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Vanguard Total Index: Conceptual Writing, Information Asymmetry, and the Risk Society

Ubu usurps much usufruct. Ubu sums up lump sums.
Christian Bök, *Eunoia*

Why is an index dear to him. He has thousands of gesticulations.
Gertrude Stein, "Advertisements"

No

index was whole
so our index
will sometimes lead

us to us
Louis Zukofsky, "*A*"–14

The past decade has seen a proliferation of works of constrained and appropriated writing that incorporate the forms of the index, the database, and the catalogue. These forms embody what Lev Manovich describes as "the database logic" of new media.[1] Manovich asks, "*How can our new abilities to store vast amounts of data, to automatically classify, index, link, search, and instantly retrieve it, lead to new kinds of narratives?*" (237). If one replaces the word "narratives"

1. Manovich's claim that "database and narrative are natural enemies" (225) has been much critiqued elsewhere. See, for instance, Vesna, and in particular Grahame Weinbren's essay "Ocean, Database, Recut" (61–85).

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with "poetry," that question could be considered the central theme of this essay. Conceptual writing's appropriation strategies, I suggest, offer some preliminary answers. Robert Fitterman maintains that conceptual writing's distinguishing feature is its use of appropriated texts "in large, unmodified chunks—a paragraph, a page, a whole book" in order to "reframe works that already exist in new contexts," which "in turn, instigates new ways to potentially realize our place as text artists in a network culture" (*Rob the Plagiarist* 15). According to Kenneth Goldsmith, "In the face of [an] unprecedented amount of digital text, writing needs to redefine itself in order to adapt to the new environment of textual abundance" (*Uncreative Writing* 24–25). Flarf poetry, by contrast to conceptual poetry, is composed of smaller, more discrete textual fragments and is said to more closely resemble earlier poetic appropriation strategies that allow poets greater agency in the selection of source materials.[2]

I make the case here that by adopting strategies of *passive indexing*, 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. Moreover, this writing points to distinctive changes in the nature of the global economy over the past two decades, highlighting the emergence of what Ulrich Beck has termed the "risk society" and Jacob S. Hacker calls "the great risk shift," wherein financial risk has shifted from governments and corporations to individuals (in the form, for instance, of privatized retirement plans).[3] All of the works surveyed in this essay thematize in some manner the relation of a writer to a data set—raising

2. For more on the distinction, see Goldsmith's introduction to the special section on "Flarf and Conceptual Writing" in *Poetry*. Conceptual art's emergence is usually dated to the early to mid 1960s; it was not until forty years later that the term "conceptual writing"—first popularized by Craig Dworkin's 2003 *UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing*—came into circulation. Though primarily comprised of sixties writing, Dworkin's primer implied a strong correlation between conceptualism and information technology by placing works such as the computer-generated *Racter* (1984) under the banner of conceptualism. For overviews of conceptual writing as a movement, see Fitterman and Place; Dworkin and Goldsmith; and Bergvall et al.

3. For an account of the risk society in relation to recent narrative fiction, see Heise (119–59).

important questions concerning matters of privacy, authenticity, identity, and information asymmetry. These works are not, for the most part, directly prescriptive of social change. They more often take the form of parodic compendia. Rather than refusing conventional syntax at the level of the sentence in the manner of the Language poets, these works for the most part operate by restructuring and reframing aggregate data.

Broadly speaking, I am construing conceptual writing concerned with the nature and structure of information systems as indexical in form. In using the term "index," I am referring more to the bureaucratic forms taken by large quantities of information than to the linguistic sense of indexicality developed by Charles Sanders Peirce.[4] Indexes are the ultimate archival form—no library, not even a Borgesian one, can ever pretend to completeness. Indexical art and writing presents tricky theoretical questions with regard to originality, translation, and transcoding. Indexes can be used to measure almost anything—including, perhaps, the impossibility of "getting outside" of the institutions of late-capitalist bourgeois culture. Financial, bibliographic, biomedical, and demographic indexes all bear witness to the forms taken by the bureaucratic mechanisms of contemporary capitalism—to which conceptualism bears an uneasy relation. The writer or artist herself is often subject to the index. The index fund, a comparatively recent financial innovation, exemplifies this phenomenon. Most knowledge workers, poets included, participate in retirement plans that own index funds that passively track stock and bond markets. Does this mean that poets, too, are owners of Apple, the world's largest corporation by market capitalization? This is not the place for an extensive consideration of the ethics of investment; my point here is simply that

4. For a useful overview of the place of indexes and indexicality in contemporary film and art, see Doane. Indexes can also fall under the purview of metadata schemes, as I discuss in my article "From the Personal to the Proprietary." Johanna Drucker argues that "metadata schemes must be read as models of knowledge, as discursive instruments that bring the object of their inquiry into being, shaping the fields in which they operate by defining quite explicitly what can and cannot be said about the objects in a particular collection or online environment" (*SpecLab* 11).

every index in some sense begs the question of the total index. To change the course of capitalism, the Language poets tirelessly suggested, it is necessary to consider one's position (or "positionality") within the system of political economy as a whole. By adopting the form of the index, conceptual writing investigates the place of the writer within global networks of aesthetic and economic valuation.

Although indexes are often taken to be passive accumulations of data, they inevitably reflect the values and biases of their creators. Much indexical writing is clearly dystopian in its critique of information systems, but indexical writing is also in some sense literally utopian in that it is often of "no place"; it substitutes local expression for categorical appropriation. The author is not dead; the author, like the electronic investor, inhabits multiple locations at once. The author as "content provider" or "data processor" exists as a function rather than as a physically or geographically locatable source of meaning. Marjorie Perloff has suggested that "only by adopting the language of the library and the database—the language of facts, dates, historical ledger, map, dictionary, biographical entry, literary quotation—can the contemporary poet create what is paradoxically a new poetic sphere" (122). Conceptual writing places in question our notions of individual agency and our ability to sequester ourselves from the global. This returns us to the question of the poet's place within the index, database, or catalogue. Words now travel, for better and worse, instantaneously across borders. We are all being indexed all the time. Rodrigo Toscano writes somewhat facetiously, "All poetic installments must index the wiles (as well as vagaries) of current global class struggle as currently acted out in the (writer's) text-designer's actual locale of habitation" (91). As Toscano, who describes himself as having "grown up on the Borderlands of California" (211), well knows, the writer's "actual locale" is often in flux, and the writer's place of residence may be far less significant than her institutional setting.

Institutional critique is among the most important concerns of conceptual art and writing and is closely related to conceptual writing's emphasis on practices of classifying, storing, and dis-

seminating information.[5] Lucy R. Lippard's *Six Years*, perhaps the most influential historical account of conceptual art, is itself an indexical sampling of a movement characterized by sampling. The long, eighteenth-century-esque subtitle of the book is an essay unto itself:

> The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972: a cross-reference book of information on some esthetic boundaries: consisting of a bibliography into which are inserted a fragmented text, art works, documents, interviews, and symposia, arranged chronologically and focused on so-called conceptual or information or idea art with mentions of such vaguely designated areas as minimal, anti-form, systems, earth, or process art, occurring now in the Americas, Europe, England, Australia, and Asia (with occasional political overtones), edited and annotated by Lucy R. Lippard.[6]

The title is all-encompassing at the same time that it refuses to commit to any one of its multiple slogans. Only Africa and Antarctica are left out of the book's totalizing purview, and yet the book advertises itself in self-deprecatingly bureaucratic terms as merely "a cross-reference book of information" and "a bibliography." Sol LeWitt famously declared in 1966, "The serial artist does not attempt to produce a beautiful or mysterious object but functions merely as a clerk cataloging the results of his premise" (n. pag.). *Six Years* might best be described as a catalogue, although the word *catalogu*e (perhaps because of its associations in the art world with the gallery system) is absent from Lippard's title.

Numerous examples of sixties conceptual artworks concerned with the indexing and cataloguing of information could be cited here. Craig Dworkin has suggested that "the guiding concept behind conceptual poetry may be the idea of language as quantifiable data" (Introduction xxxvi). The same could be said of a number of conceptual works from the sixties, such as On Kawara's *One Million Years*, or Vito Acconci's list poems, or the index-based works of the Art and Language Group. Like *Six Years*, the 1970 *Information* show at the Museum of Modern Art

5. For a useful overview of institutional critique, see Alberro and Stimson.
6. For more on the importance of *Six Years*, see Bonin and Morris.

aspired to be global in scope.[7] The show emerged out of an attempt by MoMA to placate the Art Workers' Coalition, among whose members was Dan Graham, who in a 1969 statement declared: "What does the artist have in common with his friends, his public, his society? Information about himself, themselves and all ourselves—which is not reduced to ideas or material" (94). Throughout the late sixties, Graham was centrally concerned with information systems. Eve Meltzer's description of the *Information* show serves also as a useful overview of Graham's concerns during the period:

> "This is the dream of the information world," they [the artists] seem to be telling us. A dream (indeed a nightmare for many) of the world as a total sign system, where even language has been stripped of affect and pared of everything save the bones of its infrastructure; a dream that sometimes promises revolution, but just as often threatens to completely dissociate cause and effect, sign and referent, subject and world.
>
> (132)

Of his works, Graham's "Schema" perhaps most fully accomplishes the stripping of affect and intentionality from language, leaving behind only the "bones of its infrastructure." In notes on "Schema," Graham explicitly states his goal of reducing (or expanding) the "poem" to convey the most basic, but also context-variable, information regarding its execution:

> A page exists each time as in-formation (information): its subject matter is in-formation.
>
> It takes place as in-formation in terms of the base (constituents) of place.
>
> As it takes place, its in-formation structure appears to uphold its decomposition (simultaneously as it is composed in the same process) in terms of the base constituents of (its) place.
>
> . . . . . .

7. For more on the *Information* show, see Shanken, who argues that the conventional art historical distinction between the conceptual and the art and technology movements is untenable and suggests that conceptual writers were more centrally interested in information technology than has been recognized.

> Systems of in-format seem to exist somewhere half-way between material and concept, without being either of these (categories).
>
> (n. pag.)

For Graham, information can both mark place and erode its specificity. His 1969 "Income (Outflow) Piece" situates the artist in the midst of not merely the art market but larger financial markets as well. Graham proposed to sell stock in himself—or rather in "Dan Graham, Inc."—as a means by which to make the process of creating and selling his art more transparent. He inserted himself into the marketplace for ideas through a series of newspaper ads describing "his object (motive)" as "to make public information on social motives and categorization whose structure upholds, reveals in its functioning, the socio-economic support system of media" (n. pag.).[8]

Much changed between the 1960s and the first decade of the present century, of course, but in terms of conceptual practices centered on questions of information and informatics, the rise of the personal computer and the Internet are (unsurprisingly) of paramount importance. Detractors of conceptual writing have suggested that the four-decade lag between the emergence of conceptual art and that of conceptual writing resulted either from the desire of conceptual writers to draw on the prestige of the art world or from a willful ignorance of the achievements of writers working in the 1970s and 1980s with appropriation techniques.[9] Proponents of conceptual writing, on the other hand, have frequently emphasized that conceptual writing responds to an utterly transformed media landscape. Dworkin writes:

> In a world of increasingly capacious and inexpensive storage media, the proliferation of conceptual practices comes as no surprise. . . . Conceptual poetry, accordingly, often operates as an interface—returning the answer to a particular query; assembling, rearranging, and displaying informa-

8. Other 1960s artists who extensively explored financial themes within their work included Hans Haacke, Edward Kienholz, Les Levine, Robert Morris, and Dennis Oppenheim. For a contemporary overview, see Lipman.

9. See in particular Ron Silliman's critique of Kenneth Goldsmith. See also Drew Gardner's more playful "Why Flarf Is Better than Conceptualism," and Drucker's "Beyond Conceptualisms."

> tion; or sorting and selecting from files of accumulated language pursuant to a certain algorithm—rather than producing new material from scratch. Even if it does not involve electronics or computers, conceptual poetry is thus very much a part of its technological and cultural moment.
>
> (Introduction xlii)

By functioning both like, and as, an interface, conceptual poetry draws renewed attention to the ways in which information is conveyed and categorized. Sixties conceptual art, though it was centrally concerned with the forms taken by large data sets, was produced during the era of the mainframe computer, before powerful distributed information networks were widely available to individual users. The term "data base," according to the *OED*, was first used in 1962, the term "metadata" in 1969. Conceptual artists in the 1960s could only begin to envision the emergence of a world in which among all members of the G7 group of developed nations, upwards of "70% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) depends on intangible goods, which are information related, not on material goods" (Floridi 5).

The first indexed stock fund, introduced by Vanguard in 1976, has subsequently grown to become the world's largest mutual fund. The strategy of passive indexing emerged as a result of Burton G. Malkiel's *A Random Walk Down Wall Street*, first published in 1973, which demonstrated that most professional money managers (and their actively managed funds) could not outperform a randomly chosen index of stocks or bonds. Though probably unknown to most conceptual writers, *A Random Walk* may be the most influential investment book written in the second half of the twentieth century. "The logic behind this strategy [of indexing]," according to Malkiel, "is the logic of the efficient-market theory" (374). Whether or not the investor necessarily believes in the market's ability to price assets efficiently or ethically, the assumption is that, over time, stock and bond markets in the aggregate will provide greater returns than conventional savings accounts or government retirement programs. Malkiel's simple hypothesis resulted in the "passive allocation" of trillions of dollars over the past three decades. In part, the index fund responded to the problem of "information asymmetry" (a term that came into circulation in the 1970s with the rise of informa-

tion economics).[10] Given that corporations could devote far greater resources to researching the market, the individual investor would likely always be at a disadvantage in terms of allocating capital. Rather than buy into one part of the system of capital, in the form of an individual stock or bond, investors could now in effect buy into the market as a whole.

In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the efficient-market hypothesis came under increasing scrutiny. Eugene Fama, considered "the father of the efficient-market hypothesis" (Fox 223), offers this definition: "It says prices reflect all available information . . . one of the founding principles of capitalism is that prices provided good signals for the allocation of resources, and that's basically the principle of efficient markets" (qtd. in Fox). The difficulty in 2008, of course, was that prices did not reflect all available information. Even the most well-informed (or purportedly well-informed) market participants and observers claimed that they did not understand the nature of derivatives and other complex financial products. A post-crisis article in *The Economist* went so far as to claim that the crisis had been caused by "big data": "During the recent financial crisis it became clear that banks and rating agencies had been relying on models which, although they required a vast amount of information to be fed in, failed to reflect financial risk in the real world. This was the first crisis to be sparked by big data—and there will be more" ("Data, Data Everywhere"). Of course, not everyone was on the wrong end of information asymmetry, and many corporations and hedge funds profited handsomely. Even at corporations that failed, executives notoriously received extraordinary compensation. The previously obscure term "moral hazard" (borrowed from the insurance industry) soon entered the popular lexicon. According to Paul Krugman, moral hazard "refer[s] to any situation in which one person makes the decision about how much risk to take, while someone else bears the cost if things go badly" (63). By socializing private losses on a massive

10. For a concise account of the history of information economics as a field, see Stiglitz. The inaugural text of information economics is usually taken to be George A. Akerlof's 1970 "The Market for 'Lemons': Quality Uncertainty and the Market Mechanism."

scale in the wake of the crisis, governments around the world largely absolved corporations and their executives of "moral hazard." In the U.S. at least, attempts to mitigate risk for lower-income individuals and families, by contrast, were largely ineffective.[11] From Hurricane Katrina to the subprime crisis, the federal government showed itself to be increasingly unwilling to mitigate individual risk.[12] While the 1930s and 1960s saw unprecedented expansions of the social safety net in the U.S., much of this safety net was dismantled in the 1980s, with further erosions occurring in the 1990s and 2000s. Upon his reelection in 2004, President George W. Bush's first pledge was to privatize social security. After the collapse of Lehman Brothers in September 2008, such a move became politically untenable even on the far right, and yet there were few signs (in the U.S. at least) that the shifting of risk from governments to individuals had slowed. Information might have become more abundant than ever, but the onus was increasingly upon individuals (and/or families) to ensure that they used that information to procure the right mortgage, the right insurance, or the right retirement plan—or else face personal financial disaster.[13]

I offer this brief overview of the financial crisis to underscore three salient points concerning conceptual works that feature indexical appropriation: (1) the strategy of passive indexing mimics the informatization as well as the financialization of the global economy; (2) indexical appropriation typically implies the embeddedness of the writer within the economy and/or the

11. The collapse of the housing bubble had particularly adverse effects for African Americans and Latinos. According to the Pew Research Center, "From 2005 to 2009, inflation-adjusted median wealth fell by 66% among Hispanic households and 53% among black households, compared with just 16% among white households" (Kochhar, Fry, and Taylor n. pag.). Furthermore, in 2009, "the typical white household had $113,149 in wealth, while the typical Hispanic household had $6,325, and the typical black household just $5,677."

12. See Gosselin for a comprehensive overview of the increasing precarity faced by American families.

13. In 2008 alone over one million American homeowners, including a disproportionate number of African Americans and Latinos, lost their homes to foreclosure. Many borrowers did not understand the terms of their mortgages; fewer than 10 percent of homeowners facing foreclosure received assistance from the federal government. See Chan.

mass media; and (3) indexical appropriation raises important issues related to the ownership of information and the consequences of asymmetric information.[14]

A number of literary critics, including Charles Bernstein, Joshua Clover, and Christopher Nealon, have considered the ramifications of the financial crisis for American avant-garde poetry. Bernstein parodies both the data glut and the financial crisis to great effect in his mock-address "Poetry Bailout Will Restore Confidence of Readers," delivered, appropriately enough, in late 2008 at the release of the year's *Best American Poetry*. According to Bernstein, "the glut of illiquid, insolvent, and troubled poems is clogging the literary arteries of the West. These debt-ridden poems threaten to infect other areas of the literary sector and ultimately to topple our culture industry" (267). Poetry is, in effect, caught in a liquidity trap: "The risks poets have taken have been too great; the aesthetic negligence has been profound" (268). There are too many poems and not enough readers; the literary establishment, like the banking system, can no longer inspire confidence: "What began as a subprime poetry problem on essentially unregulated poetry websites, has spread to other, more stable, literary magazines and presses, and contributed to excess poetry inventories that have pushed down the value of responsible poems" (268). Bernstein wittily plays on his insider/outsider status as both an academic and a purveyor of avant-garde poetry that, in effect, has no market value. Bernstein's address is perhaps at its most sincere in its suggestion that "[w]hen the literary system works as it should, poetry and poetry assets flow to and from readers and writers to create a productive part of the cultural field" (267). Bernstein's playful polemic, though not altogether new, has additional resonance in the continuing midst of the Great Recession.

Dworkin, too, has invoked the rhetoric of economic crisis in relation to the glut of poetry, arguing:

14. The informatization and financialization of the global economy over the past four decades has elicited extensive critical attention. For a general overview, see Harvey. For a more specific account of phenomena that have alternately been described as cognitive capitalism, semiocapitalism, post-Fordism, and disaster capitalism, see Berardi.

> Poetry faces a Malthusian limit. Bound by discrepant rates of production and consumption, the readerly economy of poetry in the twenty-first century cannot avoid a catastrophic calculus: the rate of consumption quickly hits an arithmetic limit (any one person can only read so much), but the rate of production is increasing geometrically.
>
> (*Consequence* 9)

Like Bernstein, Dworkin advocates a broader field for poetry, recognizing that making poetry more "accessible" will do little to attract readers as opposed to writers. Dworkin proposes a Franco Moretti–inspired reorienting of poetry criticism:

> Instead of attempting to account for individual books, the task would be to graph and model the complex poetic ecosystem itself, or to map data in ways that their composite assembly would reveal new information. Rather than look at discrete texts, criticism would turn to charting the relations among texts and visualizing those networks themselves.
>
> (14)

This description could also serve as an overview of many of the concerns of a poetry that draws on the index form to offer a critique not only of existing systems of literary value but of larger systems of economic and informational valuation. The index poem itself could be described as a "complex poetic ecosystem" that maps the ambient data of a society increasingly centered on the production and consumption of information.

Two list poems anthologized in *Against Expression*, Charles Bernstein's "My/My/My" and Alexandra Nemerov's "First, My Motorola," exemplify the increasingly commodified nature of everyday life. First published in 1975, Bernstein's poem begins:

> my pillow
> my shirt
> my house
> my supper
> my tooth
> my money
> my kite
>
> (93)

The simple structure of this poem points to the multiplicity of ways in which one can claim to possess something. The "my

____" format primarily lists objects, but also occasionally feelings and sometimes persons. There are no proper names in "My/My/My." Presumably Bernstein has exercised authorial agency over the ordering of his list. Nemerov's poem, by contrast, employs nearly the same structure but lists only brand names in the order in which she came into contact with them throughout the course of a day:

> First, my Motorola
> Then my Frette
> Then my Sonia Rykiel
> Then my Bulgari
> Then my Asprey
> Then my Cartier
> Then my Kohler
>
> (457)

The poem pursues this list for six pages and concludes once again with her Motorola. Bernstein's and Nemerov's poems are list poems as opposed to wholly appropriated indexes, but both poems can be read as indexes of the frequency with which items or names appear. Nemerov's poem reveals a great deal about her consumption habits in the aggregate. With nearly every brand name she mentions, we can infer a product; those inferences cumulatively result in a kind of self-portrait in a mirror of product preference. Two of the brand names that appear most frequently in Nemerov's poem are Apple and Google. "First, My Motorola" is thus a one-day "project of attention" that is a chronicle of product usage as well as a chronicle of information consumption.[15]

15. For more on projects of attention, see Sheringham and Epstein. Projects of attention typically involve the recording of everyday experience over specific spans of time. Michael Sheringham describes "[a] project" as "a commitment to midterm actions—implies a preoccupation with the domain of practice" (388). Georges Perec's *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, which is set over three days, is an exemplary "project of attention." Sheringham also cites the examples of Henri Lefebvre, Raymond Queneau, and the Situationists. Andrew Epstein applies the term to Ron Silliman's *BART*, in which Silliman describes the experience of five and a half hours spent traveling to every station on the Bay Area Rapid Transit system.

Among American poets of the post-Language generation, Tan Lin has perhaps devoted the most attention to the index as a poetic form. Lin describes his method as follows:

> *In BlipSoak01*, my impulse was to initiate a random sampling technique or device that would transpire, as it were, within a time-based composition, and that would seem "self-operating," i.e. a series of endlessly mutating literary styles no different from various surface effects, most notably the rhythms of a post-capitalist marketplace marked by flexible accumulation and the replacement of durable goods with transitory information structures as the principal commodity, which are in turn indistinguishable from the coming and going of sampled texts from various authors: Riding, Spicer, Oppen, Rakosi, etc.
>
> ("New Media Writing" 145–46)

In juxtaposing the work of poets—particularly poets generally hostile to capitalism such as the four he cites—with the ambient data of corporate mass culture, Lin creates something like a writing degree subzero in which it is difficult to source the information contained in his indexical poems. The effect, he suggests, is one of erasure, which mimics a larger cultural amnesia: "[T]he aim of the work is to erase the database as an impenetrable impediment to the poetic and render the monumental inconsequential and relaxing, with the most relaxing data being those things that have already been forgotten in a culture that exists *in order to be* forgotten" (146). *BlipSoak01* relentlessly times itself—offering down-to-the-second measurements of the time of its articulation in its margins. It becomes difficult, and often impossible, to disentangle the separate sources and discursive forms found within Lin's ambient writing.

In his more recent *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004, The Joy of Cooking* (2010), Lin again returns to the index as a primary form—interspersing photographs, found text (which typically consists of "relaxing data"), and what are probably best described as short essays on various aspects of mass culture. In a passage titled "American Standard Code for Information Exchange," Lin writes of the television show *The Apprentice*:

> Rather than contemplate the working class, the contestants on *The Apprentice* examine themselves, or more particularly, their fantasies about their

> working lives and the administered workspace—which is transformed into a TV game show. Or to put it in terms that both working viewer and working contestant can relate to: the ultimate fantasy island is the self-mediated workspace with only one survivor—a boss introjected [as one-self].
>
> (122–23; brackets in orig.)

Lin alternates between passages of targeted ideology critique (such as the preceding) and more abstract meditations on the nature of poetry and books. Reality TV and avant-garde poetry, Lin implies, share a common basis in conforming to the informational channels of their time and context. Literary theory would seem to conform to yet another informational channel, as instanced by Lin's borrowing of the complete index to Roland Barthes's *Image-Music-Text*. The "American Standard Code," though reductive in the extreme, cannot be bypassed. The ambient work, rather than attempting a direct attack on mass culture, attempts something of a sneak attack, camouflaging itself in standardized informatic patterns. It is metadata (a term played upon in the book's cover design) that matters most in determining whether or not something is identified as art: "[Today] a work of architecture [or film] or [poem] or [painting] or [novel] should have as fluid and standardized an ID [OBJECT ID™ SYSTEM] as possible and function like a waiting area, time slot, universal market/currency or metadata standard" (131). Lin offers a critique of consumer culture, but he does not suppose that poetry is immune from simplistic forms of classification such as those found in popular shows like *The Apprentice*. The contestant who fantasizes of a "self-mediated workspace," like the academic poet, partakes of the bureaucratic sublime. Self-mediation of information or aesthetic value would seem to lead to an ideological impasse wherein the viewer or reader chooses sameness rather than difference. Invoking Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, Lin writes: "Increasingly, goods and the information about those goods will come to mean one and the same thing. The difference is contracting" (86).

Conceptual works featuring indexical forms often confront the standardization of consumption, as well as the standardization

of knowledge production.[16] Rob Fitterman's *Sprawl: Metropolis 30a* (2010) operates as a metadata index of the Indian Mound Mall, a shopping center in Heath, Ohio, that Fitterman connects to the Cahokia Mounds in Collinsville, Illinois. Fitterman appropriates the mall's directory, which is overwhelmingly dominated by chain stores, and then proceeds to sample online customer reviews for every store in the mall. Fitterman also includes a promotional statement that concludes by largely erasing the effects of European conquest on the landscape inhabited by Native Americans:

> Despite its hard-luck reputation, the Cahokia site feels immensely peaceful today. There's no whiff of angst from an unsettled spirit world, no sense that anything awful happened here. So feel free to roam the grounds, bring your camera, and show your children the mystery of the Native American Indians that they won't soon forget!
>
> (14)

While such appropriation techniques carry with them a strong whiff of kitsch, they also often bring with them social critique—of standardization, of suburbanization, and of hyperconsumerism. Appropriation strategies such as Fitterman's are in some sense profoundly realist in that they accurately depict present realities with a minimum of authorial interference. The poem "Directory," for instance, which appeared in the special "Flarf and Conceptual Writing" section of *Poetry* magazine, is an extremely straightforward index both of the mall's constituent parts and of the numbing experience of knowing in advance

16. Brian Reed has, for instance, convincingly interpreted Dworkin's *Parse* as a commentary on the nature of academic labor: "[*Parse*'s] generative constraint—to transcribe a textbook's syntax—proves impossible for a fallible human to carry out punctiliously. Dworkin shows that the information age has not somehow magically dispelled alienation's negative effects. Content providers, 'creative' or not, must try to fulfill the excruciating demand that they become teratological organisms, that is, monstrously overdeveloped in certain respects and impoverished in others. Worse, they discover that honestly tenaciously pursuing their occupation actually lowers their chances of creating worthwhile art. Purposeless play, . . . as Friedrich Schiller long ago taught, is by definition inefficient. Dworkin suggests that nowadays authentic artistry can only occur when a worker is distracted from or fails at an assigned task" (151–52). For more on *Parse* and on Dworkin's poem "Dure," see Stephens, "Self-Portrait."

what products and services will be found in each. One of the poem's columns begins:

> Macy's
> Circuit City
> Payless ShoeSource
> Sears
> Kay Jewelers
>
> (335)

The poem (if it is a poem) is utterly banal, but that is its point. It mimics the rhythms of everyday life in a consumer society; it reproduces redundancy through wholesale serial copying.

Similarly emphasizing the effects of corporate homogenization, Rachel Zolf's *Human Resources* (2007) deploys a complex blend of appropriated texts in order to present a critique of management culture. While it follows no single constraint consistently, *Human Resources* frequently makes use of word counts and search-query rankings and often includes Arabic numbers within its text. In the following passage, Q stands for search-engine queries. Not surprisingly, profane and sexualized keywords top the rankings, yet political keywords (Bush, America, war) also appear: "Mass affluent consumers' key satisfaction drivers aspirational by most common queries of most-common-English-words engine: fuck Q1 sex Q2 love the shit god i penis cunt a ass jesus dog Q13 pussy hate bush john me hello vagina america bitch cat dick you war yes" (36). The language of personal investment figures prominently in *Human Resources*—interspersed with invocations of Bataillean general economy:

> Align this process as it evolves I want everything overlaid with Bataille's catastrophes as cleansing acts, rebalancing the planet.
>
> Just like your portfolio, tweaking the delicate equilibrium among asset mix, time horizon and risk tolerance.
>
> (67)

The implied you in this passage would seem to be the individual worker/consumer/investor who is implicated in the great risk shift. Poetry, too, is involved in this total investment scheme: "Ensconced in the academy pleasuring in the beautiful excess of

the unshackled referent, poetry can't stock food banks, warm bodies or stop genocide from affecting my RSP" (74). An RSP, or Retirement Savings Plan, is the Canadian equivalent of an IRA, or Individual Retirement Account. Inverting the expected concern that her RSP's investments will sanction genocide, Zolf worries grimly that genocide will adversely affect her personal economic interests.

Zolf makes it difficult if not impossible to extract the language of the personal from the language of the corporate, or even of the state. *Human Resources* suggests the disturbing interconnectedness of institutions and individuals and invokes the bureaucratic sublime to suggest that anyone and anything can be reduced to a numerical equivalent. Of the use of numbers and numerology in *Human Resources*, Christian Bök has written, "these cryptograms based upon 'word-rank' . . . call to mind index values or stock prices—or perhaps (because of the Hebraic mystique of gematria), the penal codes at Auschwitz; however, Zolf also suggests that, perhaps, poetry might constitute a kind of encryption that renders us 'illegible' to such capitalist mechanisms. . . ." ("Late review" n. pag.; ellipses in orig.). Bök's reading is perhaps overly optimistic, given that Zolf casts doubt on the ability of "the unreadable [to] drive the reader from consuming to producing" (74). Zolf implores us to "Look through the mirror, it's the Information Age," suggesting that we can see ourselves only through information (65). Whereas the dominant mechanisms of capitalism force us to translate all aspects of our lives into numerical data, Zolf insists that we do the opposite and translate quantities back into a language capable of bearing ethical content. There is little hope on Zolf's part, however, that reencryption in itself can effect social change.

Bill Kennedy and Darren Wershler-Henry's *Apostrophe* (2006) likewise uses search engine results to depict the contemporary experience of drowning in data, interpellating its readers within the global catalogue of the World Wide Web. Playing on the notion of poetic apostrophe, the poem harnesses Internet search engines to create variations on phrases that take the form "you are ____." So, for instance, a representative section titled "(feeling quite overwhelmed you must say)" runs, "you are a failure •

you are able to divine how people are feeling about you • you are continually on trial to prove that your opinions and actions are correct • you are not upset • you are finding this situation can go on for weeks, months or even years" (120). The reader cannot help but be exhausted by what are most often unflattering, if not aggressive, apostrophes. Drawing on the nearly infinite textual reserves of the Web, "you" can be almost anyone or anything. In an afterword, Kennedy and Wershler-Henry write, "As a figure of speech, apostrophe implicates the reader in the production of excess information" (287). This excess information takes on the form of a catalogue, which like an index is radically selective but also potentially radically generative of associations:

> The catalogue is a form that struggles with excess. Its job is to be reductive, to squeeze all of the possibilities that a world of information has to offer into a definitive set—not just *the* Greeks, but *these* Greeks. Its poetic effect, however, is the exact opposite. A catalogue opens up a poem to the threat of a surfeit of information, felt most keenly when the reader wonders, politely, "*How long can this go on*?"
>
> (286)

The answer to the how long question is of course dependent on the reader, and/or upon what the reader considers "a definitive set." Like Raymond Queneau's *One Hundred Million Million Poems*, the poem can easily outlast its reader's ability to read it in a conventional manner.

Much of the work of Kenneth Goldsmith, perhaps the best known and most influential of conceptual writers using appropriation techniques, can be read as indexical in its wholesale adoption of bureaucratic data. *Day* (2003), a retyping of an entire day's *New York Times*, includes some two hundred pages of stock market quotes. *Soliloquy* (2001), an exact record of every word spoken in a week by Goldsmith, includes many conversations concerning the use of computers circa 1996 (Goldsmith at the time was operating a website design business). Darren Wershler-Henry has written that "the weather in [Goldsmith's] *The Weather* serves as an index of the national mood" (n. pag.) Goldsmith's current work-in-progress, "Capital," is "a rewriting of Walter

Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* set in New York City in the twentieth century" ("Rewriting" n. pag.).

Goldsmith's equation of poetry with "managing language in the digital age" presents many critical conundrums. Although a work such as *Soliloquy* could be described as "oblique autobiography" (*Uncreative Writing* 188), what are we to make of a project like *Day*, the content of which is entirely predetermined? Consider, for instance, the following passage (I am quoting a large chunk in part because of Goldsmith's insistence on the chunkiness, so to speak, of conceptual appropriation):

> HOW AMAZON USES INFORMATION Amazon.com, the No. 1 Internet retailer, has revised its privacy policy, and in doing so has provided a window into how much it uses the customer data it collects to help it and other companies sell more. In the new policy, Amazon disclosed that it has started sending e-mail marketing messages on behalf of other companies. It also added to a long list of data it collects about users, including financial information, Social Security numbers, product searches and the telephone number from which a user calls Amazon's customer service line. And for the first time, Amazon disclosed it can buy information about customers from outside databases. And if the new initiatives do not help stem Amazon's huge losses and the company is put up for sale, the new policy says, anyone who buys Amazon will get its customer data.
>
> (*Day* 202)

There would seem to be little need here to worry much about what the New Critics called the biographical fallacy, since Goldsmith gives no indication that this passage is any more or less interesting than the hundreds of pages in either direction. This news can only be "news that stays news" if a reader (or a community of readers) finds some kind of significance in it. In a sense, the material of *Day* is a journalistic cross-section of material that hasn't been processed into history worth remembering. While some newspaper readers may feel like they read the entire paper on a given day, in fact they read in a highly selective manner. Some of the oddest pages in *Day* are the pages of stock quotes (*The New York Times* stopped printing stock quotes in 2006). Consider this oddly Steinian moment, which seems as if

it might have been drawn from an alternate version of "Patriarchal Poetry":

Baxter 1.16 1.4 35 15587
85.63 82.13 83.25-1.50 16.94 6.56 BayView .40 4.1 14 4W 9.94 9.38 9.75+0.25
Continued on Next Page
The same way my father made it.
The same way his father made it.
The same way his father made it.
The same way his father made it.
The same way his father made it.
The same way his father made it.
The same way his father made it.
The same way his father made it.
BELVEDERE
VODKA
IMPORTED

(246)

The most obvious variable in Goldsmith's retyping is the move from newspaper page to book page—in which Goldsmith tends to ignore most, but not all, of the paper's original formatting. Goldsmith could have lineated this page very differently without doing anything more than merely retyping. The stock quotes, no longer in neatly ordered columns, devolve into seemingly arbitrary strings of numbers. An advertisement, such as the one for Belvedere Vodka, would typically be set off from the main columns of news. *Day*'s reduction of the entire paper to a single typeface and a uniform prose formatting foregrounds the textual disconnect of a vodka ad placed in the midst of a page of what are in effect obsolete prices.

In a short essay that serves as a kind of manifesto for *Day*, Goldsmith writes: "I'm interested in a valueless practice. Nothing has less value than yesterday's news (in this case yesterday's newspaper—what could be of less value, say, than stock quotes from September 1, 2000?)" ("Uncreativity" n. pag.). Elsewhere, however, Goldsmith has given strong indications that his practice is not "valueless." In "The Day" (not to be confused with *Day*), for instance, which was printed in a special conceptual

section of *Poetry* magazine edited by Goldsmith, he chose two brief selections from the September 11, 2001 *New York Times* ("Two Poems"). By a strange process of recirculation, the *Times* even reprinted one of those poems, "Metropolitan Forecast" (the title is self-explanatory), on the ten-year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, crediting the poem to Goldsmith and ambiguously noting that the poem had appeared in *Poetry* magazine, although presumably the *Times* remained the copyright holder. Paired with Goldsmith's poem in the *Times* on the ten-year anniversary was a more conventional article from November 2001 describing the unseasonably warm autumn (Schulten n. pag.). In effect, the Times was (re)appropriating its own content.

Goldsmith's other poem for "The Day," titled "Islam," further reveals Goldsmith struggling to conduct a valueless practice (again I quote a large chunk):

> E2 THE NEW YORK TIMES, TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2001 ARTS ABROAD
> Continued From First Arts Page
>
> On Islam, Mr. Houellebecq went still further, deriding his estranged mother for converting to Islam and proclaiming that, while all monotheistic religions were "cretinous," "the most stupid religion is Islam." And he added: "When you read the Koran, you give up. At least the Bible is
>
> Sexual tourism
> and inflammatory
> remarks about
> Palestinians.
>
> very beautiful because Jews have an extraordinary literary talent." And later, noting that "Islam is a dangerous religion," he said it was condemned to disappear, not only because God does not exist but also because it was being undermined by capitalism.
>
> (337)

The words at the center of the selection, set off from the main text and lineated like verse, are not Michel Houellebecq's. The article in question does mention that Houellebecq's recent novel features a sexual tourist as its protaganist—but nowhere do the words "inflammatory / remarks about / Palestinians" appear in the text of the original article (Riding). Goldsmith's interjection puts Houellebecq's xenophobia into even sharper relief; the very

act of selecting this passage demonstrates that Goldsmith's aims, even if they are primarily ironic or parodic, are not free of value judgments.

Though Goldsmith's writings have attracted considerable attention, perhaps his most influential accomplishment has been his role in the creation of the *UbuWeb* archive.[17] *UbuWeb* exemplifies what the conceptual artist Seth Price has termed the phenomenon of "dispersion" during "the last few decades of global corporate sprawl" (*Dispersion* n. pag.). According to Price, "Distributed media can be defined as social information circulating in theoretically unlimited quantities in the common market, stored or accessed via portable devices" (7). Price's description has much in common with descriptions of the goals of the relational aesthetics movement in aspiring to a more democratic system of circulation.[18] Price's most extensive work of conceptual writing, *How to Disappear in America* (2008), takes the form of an

17. For a more specific discussion of Goldsmith's role in creating *UbuWeb*, see *Letter to Bettina Funcke*. I raise the topic of *UbuWeb* here because its existence points to important changes in the economy of poetry distribution. Whereas many avant-garde books and journals were produced in small editions, *UbuWeb* points toward a new "gift economy" of the Web, an indexical future (if not present) in which readers sort through a meta-index rather than encountering physical texts within the confines of a store, library, or classroom. Most of Goldsmith's texts are freely available online, as well as in print versions. His texts (if indeed they are his) are thus fully searchable and in effect can be indexed by the user. Like the larger Web of which it is a part, *UbuWeb* is a continually growing and continually updated open system. Central to the ethos of conceptual art—as many observers have noted—has been an embrace of open systems that are dynamically responsive to the world around them. Indexical/categorical art, particularly if it theorizes its own systematicity, is often described as open-ended in its structure. A finished art object such as a painting, by contrast—as theorized, for instance, in Michael Fried's influential "Art and Objecthood" (1967)—would run counter to an open system. A market, in a manner of speaking, is a population of shares whose prices continually rise and fall. A traditional anthology or exhibition presents a closed catalogue of writers or artists. If the *UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing* did not pretend to be global or comprehensive, the same cannot be said for *UbuWeb* as a whole, which has profoundly expanded the conditions of accessibility for avant-garde art and has made available films, sound recordings, and texts from dozens of countries and languages. As Siegfried Zielinski notes, "In the Internet, all earlier media exist side by side" (31). *UbuWeb* makes available a virtual Alexandria of avant-garde film, art, music, and writing. Screen and speakers are its primary constraints. Unlike conceptual art, which now often commands astronomical sums, conceptual writing is for the most part either free or available in inexpensive editions.

18. For a useful introduction to the relational aesthetics movement, see Bishop.

ambivalent handbook on said topic. The book indulges fantasies of escape only to relentlessly demonstrate how difficult it in fact would be to step outside of the bureaucratic oversight of contemporary society. *How to Disappear in America* presents a paranoid vision of a world in which our every action leaves some trace of our presence.

Price's *How to Disappear in America* foregrounds the disappearance of its author in complex ways. Price acknowledges that the book is mostly appropriated, but he also claims to have spent considerable time editing and writing it. Price rearranges and adds to the text, and his main source would seem to be an online version of the text by Frederic Rice available on the website *The Skeptic Tank*. The complexities do not end there: in 2006, the German artist Susanne Bürner published substantially the same source text(s) under the title *Vanishing Point: How to Disappear in America without a Trace*. Both Price's and Bürner's texts are distributed by the New York–based Printed Matter, although I can find no other institutional relationship between the two works. Bürner's version predates Price's, but the two artists seem to have been independently attracted to the same source. When I asked a salesperson at Printed Matter about the relation between the two books, she replied, "That's the trouble with appropriation," implying that it made little difference if appropriation artists independently drew upon the same texts. In another sense, however, the troubling fluidity of (re)appropriation could be part of the point: the writer/artist is dispersed into an amorphous, ahistorical mass of textuality.

Price's *How to Disappear in America*—like other recent conceptual works such as Christian Bök's *Xenotext Experiment*, Sarah Jacobs's *Deciphering Human Chromosome 16: Index to the Report*, and Kim Rosenfield's *Re: Evolution*—is particularly focused on issues of bio-informatics. The book concludes with an eloquent court ruling written by Montana State Supreme Court Justice James C. Nelson, which contains the following statement:

> [W]e are a throw-away society. My garbage contains the remains of what I eat and drink. It may contain discarded credit card receipts along with yesterday's newspaper and junk mail. It might hold some personal letters, bills, receipts, vouchers, medical records, photographs and stuff that is

> imprinted with the multitude of assigned numbers that allow me access to the global economy and vice versa.
> My garbage can contains my DNA.
>
> (92)[19]

Justice Nelson, despite his concern, ruled that evidence collected from a suspect's trash was not eligible for Fourth Amendment protection. The irony, then, in Price (and Bürner) concluding with this ruling is that the ruling stands as a futile critique of the system of criminal data collection. The book seems to be saying, in effect, that there is no way to disappear in America, no way to step outside the total index of governmental and corporate data systems.

Matthew Timmons's *Credit* (2009) similarly engages the inescapability of data-collection systems.[20] *Credit* so far exists perhaps only in four copies, and its author notes that he himself is not able to afford its $199 cost on the Lulu website. Praised by Craig Dworkin and Vanessa Place, *Credit* consists of eight hundred pages of financial documents addressed to its author. Since I too am unable to access or afford this book, I will quote from Dworkin's description:

> Documenting the social and economic space defined by the writing that falls between bulk mailing and fine print (full color and some of it very fine indeed), CREDIT appropriates direct mail credit card solicitations and

19. The court decision can be found in *The Skeptic Tank* online version as well as in Price's and Bürner's versions (Rice, sec. 14).

20. Dana Teen Lomax's *Disclosure* and Brian Kim Stefans's *Bank of America Online Banking* bear interesting comparison to *Credit*. Both works extensively reproduce their authors' personal financial records. *Disclosure* consists entirely of official records—ranging from report cards to dental x-rays to bank statements. An excerpt was first published on *UbuWeb;* a fuller version was published in 2011 by Black Radish Books. Stefans's exposé makes no pretense to being poetry or conceptual writing (although its author is included in *Against Expression*) and was first made available for free on *Lulu*. In reviewing the book, Marie Buck praises it for its lack of posturing and suggests that we might in any case "read the pamphlet as an intervention into the contemporary poetry community of which Stefans is a part." Buck notes: "The pamphlet begins with a Frank O'Hara quotation—'I go on to the bank / and Miss Stillwagon (first name Linda I once heard) / doesn't even look up my balance for once in her life . . . ,' suggesting that Stefans might have poets in mind. And given the pamphlet's avenues of distribution, it's safe to assume many of the people who have read it are poets. (I, for one, started reading it thinking I was beginning some sort of conceptual poem.)" (n. pag.).

> advertisements in order to explore the nature of disclosure in a series of plays between display and censorship, see-thru windows and security envelopes, financial promise and legal threat. . . . Testing the limits of publishing—CREDIT is the largest and most expensive book publishable via Lulu—Timmons' book is well beyond most readers' means.
>
> (Blurb n. pag.)

Although much of the personal information is redacted, *Credit* nonetheless would seem to reveal much about how individual borrowers are interpellated by a system of massive redundancy. Despite (or perhaps because of) his credit woes, Timmons, according to Vanessa Place, received twenty-six credit card offers within a span of three weeks. There would seem to be little hope that even the most vigilant consumer could ever wholly resist, ignore, or understand such a fantastically complex array of financial opportunities and risks. The bourgeois investor may contemplate the ethics of his or her retirement investments; the indebted consumer is forced to trust corporations whose fine print cannot possibly be comprehended.

Perhaps the most troubling conceptual inventory yet to appear is Vanessa Place's *Statement of Facts*. First published on *UbuWeb* and now available from Blanc Press, *Statement of Facts* reproduces legal documents (with names redacted) obtained by Place, who is a criminal appellate attorney specializing in the defense of sexual offenders. *Statement of Facts* is the first part of a trilogy called *Tragodía*; two further installments, *Statement of the Case* and *Argument*, are forthcoming. The Blanc Press version of *Statement of Facts* mimics the appearance of the Princeton University Press Charles S. Singleton translation of *The Divine Comedy*—but there is no redemption (*purgatorio*) or transcendence (*paradiso*) within Place's tragic epic of suffering, guilt, and violence. *Statement of Facts* showcases the *Rashomon*-like effects of conflicting testimony and makes its readers question the factuality of criminal documents—opening a window on to the bureaucratic mechanisms of the criminal justice system.

Despite Place not having written a word of the 430 pages of *Tragodía 1: Statement of Facts*, the perspective of the author can hardly be neutral, given that Place has written extensively on rape law in her critical book *The Guilt Project: Rape, Morality, and*

Law. Both *The Guilt Project* and *Statement of Facts* make for extremely difficult reading. While *Statement of Facts* purports to passively index court documents, *The Guilt Project* offers a sophisticated and well-argued account of the hypocrisies and injustices of contemporary rape law. Place does not mount a comprehensive socioeconomic critique in *The Guilt Project*, but she does repeatedly emphasize that poverty contributes greatly to the justice system's fundamental lack of fairness. From the perspective of issues having to do with information classification and data excess, *Statement of Facts* could be taken to suggest that no amount of documentation will necessarily give us an objective account of disputed events. It is not possible to evaluate Place's provocative claims here; what I would note especially is that *The Guilt Project* insists on the culpability of society as a whole. Place emphasizes that contemporary media culture has a role in shaping notions of guilt and innocence, and she foregrounds her own role within the system:

> There's no getting out from under the calloused communal thumb, because in today's Western world, even artists abrogate their artistic identity, and authors their authority, and it's all big business, or big business writ small, for even indie's corporate-lite, and where there once was a thirst for culture, now there's not much left but a gag effect.
>
> (236)

Place's rhetoric is extreme, and her prognosis bleak. The conditions she describes, importantly, take place in a world where "We live engulfed in images, and there is no transcendence" (239).

The works I have described so far in this essay (with the possible exception of Bernstein's "My/My/My") passively index in whole or in part an existing data set. By contrast, a poem such as Paul Violi's "Index" actively indexes a fictional biography. Although a version was published in *Harper's Magazine* in 1984, the poem has no direct link to the famous "Harper's Index," introduced in 1984. Violi's "Index" is a chronology of the life of a fictional painter named Sutej Hudney, which begins at childhood and ends with "Last words." "Index" performs an intriguing retrospective indexing, but the poem is distinctly "un-conceptual" by comparison to the writing of Lin, Place, or Goldsmith. Violi's poem is arguably more a work of short fiction

than a work of appropriation—interested more in an ironic displacement of the self than in a critique of information or classification systems.

Thanks in some measure to the promotional tactics of its practitioners, conceptual writing has too often been read as a literature of exhaustion rather than as a literature of engagement. While exhaustion may indeed be a goal of conceptual writing (which Place and Fitterman describe in terms of an allegory of failure), it can also be the case that many of the works just described can be placed in a realist, or even socialist-realist, tradition.[21] The works described above conform well to Mitchell Whitelaw's description of indexical data art. Whitelaw describes recent works which

> construct a notion of data—of its capacities, qualities, and significance—in the ways that they use it. Data is here first of all indexical of reality. . . . These works gather existing data from the network, drawing together thousands of elements that are already, unproblematically, "out there." This reinforces the sense of collapsed indexicality; these data points have causes (authors) of their own that in some sense guarantee their connection to reality, or at least defer the question of that connection.
>
> (n. pag.)

Rather than post-individualist cross-sections of random data, works of conceptual writing can be read as realistic depictions of how "we spend our lives engaged with data systems." We are data; data is us—whether in terms of bioinformatics or in terms of the bureaucratic sublime's fusion of the personal and the corporate, or the personal and the academic. As Derek Beaulieu writes, "The Internet is not something that challenges who we are or how we write, it is who we are and how we write" (6). Whitelaw suggests that one of the goals of data art is the construction of a new "data subjectivity." Conceptual writing helps us counter the myth of the anarchic Internet, of the self-created digital subject, of the poet as a figure of retreat to a time before the information society. By a seeming paradox, conceptual writ-

21. Drawing on the examples of Charles Reznikoff and Vanessa Place, Goldsmith has presented a version of this argument in his essay "Toward a Poetics of Hyperrealism" (*Uncreative Writing* 83–108).

ing may be the most creative, most technologically aware writing now being found, generated, and lost in the vastness of electronic textuality. Artists and writers can no more easily choose to opt out of the information society than they can choose the era in which they live. For the generation of poets that came of age in the 1990s and first decade of the 2000s, data excess is a fundamental precondition for new (and recycled) writing. As Price puts it kitschily in "Dispersion":

> With more and more media readily available through this unruly archive [the Internet], the task becomes one of packaging, producing, reframing, and distributing; a mode of production analogous not to the creation of material goods, but to the production of social contexts, using existing material. Anything on the internet is a fragment, provisional, pointing elsewhere. Nothing is finished. What a time you chose to be born!
>
> (n. pag.)

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