitterman, *No, Wait. Yep. Definitely Still Hate Myself* (New York, 2014), p. 46; hereafter abbreviated *N*.

26. In terms relevant to the broader concerns here, Paul Stephens positions an earlier Fitterman book in relation to digital culture; see Paul Stephens, "Reading Robert Fitterman's *Now We Are Friends* through the Lens of Ten Media Theoretical Terms," *Post45*, 21 Jan. 2015, post45.research.yale.edu/2015/01/reading-robert-fittermans-now-we-are-friends-through-the-lens-of-ten-media-theoretical-terms/

today is a result of / Modern technology"; "I started reading / someone's Tumblr about feeling / All lonely and, whatever, it's totally stupid sounding, / but then I felt exactly / The same way" (*N*, pp. 20, 4). And here is where we can see why *No, Wait*, unlike most of the poems I will consider here, benefits from being a printed book, with more intensive protocols of reading than the screen and an immediately palpable sense of its duration and page count. Although discrete sources are blended seamlessly at the local level, readers are reminded at a stretch of the absurdity of sustaining a coherent speaking subject in such a relentless reiteration of one idée fixe. The book, as a unit, establishes the frame against which its irony can emerge: so many isolated individuals, feeling as if they are completely alone and that no one understands them, are actually quite unified and coherent in both their feelings and the language with which they express those feelings. "If you feel left out from this / Feeling of togetherness, believe me, you are not alone" (*N*, p. 45). Echoing Groucho Marx's quip about not wanting to belong to any club that would have him as a member, one line laments: "If only there were a match.com for friendship, / But as nobody admits to needing any friends, who would join?" (*N*, p. 47).[27]

Turning to internet discourse for poetic materials, *No, Wait* finds discussions of poetry already in play and firmly aligned with the despondency of the online commentary it expropriates. From the inset song of William Carlos Williams's early poem "Danse Russe" ("'I am lonely, lonely. / I was born to be lonely, / I am best so!'")[28] to amateur verse like "The Scorned One," posted to the blog-like webofloneliness.com,[29] the poems incorporated into *No, Wait* are, unsurprisingly, about desolation, but so is the very idea of poetry itself, which serves as the litmus of true despair: "all I do now is sit around writing poetry. . . . I feel so lonely"; "I feel so lonely, like I need somebody. I even wrote a poem about these feelings today—fuck, I just need to turn everything around"; "*if you think reading poetry is sad, just try writing it!*" (*N*, pp. 51, 3). Blurring that line, Fitterman writes his own poem by reading others, and that dynamic between interior and exterior, personal and public, resonates throughout the book. Not only is the material predominantly drawn from discourse in a private mode published in public fora, but it often describes scenes of private emotions in dynamic tension with public settings: one speaker notes the numerous unemployed

27. See Erskine Johnson, "In Hollywood," *Dunkirk Evening Observer*, 20 Oct. 1949, p. 22.

28. William Carlos Williams, "Danse Russe," *Poetry Foundation*, www.poetryfoundation .org/poems/46483/danse-russe

29. See "The Scorned One," *Web of Loneliness Poems*, 13 Dec. 2012, poems.webofloneliness .com/2012/12/13/the-scorned-one/

middle-aged businessmen "trying to look inconspicuous" as they "jabber away at a laptop" in the middle of the day at Starbucks; another "wastes an afternoon" chatting up cashiers at local shops in a bid to try to cheer himself up; others hold back tears on the bus, in cafés, or walking down the street, until they find themselves "crying right there" in the civic spaces of commercial public life (*N*, pp. 39, 41, 63–64, 66, 68).

   That theme of public crying—a dramatization of the structures by which social media aggregates records of individual affect—comes into even sharper focus in Diana Hamilton's *Okay, Okay*, which pays particular attention the intersection of corporate employment and weeping.[30] Crying constitutes the affective activity par excellence because it both indexes emotional states and is itself a precognitive physiological response—it is *affective* in both the strict and casual senses of the word. Involuntarily expressed, the liquid from lacrimal glands is also expressive. With its title suggesting either impatient dismissal or comforting sympathy, *Okay, Okay* pulls back the cubicle divider to reveal the inverted strictures and contradictory expectations of the affective economy. From one side, as autonomist critics realized, workers have been increasingly tasked with emotional labor, to the point where certain affective situations—chaperonage, hospice care, and counseling, for example—have become products themselves. Even in other fields and industries, however, employees are often expected to sell not just products but emotions not necessarily related to those products, such as feelings of esteem, well-being, and so on. When the checkout clerk, following customer service training, smiles and asks how your day is going, you witness first hand the "commercialization of human feeling" by which internal states are colonized as an extension of marketable exchange.[31] As "the worker's personality and subjectivity have to be made susceptible to organization and command,"[32] a range of business "organisations are increasingly seeking to suppress, hide or manage an employee's feelings" with explicit rules "making emotion management another form of paid work."[33] Employees, that is, may be simultaneously tasked with fostering positive affective responses in customers while masking their own negative responses, such as the performative display of tears. Repressed in the name of professionalism, tears might or might not conform with the cultural expectations from

    30. See Diana Hamilton, *Okay, Okay* (New York, 2012), truckbooks.org/pdfs/Hamilton _OO.pdf

    31. See Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, pp. 189–90.

    32. Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," p. 134.

    33. Sharon C. Bolton: "Emotion Here, Emotion There, Emotional Organisations Everywhere," *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 11 (2000): 156.

other social spheres, such as family, romance, religious ceremony, and more. As one pertinent section of Hamilton's book reads:

> Sometimes it's very hard to separate the work mode from the per-
> sonal mode and the feeling mode. And sometimes you do get to the
> point, we've all been there, we've all done that walk of shame past
> our coworkers, from the boss' office to the bathroom. You know,
> it happens, we cry, we go to the bathroom, we clean ourselves up,
> we drink a glass of water, um, definitely try to cool down the body,
> in order to stop the crying. Work is about facts, it's not about
> feelings. It's about facts, it's not about whether or not someone likes
> you, it's not about, you know, whether or not you look good that
> day, it's about the facts, we've all been there, bottom line, we're all
> human, we all have feelings, we all get upset, it's not the end of the
> world. But best avoid it if possible.[34]

In the appropriated language of online infomercial articles and discussion boards, Hamilton's text quotes here from an elided transcript, merging host and celebrity guest into a single, reassuring ("okay, okay") voice.

The interview, for the record, can be heard via an embedded video on the social media aggregating site Howdini. As the caption to the video asks, soothingly: "Have you ever fought back tears in the office? We've all been there. Melissa Kirsch, author of *The Girl's Guide to Absolutely Everything*, shares advice on how to deal with crying in the office."[35] The framing message, with its insistent third-person plural, is collective experience: "we've all been there, bottom line, we're all human, we all have feelings, we all get upset." Other passages in Hamilton's book, however, suggest that crying may be less universal, and instead specifically gendered. From the one side, tears may be considered more or less acceptable depending on cultural factors such as the weeper's gender; from behind the lids, moreover, those tears are produced in the "bodily mode" of individuals who may be physiologically predisposed to a tearfulness grounded in the affective response of the structurally and chemically sex-differentiated limbic system and its regulation of hormones.[36]

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34. Hamilton, *Okay, Okay*, p. 61.

35. Melissa Kirsch, "How to Deal with Crying in the Office," *Howdini*, www.howdini.com /video/6649796/how-to-deal-with-crying-in-the-office

36. For recent statistics on American attitudes toward crying in public, see d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/i2qimxphnu/tabs_OP_Crying _20160623.pdf. The address of the *Howdini* article is explicitly gendered (the first bullet-point advice is to "make a beeline for the ladies' room") (Kirsch, "How to Deal with Crying in the Office").

This bodily mode emerges, in Hamilton's book, from the interpolation of comically timed message-board statements with a personal web-page article by an executive coach (one obvious type of affective laborer).[37] Blending credentialed expert and opinionated posters in the way the previous section blended interviewer and interviewee, Hamilton's text continues:

> You find yourself having a natural physiological response to feelings that derive from events. Many women cry easily and unexpectedly, especially around that time. Our socialization includes greater latitude than boys to express emotions through crying. In some ways, this freedom serves us well as grown women, especially since September. There is substantial research on "emotional intelligence" saying this ability makes us better, more effective leaders. We are also better friends, family members, and coworkers. You are not alone. In other words, tears make us look bad.[38]

Whether foibles or virtues, culturally or biologically predisposed, tears here serve Hamilton's mashup in the way that affect serves the economics of social media: data trumps semantic content, and any response—right or wrong, true or false, positive or negative—will do to further the enterprise.

Okay, Okay opens with the architectural floor plan of an office suite and several pages of disorienting, spatially impossible, collaged descriptions of cubicles and open plan workspaces. Such environments exemplify a concentrated area of what Rem Koolhaas has termed "junkspace": ephemeral, lightweight, quickly dated, blandly cluttered, too-soon-shabby structures that attract desultory renovation or dispassionately conceded vacancy.[39] Such constructions, for Koolhaas, partition space into afterthought apportionments of subdivided containers according to an ethos of uniform, air-conditioned organization and disorienting borders. Identifiable by their proliferation of liminal and transitional structures, these spaces gesture halfheartedly toward the personal zones of domestic comfort and, simultaneously, to the corporate arenas of regimentation. Like the cubicle, junkspace is neither ever quite private nor quite public. Furthermore, by assimilating interior structures to the buildings that contain them, junkspace is writ large in what a recent report described as "suburban corporate wastelands": the tens of thousands of acres of abandoned, 1980s-era office parks, corporate campuses, and bureaucratic compounds that have been vacated

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37. See Susan Picascia and Linda M. Poverny "There's No Crying in Business" (2011), susanpicascia.com/noCrying.html

38. Hamilton, *Okay, Okay*, p. 61.

39. See Rem Koolhaas, "Junkspace," *October* 100 (Spring 2002): 175–90.

across the United States by companies such as Pfizer, AT&T, Motorola, Amazon, and United Airlines.[40]

   According to analysts, those vacancies can be attributed in large part to the digital networks that have allowed more employees to work from home, to stagger shifts flexibly, and to deaccession the vast accumulations of onsite paper files—the backbone of the information infrastructure of twentieth-century bureaucratic corporate management—in favor of digital files retrieved from remote, cloud-hosted hard drives.[41] The built architectures of junkspace have their equivalents in the online real-estate domains that drove the profit and demise of companies that have moved out of their oversized compounds or moved on entirely. The information superhighway is littered with all sorts of abandoned, foreclosed, and dilapidating websites in what Joey Yearous-Algozin has called proliferating "dead zones":[42] vast tracts of failed large-scale enterprises (Friendster, Napster, Altavista, Grooveshark, and others); orphaned personal websites; broken links and 404 error pages; missing image files; derailed comment threads; UNIX folders keyed to a forgotten password; web pages with deprecated tags and superseded attributes, inoperative plugins, altered protocols, software that is no longer supported; the accumulating detritus of spam bots; and all the accounts that users forgot to delete on MySpace and AOL, or that live on after their owners are deceased—aborted, unupdated, and ineradicable.

   That doubled sense of *defunct* lies at the heart of Sophia Le Fraga's 2015 book *literallydead*, which literalizes the titular phrase—netspeak slang that reaches for an emphatic beyond OMG—and which had been taken as the Instagram handle for an account purportedly owned by a skeleton, named Skellie, who ostensibly snaps selfies while modeling for the camera at brunch, or in clubs, or at yoga.[43] Her familiar pose, in many of the posts, of the pivoted torso extending its parallel ulna and radius, the forearm radically foreshortened to a point terminating just beyond the edge of the image frame, underscores the narcissism of the genre, which has become embodied in the symbiosis of stance and hardware. The techno-

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40. These properties, significantly, stand empty at a vacancy rate of 16.6 percent, compared with urban rates of 12.4 percent; see CBRE Group: "U.S. Commercial Real Estate Market Continued Steady Recovery," 10 Oct. 2013, www.cbre.com/about/media-center/2013/10/10/us-commercial-real-estate-market-continued-steady-recovery

41. Catie Talarski, Tucker Ives, and John Dankosky, "The Suburban Corporate Wasteland," *Where We Live*, WNPR, 3 Dec. 2013, wnpr.org/post/suburban-corporate-wasteland

42. See Joey Yearous-Algozin, "Everybody's Obituary," 20 Sept. 2013, www.lulu.com/items/volume_78/20644000/20644752/2/print/TT_Canceled_Anthology_Yearous-Algozin_for_lulu.pdf

43. See www.instagram.com/omgliterallydead

logical symptom of the psychology of social media is evident in the ubiquitous machines engineered to accommodate the forwarding software of social media: smartphones that otherwise prioritize minimized weight and production costs nonetheless yielding to the extravagance of redundant cameras, one of which always looks back indulgently at the user. The commercial facet of this logic, which tethers online and offline identities, reflects the pressure by data-mining corporations such as Google and Facebook to encourage the "real name" authentication requirements that augment the value of the information in which they trade.[44]

If the lighthearted gallows humor of "omgliterallydead" keeps Skellie from developing into a full-blown allegory, Le Fraga recognizes the serious side of this minor meme. Extending the archival impulse of fin-de-siècle conceptualism to a world of ubiquitous and inadvertent archiving, *literallydead* reprints the messages left on the walls of deceased Facebook users, replete with texting abbreviations, misspellings, and occasional moments of excruciatingly inappropriate and tragically belated spam: "Theres 30 hrs left I'm so close to my goal and I can't make it without u!/ Get these whimsical songs of mine to come to life..i promiSe even 1$ helps!"; "Do you have someone with mental illness? I am participating in an overnight walk to raise money for suicide prevention. Will you give?."[45] Throughout, the poems in *literallydead* exhibit the excessive, compensatory insistence on positive affect that has come to fill the tonal void of the new language of internet communication: all caps typography, acronyms such as LOL, emoticon smiles, less-than-three hearts, repeated exclamation marks, and other modes of exaggerated inflection. But in Le Fraga's book, those rhetorical flourishes collide with the lachrymose states on display in *Okay Okay*—here in the guise of genuinely heartbreaking sadness, grief, anger, and despair. Both modes, moreover, are triangulated by the inexpressible refusal signaled by the book's title, which like "omg," "idk," and "I can't even" asserts a precognitive affective state of speechless stupor. These increasingly frequent surrenders of analysis might be parsed as indications of attempts to navigate between the social media Scylla of cheerful liking and its Charybdis of trolling. Whatever they signify more broadly, Le Fraga's book is replete with the stalled articulations of the "literallydead" in the face of those who are, literally, dead: "I'm still in shock"; "I am speechless"; "I can't imagine"; "I'll never know"; "no words can explain"; "I'm lost in words"; "I can't articulate"; "it blows my mind"; "shocked"; "This is one of the few times Ive been

44. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun: *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Cambridge, Mass., 2016), p. 109.

45. Sophia Le Fraga, *literallydead* (Tucson, Ariz., 2015), pp. 40, 48.

speechless due to news"; "OMG"; "omg"; "omg"; "omg" (*l*, pp. 14, 22, 22, 24, 40, 53, 47, 54, 59, 22, 29, 51, 53).

Others use memorialized accounts as fora not just for tributes or personal testimony, but for speaking with the dead in direct address: entreating, thanking, encouraging, cursing, requesting. or acknowledging signs. Some simply chat: "Hey, I'm almost done with a book of poetry. I fell in love recently, too. / I miss you so much, I have so many things to tell you"; "So many thunderstorms lately!"; "Hey, I'm doing good in school"; "saw Thor last night, know you would have loved all that Viking stuff / even though I thought it was a bit goofy" (*l*, pp. 27, 39, 61). In other words, the book proposes a conflation of the nineteenth-century spiritualist sense of *medium* and the modern sense of *new media*: "I wasn't planning on writing anything on Facebook. / It does no justice as a medium," as one entry indeterminately avers (*l*, p. 16). In the end, in fact, the subject of Le Fraga's book as a whole is as much about what cannot pass over, or live on, in the technological terms of media themselves. Several posts explicitly invoke the apps and tools integrated into the website, noting in passing its ability to mix file types within the space of a single web page: "Dude I wish I could pop open a Facebook message and chat for a minute"; "I remember you sent me a long thing on Facebook chat talking about how / you liked my art. No one had every talked about my work that way before"; "You were just online and we were talking"; "I went through all of your pictures on Facebook today. / Sometimes I laughed and read the comments" (*l*, pp. 28, 21, 29, 20). *Literallydead*, in its turn, emphasizes the sorts of content that are meant to be seamlessly integrated into the interoperable structures of a Web 2.0 page by foregrounding how ungainly those conventions are when moved to the substrate of the printed codex page. Randomly generated strings of YouTube web-address file names appear unremarkable and remain all but unread by online viewers when they announce a clickable link, a browser's uniform resource locator, or some scaled and automatically loading file, but they become ungainly when read aloud or typed out on the page where their cumbersome directory indexing is essentially meaningless:

> http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbQjp7kyp7U
> i know you would love this track.
> [*l*, p. 5]

Furthermore, the printed page itself is highlighted by the over-designed materiality of Le Fraga's book. In contrast to the perfect-bound paperback format of *Okay, Okay* (which was also released as a PDF), *literallydead* advertises its craft bookness: thick unbleached sheets with visible decorative

fiber inclusions; even thicker, raw board covers letterpressed and sporting an appliqué woodblock-print illustration of a smartphone wielding plague doctor; a kraft-paper hinged spine; and colored endpapers with a cursor-motif pattern print. In this way, the book restages the discordancy cues of Le Fraga's *I Don't Want Anything to Do with the Internet*, in which the appropriated language foregrounds the idiomatic conventions of social media meant to be written and read on a smartphone, while its format emphasizes hand-crafted print: the visual noise of photostatic reproduction; a typeface emulating the irregular inking and damaged letterforms of a typewriter; hand-cut cards bound with twine.[46] In short, the form of these publications announces a distance from the digital rhetoric of their content. In the case of *literallydead*, Le Fraga emphasizes the difficulty of remediating from screen to codex through the deliberate awkwardness of the book's print-page design, in which intentionally low-resolution images are positioned with calculated framing and unartful cropping to suggest browser or file windows that need to be resized and properly scaled. Comprised of screenshots from music videos, including several from the cruelly apt "I Can't See You I'm Dead," these images do not fit on the page, either physically or in terms of their suitability.[47] With these marked disparities between the screen animation from media such as Flash and HTML5-tagged MP4 streaming video, on the one hand, and the static state of the printed page on the other, Le Fraga winkingly speaks to the embedded asynchronous data transfers that in part define the current state of the Web.

The cross-site confluence of otherwise unrelated databases also underwrites Yearous-Algozin's *Lazarus Project*. The sprawling work includes a three-volume, 1,400-page installment invoking some 20,000 deceased named on MyDeathSpace.com, a site that connects obituaries with the social media accounts of people who have died. Like La Fraga, Yearous-Algozin implicitly equates human mortality with the moribund and defunct Web spaces of dead-end digital artifacts hosted by sites with breathlessly short life spans. His sense of the work's relation to cross-platform dynamics is even more explicit:

> What's interesting for me when this material—the description of people's deaths, say—operates in a virtual plane is how it moves. Even long texts are easily transported and stored and their URLs can be shared across multiple platforms. It's not any different than any other piece of data and our phones or laptops don't care about

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46. See Sophie Le Fraga, *I Don't Want Anything to Do with the Internet* (n. p., 2012/2014).
47. Schlomo, "I Can't See You I'm Dead," *Bad Vibes* (2011).

what kind of .doc or .jpg you're downloading. In a sense, this im-
poverishment reaches a limit point in the digital environment. . . .
It becomes nothing more than death infecting information in all its
terrifying flatness.[48]

Yearous-Algozin here pinpoints the great paradox of the multimedia, dy-
namic Web: the diversity of its sources are all funneled to the more heg-
emonic frame of the single portal site, and its diversity of media, from
still images to animated video to sound to text, are at their base all shar-
ing the same substrate of numerical code and globally standardized pro-
tocols. This homogeneous uniformity leads to the "terrifying flatness"
suffusing internet information in all of its impoverished forms. *Lazarus*
hints at the leveling numerical code underlying its born-digital text with
the relentless 1/0 binary structure of death and resurrection that organizes
its strophes. The poem opens:

> Hanah Puga (20) allegedly took her own life
> Hanah Puga (20) comes back to life
> Erik Halldorson (40) took his own life after a battle with depression
> Erik Halldorson (40) comes back to life
> Kameron Jacobsen (14) killed himself and his father Kevin commit-
> ted suicide less than a year later
> Kameron Jacobsen (14) and his father Kevin come back to life
> Danielle Willard (21) was shot by police
> Danielle Willard (21) comes back to life[49]

The text continues its flickeringly repetitive off-on couplets for page
after page, volume after volume of naïve reversals that obviously fail to per-
form their performative task. The resulting catalogue, by turns disturbing
and anesthetizing, provokes what Sueyeun Juliette Lee has identified as
the "traumatic stuplime": a reader's affective reaction to socially violent
content proliferated in a coldly monotonous and protracted durational
form.[50] Lee's term modulates Sianne Ngai's characterization of avant-garde
texts that elicit "an aesthetic experience in which astonishment is paradox-

48. Yearous-Algozin, "Poetry Is Not the Final Girl: Joey Yearous-Algozin," interview with
Trisha Low, *Harriet Blog*, 22 Apr. 2015, www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/04/poetry-is
-not-the-final-girl-joey-yearous-algozin/

49. Yearous-Algozin, *MyDeathSpace.com*, vol. 1 of *The Lazarus Project: MyDeathSpace.com*
(n. p., 2013), p. [4].

50. See Sueyeun Juliette Lee, "Shock and Blah: Offensive Postures in 'Conceptual' Poetry
and the Traumatic Stuplime," *The Volta* 41 (May 2014), www.thevolta.org/ewc41-sjlee-p1.html

ically united with boredom."[51] Indeed, reading through the volumes, one begins to feel the weight of Rainer Maria Rilke's realization, in his own Lazarus poem, of the dread that all the dead might rise again: "ihn graute jetzt, es möchten alle / Toten durch die angesaugte gruft wiederkommen [he dreaded that all the dead might come rushing back through the suction of that tomb]."[52] Where Le Fraga's book might still function as a genuine expression of personal grief (albeit one navigating the newly public forms of personal correspondence), the totalizing scope of Yearous-Algozin's project feels too glibly impersonal to do the work of mourning. Nonetheless, if the tone of *Lazarus* strikes a slacker cut-and-paste pose, the basic structure is still familiar from what Jahan Ramazani has identified as the "compensatory economy" of the canonical elegy.[53] Recall John Milton's genre-defining "Lycidas," which announces in its first stanza "Lycidas is dead" and then adjures, in its penultimate stanza: "Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more, / For Lycidas, your sorrow, is not dead."[54] Percy Shelley similarly balances the opening of his "Adonais," "I weep for Adonais—he is dead!," with a following prestidigitation: "Peace, peace! he is not dead."[55] Eschewing Milton's consoling succor and the complicating metaphoric inversions at the end of Shelley's poem, the clipped monotony of Yearous-Algozin's bare, swift grammatical reversals suggests an impatient revision to the elevated ambitions of the elegy's poetic legacy, which would also include the tradition, inherited from the Renaissance, of poets' attempts to imagine that the lyric could restore the natural world to harmonious vivancy. Despite this august pedigree, Trisha Low flatly accuses Yearous-Algozin in an interview: "you don't believe in poetry at all, only platforms."[56]

That faith in platforms, which we might gloss as the particular networked devices that render data in culturally intelligible ways, marks a final remarkable development in conceptual writing's relation to digital tech-

51. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009), p. 271. A single, startling jolt comes in the middle of volume 2, where Yearous-Algozin's friend and fellow poet, Trisha Low, is unceremoniously and ceremonially killed and resurrected. The murder takes place at the Golden Wok, presumably the restaurant just four miles north of the SUNY Buffalo campus where Yearous-Algozin attended the poetics program; see Yearous-Algozin, *MyDeathSpace.com*.

52. Rainer Maria Rilke, "Lazarus," *Sämtliche Werke* (Berlin, 1963), 2:50; trans. Edward Snow, *Uncollected Poems* (New York, 1996), p. 37.

53. Jahan Ramanzani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago, 1994), p. 71.

54. John Milton, "Lycidas," Poetry Foundation, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44733/lycidas

55. Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats," Poetry Foundation, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45112/adonais-an-elegy-on-the-death-of-john-keats

56. Low, "Poetry Is Not the Final Girl."

nology. As we have seen, the intersection of technological systems and cultural practices constitutes an essential aspect of the remediated poetry of Le Fraga and Yearous-Algozin, but the latter further allegorizes the technical support of his book. *The Lazarus Project* was published by Troll Thread, an imprint for born-digital PDF publications begun in 2010. The publisher's name, indicating an online comment thread in which the discussion has been terminated, diverted, or deformed by provocative and malicious intervention, speaks directly to their awareness of the digital platform's embedded social aspects. Founded the same year as Troll Thread, the similarly structured Gauss PDF is also indicative of my argument here. Eliding the acronyms for "probability density function" and "portable document format," the publisher's name conflates the quantization of medial noise in Gaussian dither, which one might easily take as a metaphor for the literary provocations of its publications in the face of more mainstream publishing, with the coded format of those publications themselves.

Both Gauss PDF and Troll Thread publish their books on Tumblr pages. Although most titles are also available via the print-on-demand self-publishing platform Lulu, neither publisher promotes or privileges printed editions. The choice of a microblogging social network as the venue for literary publication signals a generation of poets who—for the first time in at least a century—are not primarily concerned with publishing conventional printed books. Recognizing conceptual poetry's "hospitality for digital textuality," and the database implications of what it means to write and read in the twenty-first century, presses such as Troll Thread and Gauss PDF extend that aspect of poetics to the publication of poetry itself.[57] In the process, they bypass the ritual of the first slim volume, which used to serve as a debutante calling card announcing a poet's bid for entry into the society of letters.

Significantly, these new outlets for publishing radically reduce the investments of both time and capital required to print a book; a work can be published on Tumblr in minutes rather than weeks (and withdrawn just as rapidly), while the material investment, in turn, requires merely internet access rather than the thousands of dollars needed to print and bind and ship even the standard thermal-bound paperback. Poets are taking new risks in the rates and scales of production accordingly.[58] The questions

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57. Holly Melgard, "Part 1," interview with CAConrad et al., *8-Pointed Star*, 8pointedstar.blogspot.com/2012/05/troll-thread-poetry-collective.html

58. See Ibid, "Part 3." Tan Lin notes that the new broad-channel venues for poetry production and publication paradoxically accommodate and mirror both "sluggish durational lazy aggregation" and also the "swift dissemination of found data" (Tan Lin, "Poetry Operations, Black Noise, and Versions of Hiatus," *Harriet Blog*, 4 May 2014, www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2014/05/poetry-operations-black-noise-and-versions-of-hiatus/). Lin is picking up

are no longer those of restricted economies (Is a work good enough to justify the cost of production? Is it better than another work that could be published in its place? Is a manuscript revised sufficiently to take a final form?) but rather of the general economy conundrum—well, why not? The affordances of the PDF, likewise, have inflected the styles and contours of the work produced, permitting the texts themselves to explore the limits of scale, sophistication, and spontaneity.[59] In the process, these publications test the minimum threshold for the genre of poetry.

   Moreover, the embedded, leveling, ubiquitous digital space of discourse means that the commentary on new work circulates in new ways as well. The first phase of conceptual writing happily turned to the internet for source material to plunder but then transposed it to print and from there to discussions at readings and social gatherings free from live tweets or Vimeo futures, all with the hope that it might be discussed in print: academic journals shelved in libraries or xeroxed zines distributed through the postal service and taking up shelf space at Small Press Distribution. Today, in contrast, the internet is often completely coextensive with poetic practice: not just a source of material or a model to emulate or an ethos to mimic but also the publishing platform, the means of distribution, and the mode of production as well as the space of the poetry scene, and the venue for both the casual and professional analysis and discussion of poetics. "Nowadays," as Matthew Kirschenbaum has recognized in a study of authorship and contemporary academic scholarship,

> authors' statements about their work are laid alongside those of critics and fans, all commingling via the same web services and streams, the same platforms and feeds, all discoverable by means of a common interface, the search bar at the top of the browser.[60]

In part, this confluence is simply keeping with vernacular practice, which trends toward acts of countersigning in a network where files are perpetuated and shunted in reposted relays across proprietary sites: reblogged, regrammed, pinned and embedded, shared and streamed, alias-linked,

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on Yearous-Algozin's cue that we might consider the low-level durational activity of always-on-line networked reading and writing in light of Bruno Latour's epistemology of the hiatus: "un pas, un saut, une passe qui nous permette de définir les existants *aussi* comme une manière particulière d'établir une continuité à travers des discontinutités" (Bruno Latour, *Enquête sur les modes d'existence: une anthropologie des modernes* [Paris, 2012], p. 94).

   59. For a consideration of the cultural imaginary of the technical specification of the portable document format, see Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents* (Durham, N.C., 2014), pp. 111–35.

   60. Matthew Kirschenbaum, "What Is an @uthor?," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 6 Feb. 2015, lareviewofbooks.org/article/uthor/

liked or commented—but always kept circulating on the Web to which users are connected with increasing continuity (in hand, in pocket, on the wrist). These practices are encouraged by the commerce of data mining by social media companies, which depend on analyzing individual actions against collective statistical aggregates and which see the affiliations between users—regardless of what messages pass between them—as itself a valuable information commodity.[61] At the same time, embedded repetition rhymes in precise ways with the appropriative poetics of conceptual writing. Chris Sylvester, one of the founding editors of Troll Thread, singles out a common point among the collective's diverse practices by noting that conceptual texts and their sources are similarly coextensive: "you don't leave the site of a previous text as you repeat it" through appropriative strategies.[62]

Under these conditions of textual overflow, comingling, and saturation, the social network of poets threatens to eclipse their poems, which have been rendered all but unnecessary for the production of a discourse about poetics. Not only is a poem no longer a requisite occasion for what passes as poetry criticism, but the social network can assume the role of the poetic text itself.[63] A digital PDF file of a Facebook comment stream, for just one cautionary example, was recently published as poetry. The Lulu.com description of the print-on-demand collection reads:

> From 2012 to 2014, the poet and artist Vanessa Place regularly reposted other poets' Facebook status updates as if they were her own. One such appropriated update, reprinted as the cover of this book, prompted a poet to block Place. Thirty-eight poets responded to his announcement "Vanessa Place . . . blocked." This book reproduces verbatim their Facebook discussion.[64]

Despite the claim, the reproduction is not quite verbatim. Instead, proper and proprietary names have been redacted. One representative page, for instance, reads:

> **Poet** ohhhh I see now . . . she has copied my
> Entries on Some Other Social Media Site as

61. See Chun: *Updating to Remain the Same*, pp. 111–26.

62. Chris Sylvester, "Part 4," interview with CAConrad et al.

63. There is some irony in the fact that the most talked-about poem of 2015, Kenneth Goldsmith's "The Body of Michael Brown"—an unpublished text that none of the numerous discussants had in fact read with their own eyes—was based on the report from an autopsy (*autopsia*, from the postclassical Latin, via the Greek, *aτός* [self] plus *όψις* [vision]: the act of seeing with one's own eyes).

64. Lulu, www.lulu.com/us/en/shop/38-poets/vanessa-place-blocked/paperback/product -22009514.html

> Well . . . I think it's part of a project that she is
> working on..I guess it didn't bother me but I
> can see how feelings could be hurt.
> <u>9 hours ago</u> · **<u>Like</u>** · **3**[65]

Displaying the formatting attributes retained by up-to-date cut-and-paste tools, the book's typography—underlining, boldface, and varied colors—divulges vestigial artifacts of what once indicated functioning HTML hyperlinks. With individual names reduced to general terms (*tweets*, in the source for the passage above, for example, becomes "Entries on Some Other Social Media Site"), the repurposed text further suggests that specific content matters less than the fact of participatory inscription within the network. A troll thread from its very inception, the entire discussion was sparked by Place's ventriloquism of a self-promoting post by Dorothea Lasky, which boasted:

> Dear friends, I am so happy to report that I have a new book of poems coming out this fall from W.W. Norton's historic Liveright imprint, The book is called Rome and there are four poems from it in the current issue of The Paris Review. And here is its cover.[66]

For the double *détournement* of Place's *détourned* text, Lulu's anonymous appropriation of Lasky's vocabulary is perfect; a "cover" is also, of course, a disguise or concealment, a screen or pretense, a published plagiarism: "the recording of a song, etc., which has already been recorded by someone else."[67] Where Lasky's writing still moves between the online world and the off-line institutions of print, with its established Manhattan publishers and bound journals, *Vanessa Place . . . Blocked* is the epitome of the new media regime—at once the embodiment and vanishing point of conceptual poetry.

If the first phase of conceptual writing openly challenged the ideologies of creativity and originality foregrounded by the rhetoric of institutionalized creative writing, the current phase challenges conceptual writing's own ideologies of artistic value in turn. Featuring poems of entirely appropriated language, a priori structures, impersonal procedures, and modest authorial interventions, the current mode continues the trajectory of conceptual writing's initial critique of uniquely expressive lyric subjectivity, but it further challenges the residual aspirations to the literary—an

65. 38 Poets, *Vanessa Place . . . Blocked* (2015), p. [29].
66. Ibid.
67. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "cover."

antiquated cathexis to the codex and various unrelinquished criteria for aesthetic values—that conceptual writing never thought to surrender or fully dispute. This new phase of conceptual poetry unhesitatingly takes up conceptualist techniques, but it does so toward fundamentally different ends. And in the current cultural climate, that could not be otherwise. Troll Thread, in other words, may be a more openly literal declaration of intent than the flippantly whimsical phrase it might at first have sounded like. Yearous-Algozin describes the phenomenon of the troll thread as "a disrupted comment stream or message board, such that conversation derails and is ultimately abandoned." The troll, he continues, inserts itself into a discourse in order "to derail a conversation between sincere and interested users."[68] Where the online troll refuses the social values of discursive norms, the new conceptualisms refuse the literary values of even the avant-garde's poetic ambitions. PDFs proliferate under the cover of conceptualism like so many acts of generic vandalism in an abandoned *terrain vague*.

   One consequence of this new dispensation will be the transformation of the nascent canon of conceptual writing. From the current vantage, with its new vanishing point, some works now appear to be looking backward, casting last glances at the traditions they distilled or opposed, while others now appear unexpectedly prescient. For just one example, the new perspective makes Tan Lin's writing seem especially prophetic and percipient. Lin's *Heath* project, for instance, which registered as somewhat eccentric in 2007, now stands as a more central and significant antecedent to the current poetic discourse than any of the works that formed the initial canon of self-styled conceptual writing. The project is comprised of several editions, including digitized versions in various file formats, that exploit paratexts in order to confuse the limits of the book by folding ancillary texts into the center of a book as if the codex were an impossible space with a larger interior than the exterior surface of its covers could contain. Linking *Plagiarism/Outsource* to *Heath Course Pak* to a number of online texts, Lin constructs what Kristen Gallagher has termed an expanded "text and image environment."[69]

   68. Yearous-Algozin, "Everybody's Obituary," pp. 7, 8.
   69. Lin, *Heath: Plagiarism/Outsource* (Tenerife, 2009); hereafter abbreviated *H*. Part of the strategic disorientation of his project includes destabilizing titles, authorship attributions, chronologies, and publication dates. Lin's book is alternately titled *Heath*, alternately titled *Plagiarism/Outsource, Notes Towards the Definition of Culture, Untitled Heath Ledger Project, A History of the Search Engine, Disco OS*; alternately titled *Untilted Heath Ledger Project*; Tan Lin: *Heath Course Pak* (Denver, Colo., 2012), alternately titled *Heath Course PAK RFC*, alternately titled *HeathCourcePack*. See Daniel Scott Snelson, "Heath, Prelude to Tracing the Actor as Network," aphasic-letters.com/heath/. See also Kristen Gallagher, "The Authorship of Heath

That environment, as we have seen, transforms itself dynamically according to the trackable activities of the browser in an algorithmic Web of targeted marketing databases, user-generated profiles, and registered subscriptions. Thus, although the language in *Heath* is largely outsourced and copied from others, it could not have been compiled by anyone but Lin. Most of the particular elements jumbled together in Lin's books were originally generated by chance, through unpredictable server scripts, but their contingent configuration depends on the unique gestures, transactions, and reading activities performed over time by Lin within a corporatized mesh of networks. For one example of the circulation of text in this "reading system driven by the search engine," consider the following paragraph: "each morning at the Pickwick was narrowly descriptive and 'as inert as possible,' subject to erasure or re-distribution" (*H*). The quoted phrase would seem to serve as an apt description of Lin's "ambient poetics" of relaxation;[70] "the stories that I tell," Lin explains elsewhere, "are a bit inert."[71] A footnote, however, indicates that the line is sourced from the home-decorating section of an outmoded website aimed at geriatric residents of Cleveland:

> Even the natural materials in your bedroom are best if they are as inert as possible. For example, fresh pine has a smell that could interfere with restful sleep, as can a houseplant if the soil is a bit mildewed or waterlogged.[72] [See *H*, p. (84)]

The theme of the website is health, a single keystroke from the theme of *Heath*. Be that as it may, the missing link, as it were, is in fact another page deep within the same site, not noted in *Heath*, which erases and re-distributes the path to an article listing the "Top Ten Costumes for Halloween" and declaring the second "hottest costume for 2008" to be the

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Ledger in the New Reading Environment; on Tan Lin's *Heath: Plagiarism/Outsource*," *Criticism* 51 (Fall 2009): 701.

70. See Jennifer Scappettone, "Versus Seamlessness: Architectonics of Pseudocomplicity in Tan Lin's Ambient Poetics," *boundary 2* 36 (Fall 2009): 63.

71. Lin, "Writing as Metadata Container: An Interview with Tan Lin," interview by Chris Alexander et al., *Jacket2*, 20 Jan. 2012, jacket2.org/interviews/writing-metadata-container. See Charles Bernstein, "Poet's Sampler: Tan Lin," *Boston Review*, 1 Apr. 1999, bostonreview.net /poetry/tan-lin-poets-sampler-tan-lin. For a consideration of Lin's work in terms of affective labor, with important emphasis on the racial politics of the non-appropriated material in *Heath*, see Paul Stephens, "The Poetics of Celebsploitation: Celebrity Culture and Social Media in Recent American Poetry," *Amodern*, Oct. 2015, amodern.net/article/celebsploitation/

72. Annie B. Bond, "Design a Blissful Bedroom," *CleavlandSeniors.Com*, clevelandseniors .com/home/dec-bedroom.htm

Joker, because "Heath Ledger's phenomenal rendition of the Joker has fans flocking to the costume shops in droves to pay homage to the dark character and a beloved, talented actor."[73] Such routes of detour and distraction, contingency and determined research, describe the contours of reading in the garden of internet forking paths, its soil—however mildewed or waterlogged—shot through with rabbit-hole warrens. *Heath* materializes a cartography of that terrain by recording the itineraries of interconnected, hyperlinked queries in a text that registers online reading, with all its inscriptive traces, as writing. Subtitled a "history of the search engine" in one of its iterations, *Heath* documents a particular moment in which the algorithmic flexibility of search-engine interfaces was beginning to make the apparent spelling error of another of Lin's subtitles less significant to querying users: "Untilted Heath Ledger Project" (*H*, p. [1]).[74] Correcting, including, and anticipating, the modern algorithmic search engine returns what it considers to be the proper term—*untitled* for "untilted," *Heath Ledger* for "health ledger"—regardless of human intention or mistyping.

　Heath is a history not just of the search engine, but of the wider Web as it became filtered, fed, integrated, and syndicated—structuring data in order to automatically aggregate, update, and tailor the dissemination of newly published information. Specifically, Lin takes several internet formats and protocols—RSS (Rich Site Summary) and the RDF (Resource Description Framework) modeling on which it is based, SMS (Short Message Service) and the GSM (Groupe Spéciale Mobile) standards from which it evolved, CSS (Cascading Style Sheets) and the then newly renovated XHTML (Extensible HyperText Markup Language) into which it was integrated—as both the subject and mode of his composition.[75] Although these are not all equivalent structures (and not all easily integrated), they are all indicative of the metadata structure of the semantic web, and they speak to the increasing automation of the internet and its even smaller in-

　73. "Top Ten Costumes for Halloween," *CleavlandSeniors.Com*, www.clevelandseniors.com/family/halloween-costumes-08b.htm. For a different poetic investigation of outsourced literary labor, see Nick Thurston, *Of the Subcontract, or Principles of Poetic Right* (York, 2013).

　74. The source, one presumes, was Chris Norris, "(Untitled Heath Ledger Project)," *New York Magazine*, 18 Feb. 2008, nymag.com/news/features/44217/

　75. See Snelson, "*Heath*, Prelude to Tracing the Actor As Network," dss-edit.com/heath/. In line with Lin's interest in protocol, the cover spelling of *Heath Course Pak* suggests the .pak file format extension, a nonstandardized nomenclature indicating compressed archive packages that most systems consider as a .zip file.

crements of data transfer: notifications, alerts, real-time pushes, and continuous XHR machine communication. Recognizing the reconfiguration of temporal scale and pace made by these technologies, furthermore, helps to explain the otherwise capricious inclusion of twenty pages of legal disclaimers, technical specifications, and crowdsourcing appeals from the Project Gutenberg digital edition of *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, along with the editor's introduction to the eighteenth-century edition and the preface from the nineteenth-century edition from which the digitized text derived. Lin's initial raison d'être for turning to Samuel Pepys would seem to be the earlier inclusion of a subscription news-feed notice of a newspaper article about the accuracy of Wikipedia, which happened to feature an analysis by biographer Claire Tomalin of the site's entry on Pepys.[76] By reprinting the framing texts to *The Diary*, but nothing from Pepys's own text, Lin continues his investigation of paratexts and the social framing of data. Moreover, an investigation into Wikipedia's rapidly revised, widely sourced, and obsessively structured data is in keeping with the other aspects of the Web highlighted by Lin. But those featured technologies, with their constant coded notices, also underscore the degree to which Pepys's coded and compressed tachygraphic chronicle is itself less like a classical memoir and more like a modern blog: a set of seventeenth-century time-stamped status updates registering quotidian minutiae. *Heath* restages Pepys's diary with a twist—Lin's recognition that the personal recording of everyday life is now part of the experience of everyday life. *Heath* is essentially the display of updates about updating.[77]

 As in *literallydead*, the deliberately misformatted, oversized, and under-resolved elements in *Heath* signal the asymmetrical remediation between screen and page, but unlike the relatively solemn stillness of the former, in which video frames are frozen, silent and motionless, like the accounts of the deceased, the visually incongruous elements in *Heath* produce a jarring surface and loudly announce, like the uncorrected untilted title, an aesthetic willing to embrace the appearance of haste, impatience, and indolent indifference. In contrast to the obsessive, relentless, cool systematicity of turn-of-the-millennium conceptual projects, which paraded uniform surfaces of deodorized polish, the newer projects flaunt an air of unembarrassed carelessness.

76. See Mike Barnes et al., "Can You Trust Wikipedia?," *The Guardian*, 24 Oct. 2005, www.theguardian.com/technology/2005/oct/24/comment.newmedia

77. For the cultural force of the logic of the update, see Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same*.

Telling traces of this willingness to admit unvarnished skeins recur in Danny Snelson's *Epic Lyric Poem: 167121 Songs, 257.8 MB File.* As the subtitle intimates, the book stands with one foot firmly planted in the exhaustive, database poetics of late twentieth-century conceptual writing and the other striding forward into the current social media networks of distributed data. On the one hand, the poem is meticulously edited to adhere to the formal constraint of precisely fifty-five characters per line (the average length of a pop-song verse, according to the book's jacket copy); the pages, consequently, block to smoothly justified margins in the monospaced Courier typeface used to set the text. But that editing is all to the point; Snelson's fidelity is to the format, rather than the content. A comparison with the source material for the poem reveals that he had no qualms about altering the raw material of his found text.[78] That text originally took the form of an SQL torrent file, that is, one structured by metadata in order to pull relational data streams that could both efficiently distribute the file as a whole and hierarchically organize its contents in subsequent reassembly. In this case, the contents featured lyrics to popular songs, presumably compiled to facilitate building one of the dubious websites, such as siteforlyrics.com, proliferated in an attempt to game the search engine optimization algorithms with the aim of attracting Web searches and generating advertising revenue. With a pataphysical misapprehension of vernacular terms (*epic* meaning impressive rather than indicating a heroic narrative verse, *lyric* as pop-song libretto rather than short intimate poem), Snelson then employed a Python script to extract all the instances of phrases containing the string "lyric" from the database, which he sculpted into a mock mock-epic poem of fifty-five stanzas of twenty lines each.

Along with verses from songs, Snelson also preserves the residue of paratextual data, in fractured palimpsest, swept along in the torrent stream: fragments of HTML tags; anchored URL addresses to internet dead ends; snippets of formatting code; user emails and handles; apostrophes in place of quotation marks; and the texting chatter etiquette of a culture dependent on user generated content (such as "thnx!," "tnx," "please click," and various editorial notes and apologies for failures or deviations). A representative stanza reads:

78. The source was published alongside a PDF of the result, see Dany_Epic-Lyric-Poem _Troll-Thread_3-2-14.sql.zip

```
Mental seduction, yr sound suction, abduction of lyrics
That perpetratin and takin our lyrics, non-originatin''
Sorry, i have no lyrics of this song, br>would please a
font color=#666699>submit the lyrics for this song /fon
The ocean'' & ''i believe your sweet love'' lyrics from
Recordings of these songs exist. Lyrics taken carefully
Part of the anti-heroin project. Lyrics taken carefully
Married men. The lyrics taken from the japanese single.
Starring charlie sheen. Lyrics from carefully listening
Soften, dilute, poeticize, or commercialize our lyrics,⁷⁹
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The obvious irony, of course, is that the "abduction of lyrics" here involved multiple appropriations (*plagiarism*, we might recall, is originally an abduction, with its etymology in the Classical Latin *plagiārius* [a "person who abducts the child or slave of another, kidnapper, seducer"]), and despite the apologetic disclaimer, they have in fact been transcribed by a series of machines and humans, including Snelson himself, who would turn the unsung apology into a self-consciously poetic—if not quite lyric—form.[80] Besides including the torrent material that accompanied the song lyrics proper, Snelson also inserts his own text in order to fulfill the character-count constraint for each line. In the conclusion to the stanza above, for example, "poeticize" performatively rounds out a phrase from the Boogie Down Productions song "My Philosophy," edging it, in the process, into dialogue with unedited boasts from Puff Daddy ("known as the poetical, lyrical, miracle son")[81] and Canibus ("my specialty is: poetically lyrically energetically this"), which both appear elsewhere in *Epic Lyric Poem*.[82] In line with his poeticizing "poeticize," Snelson's emendations and redactions are often recursively self-conscious nods to the media and genres at issue. The introduction of "book" (along with forged double apostrophes) to a line from D. C. Talk's "Can I Get a Witness," for instance, transforms one metaphoric sense of "spine" to another: "I don''t water down lyrics or forget the book''s spine" (*E*, p. [24]). Similar insertions include nods to the programs,

79. Snelson, *Epic Lyric Poem: 167121 Songs, 257.8 MB File* (2015), p. [21]; hereafter abbreviated *E*.

80. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "plagiary."

81. Puff Daddy, "P.E. 2000," *Forever* (Bad Boy 78612-73033-2, 1999).

82. Canibus, "Horsementality," *2000 B.C. (Before Can-I-Bus)* (Universal Records 012 159054-2, 2000).

files, and structures that made Snelson's own book—whether in its un-bound PDF format or with a POD spine—possible: Python, SQL, and structured data. A sampling of the relevant samples includes: "pistol-whippin your body with my python lyrical odyssey";[83] "from the SQL lyrics that might actually make you think";[84] "with a bewildering array a SQL database lyrical display";[85] "I got these lyrics waking up all their database spirits";[86] "it goes one two three when i"m kicking the data lyrics";[87] and so on (*E*, p. [20]). Accuracy, however, never characterized the original database either, which is riddled with digital detritus and was compiled by amateur stenographers who often misheard or mistyped lyrics to begin with. Here again we can glimpse the evolving ecology of language in the algorithmic environment. To generate advertising revenue by attracting users to the site, the data from the SQL file never needed to be accurate; it merely had to be good enough to direct a query, something made possible by the new generation of auto-correcting predictive engines.

The same, Snelson implicitly asserts, is true of poetry as well. With its retentions of extraneous material and its blatant editorial augmentations and truncations, *Epic Lyric Poem* openly acknowledges the all-too-human nodes that still operate in the discourse networks of increasingly auto-mated inscription, and the tension between text meant for human readers and text meant for machine readers. In doing so, it tacks against earlier modes of conceptual appropriation, which tended to offer tidily polished texts under an ideology of unedited replication. The primary device of that earlier conceptual practice was the blunt reframing of found texts in order to defamiliarize their language, critique their implicit presuppositions, or bring out the inherent and unexpected literariness of demotic writing. For *Epic Lyric Poem* and other poems of its moment, the interest lies more in the impossibility of the demarcating dream of the frame itself. Where earlier works of conceptual writing frequently removed Web-based texts from the networks on which they were found in order to recontextualize them, works like *Lazarus*, *Epic Lyric Poem*, and *The Making of the Americans* re-

83. See Kid Capri: "Soundtrack to the Streets," *Soundtrack to the Streets* (Track Masters 491602 2, 1998).
84. See The Offspring: "Disclaimer," *Ixnay on the Hombre* (Columbia Records CK 67810, 1997).
85. See Canibus, "Master Thesis," *Mic Club: The Curriculum* (Mic Club Music MCB 7120, 2002).
86. See Ice Cube, "Pushin' Weight," *War and Peace Vol. I* (Priority Records P2 50700, 1998).
87. See Bloodhound Gang: "Mama Say," *Use Your Fingers* (Cheese Factory CK 27225, 1995).

main as part of the networks that produced them, continuing rather than extirpating their procedures. If the failure of the first phase of conceptual writing was to imagine that it could separate itself, at will, from the database culture that it mimed and mined, the danger of current practice is that readers might still imagine that it wants to.