

What Was Conceptual Writing?

This rhetorical question, “What was Conceptual Writing?,” is offered as a conceptual lever. It apes the modality of a question asked about modernism in 1978 by Robert Adams, “What was Modernism?”; but takes it takes its charge from the closing call to work made by Raymond Williams in his 1987 lecture “When was Modernism?”¹ The challenge that Williams foresaw was the need to counter-pose, against the modernist canon, an alternative history of those aesthetic practices marginalized during modernism that could (1) refocus our concerns in the present onto the question(s) of community and with which (2) we might work our way out of the meaningless deadlock of postmodernism.

This essay levers those concerns into the emergent discourse on so-called Conceptual Writing. In doing so, it opens from the inside a discussion about some of the socio-political choices that capitalist realism forces any self-consciously Conceptual Writer to make – or risk having made for them – about their work and their labour mode(s).² My opening offer to that conversation is based on a simple thesis about one kind of conceptual writing (small “c,” small “w”) that insists on being lowly yet dynamic (wild) and highly productive yet precise (praxical); and which, in being so, has demonstrated a unique hyper-exaggeration of turbo-capitalism’s singular logic of production.³

This essay focuses on the potential of that hyper-exaggeration to form a critical perversion of the social affectivities of capitalism. The first three sections broach respectively the why, what, and how of Conceptual Writing in the context of this thesis. In the final fourth section I summarily advocate a kind of conceptual *writing* that works knowingly in the “wild” in pre-disciplinary ways; that is part of a praxis that understands the work of writing as something potentially desubjectivating; and that might try to unfold some notion(s) of responsibility which it has the unique political potential to figure.

1. Discontent with the Connotations of Mastery, Full Stop

Conceptual Writing presumes that the kinds of subjects who might write are necessarily unstable social beings. As such, they are always already significant regardless of whether or not they consciously write. The writer-subject establishes themselves when they work to choose what, when, and how to signify through kinds of textualities that depend on language. The “self” as a construct, rather than as an innate authority, is a concern that Conceptual Writing has inherited. What Conceptual Writing does with this inheritance, with a unique intensity, is to shift the question of authoriality from “who wrote that text?” to “who takes responsibility for that text?” This shifting reveals how the authorial problematic has been recentered in our techno-digital, juridico-legal discourses of culture and property now. Responsibility and value are twin concerns for writer-subjects in this discourse network, and no model based on mastery has synthesized them satisfactorily. Conceptual writing disavows both mastering and being mastered as artistically and socially inadequate subject(ified) positions.

Instead, Conceptual Writing foregrounds the fact that all languages depend, in part at least, on conceptuality. This foregrounding makes Conceptual Writing conceptualist; and that quality, genealogically speaking, situates the emergence of Conceptual Writing in a long, pre-disciplinary constellation of conceptualist forms of cultural production. The cultural legitimacy of these forms as anything beyond mere *theoria* is staked upon two commitments. First, that there is a difference between the singularity of an idea and the sequence of ideas that combine into a concept, which is to say, that a concept is more than an idea. Second, that the populist misassumptions that (1) abstract thinking and concrete action are mutually exclusive and/or (2) that abstract thinking has limited concrete value, can never ground styles of living and working wherein the potential mutual dependency of theory and practice might ever ground a positive praxis of writing.

Following Karl Marx,⁴ for whom praxes distinguish themselves as positive by working towards dealienation, Conceptual Writing leads the writer-subject onto a unique tightrope. On one side is an unprecedented collapse into defenceless alienation that completely accepts the realism of capitalism and the obedience of literature to a business ontology. On the other side is an infinite movement against that collapse, a movement whose energy is closer to internal combustions like rave culture and computer hacking than it is to the resolute “proper” autonomy of the *littérateurs*. That tightrope is the exceptional fault line on which the writer-subjects who would be Conceptual Writers find themselves when they accept that they have been interpellated as, *first and*

foremost, consumers; and that their consumerism is acutely different from that of the reader-as-writer in which the postmoderns found some confused sanctuary. That fault line is the terrain of conceptualist consumer-writers who are self-consciously Conceptual Writers, which is a dissymmetrical and doubled subjectivity as opposed to a bipolar subjectivity with split individuations that sometimes overlap.⁵

On the first side – in the collapse – the consumer-writer becomes the perfectly compressed capitalist model of a culture-maker. For this consumer-writer, the potentially distracting work of writing is efficiently smoothed into acts of consuming. *This* reification of the consumer-writer's re-productive-consumption-as-literature further spectacularizes and legitimates the products and behaviours of capitalist life. Trapped in this dystopic model, Conceptual Writing would be a perfectly uninterrupted flow of reproduction performed by graphical and interface designers who work on the surface of life to resignify the realism of capitalism, like literature's equivalents of Nicolas Bourriaud's *semionauts*.⁶

The other side would be constituted by work and workings that *appear* much like the surficial resignifying done on the first side; and yet the work of the other side would mean the polar opposite for the politicality of the consumer-writer subject. As such, the two sides are, ideologically speaking, mutually exclusive. The work of the other side can be analogized to a moving, or constant removing, and can be insufficiently outlined by echoes from the last century, by which the project of dealienation would be something like the never-ending process of desubjectivation. This moving, as a form of working, looks a little like Maurice Blanchot's unworking, a little like Marcel Broodthaers's "absence of work," and a little like Theodor Adorno's functionless work; and yet, it doesn't *work* anything like them.

2. A Stubborn Bastard and a Common Noun

"How" Conceptual Writing works on this, the other side, is not just determined by what consumer-writers produce as Conceptual Writing. It also depends on what one and all *do with* Conceptual Writing. In all three of the twentieth-century models mentioned above – those of Blanchot, Broodthaers, and Adorno, which are just three examples from a much longer list which could include closer precursors like Steve McCaffery or Bruce Andrews⁷ – being artistic becomes a way of working that refuses to be complicit with the *techne*-driven functionalism produced by the capitalist expropriation of one's labour power. Through errings, poesy, and non-purposiveness these models convert the aesthetic ideology

of modernism – which Cornelia Klinger concisely argues is a tripartite fixation on autonomy, authenticity, and alterity⁸ – into rationales and methods of production *defined by their contrariness to capitalist rationales and methods of production*. This twentieth-century legacy roots the critical potential of artistic production in the demand to desubjectivate one's labour power *by producing things differently from capitalism*. This is artistic production contra capitalist production, based in part on a want for artistic work to be a different kind of work than labour.

The milieu of now is different. Constant acceleration has indemnified a kind of turbo-capitalism as a hegemonic social realism. As McKenzie Wark has eloquently said of Comte de Lautréamont and the situationist tactic of *détournement*,⁹ Conceptual Writing exploits, rather than elaborates, modern poetics; and it does so with a sense of contemporaneity similar to that exercised by Futurism (similar in its immediacy, not as a like philosophy of the “always new”). “Who takes responsibility for that text?” is unfolded as a question of poetics by using objectivity to nuance subjectivity in a subversive amplification of the objectification of the writer-subject as consumer. Instead of refusing the kind of work that is the labour of capitalism, Conceptual Writing conversely *over-does* the expropriation of work as capitalist labour by *hyperextending* the rationales and methods of turbo-capitalist production. It renders repetitive HITs, hyper-structural exercises in style, data shifting, meme trends and data harvesting, etc. all into constitutive acts of literary writing.

The expropriation of the work of writing as labour has long been ceded, to differing degrees, by various pragmatist camps as a necessary, or attractive, dimension of literary practice if such work is to be socially relevant or professionally viable. What Conceptual Writing can uniquely do is introduce the *hyperextension* of turbo-capitalism's singular logic of production as the *exclusive* determinant of how and what to write. It can then superimpose these inappropriately tasteless processes upon the sacred territory of literary composition as complete vocabularies, methods, and sometimes even machineries that fabricate entire documents or even oeuvres.

Many postmodern, modern and premodern writers sampled fragments from everyday life and remixed them into their own compositional structures, as in Language poetry, or did vice versa, as in George Herbert's seventeenth-century proto-concrete technopeignion altar poems. Conceptual Writing, at its best, appropriates its content and form from amongst the extant, and premises any editorial decisions on reflexive judgments of conceptual appropriateness rather than aesthetic fetish. This wholesale intensity, which results from hyperextension and overworking, generates Conceptual Writing's unique textuality. Previously inappropriate kinds of textualities are accepted as just other

textualities of life. Conceptual writers take responsibility for staking the grammars, syntaxes, lexicons, stylesheets, modes, speeds, media, and proprietary statuses of these outsider textualities as legitimate problematics of literature.

Those characteristics are then further extended as premises for decisions about dissemination that the literary industry would normally preserve for publishers. Conceptual Writing, in the spirit of small-press communities but with the networking advantages of digital life, has proposed a new mode of readerly experience that is ripe for a peer-to-peer commons of literature. Only in this commons, and only when understood as fundamentally socio-relational, can the unique (dissymmetrical and doubled) subjectivity of the writer who would be a Conceptual Writer be fully uncovered as the consumer-writer-qua-consumer-writers. A Conceptual Writer is never an Author because she never works in isolation nor to isolate herself. In fact, she determinedly overdoes the opposite, and in doing so she explores the importance of the proposition “publishing as praxis” to the question “who takes responsibility for that text?” That proposition might be the theoretical crux to understanding the peculiar way that Conceptual Writing reproduces textualities – inverting standard manufacturing logics in a practice of reproduction-as-production – and has itself been reproduced as an institutional category, given that its conditions of existence are *founded on the tensions between* (1) “the horizons of the publishable”¹⁰ and (2) the institutions of literature plus its criticisms.

The critical potential of this socio-relational writer-subjectivity – which I take to be Conceptual Writing’s political import – depends upon stubbornly contesting traditional identitarian logics. First, doing this, and maintaining the dynamic praxicality that has been a strength of this community to date, means refusing the comforts of traditional historical categories like “movement” or “school.” Conceptual Writing was a wrong turn. Rather than a proper name, this community might better keep alive its dynamism under the cover of a common noun: conceptual writing (with “c” and “w” in sentence case) would be an appropriately inappropriate way of signifying a collective refusal to be comfortably integrated. Second, being critical, as a highly literate yet destabilizing influence, is best actioned from a non-dependent position *inside* the context that the work is problematizing. When this happens, conceptual writing forms an immanent institutional critique of literature by shifting modes of writing from the outside of literature to its inside.

These outsider modes of writing can also be explored qua writing in registers other than literature, from inside looser fields like contemporary art. There, for example, one can work through the question “What does art make it possible to write and to think?” In doing so, one can pose a challenge to the sanctity

of literary writing from the outside. Conceptual writing lends itself to this kind of fluidity for a complex of reasons that gravitate around the mongrel, pluralist, multilingual transience of both Western urban sociality and, even more fully, the relationalities of network culture. Conceptual writing is one unexpected progeny of the attitudes and technologies of these new networks “contaminating” the culture industry – it is the bastard consequence that stubbornly refuses to ignore its currency or potential. Conceptual writing’s political potential, to explore rather than accept the subjectivity of contemporary writers as relational consumers, depends on its continuing to be a stubborn bastard.

3. Praxis for a Reality Altogether Dangerous and Unique

The discourse of conceptual writing is becoming consciously unresolved somewhere between aesthetics and poetics via media theory. Understandings of politicality and criticality are either imported from one or other of these fields and taken for granted, or not discussed. Both situations are inadequate. The former gives starting points by situating the new in familiar frames of reference; references that fast appear superimposed rather than reflexive. The latter is based on either (1) a wish to avoid fixing the potential political meanings of these writings as artworks (which would, of course, allow the potential that they might always mean more) or (2) a hangover of the modernist moral paradigm of the artist as a trans-ethical aesthete, both of which perversely undervalue conceptual writing’s political potential by overvaluing the conceptual writer as if she were an Author. The former and the latter understandings both risk missing the *specific* potentials of conceptual writing – as the style of living of capitalist subjects who work as consumer-writers-qua-consumer-writers vis-à-vis the proposition “publishing as praxis,” for whom any politic based on being removed is antithetic. Conceptual writing renders conceptually productive the ambiguity of the dissymmetrical double subject, consumer-writer, via the social determinations specific to its conditions of existence outlined above. And, on the shoulders of a broad, rich history of anti-normative writers, conceptual writing exploits this ambiguity with a unique intensity.

Conceptual writing has found opportunities and conversations in a range of disciplinary contexts. But it can only be fully thought as an itinerant sub-context of the longer, broader macro-context of conceptualist cultural production. Conceptualism has been a determinedly difficult subject-object for history. In the arts it is distinguished by the privileging of conceptuality in material acts – a privileging that can best be described as an approach to making. When

understood as an approach, rather than a historical category, conceptual writing can be fully unfurled. The conceptual writer uses this approach to unfold the political subjectivity of being consumer-writer-qua-consumer-writers like a trickster at work in a dangerous and unique reality. In turns she inflates then short-circuits the horizons of writing and the horizons of the publishable.

Yet unlike those tricksters modeled on Loci and famed by anthropology, the conceptual writer lives, consumer-writer-qua-consumer-writers, with the responsibility of a citizen-subject¹¹ for the consequences of their work – a work that is more than mischief.¹² Critics of conceptual writing would like this trickster quality to be diminutive – a characterization that typifies how such writers flit and play. Instead, it is the very quality that accelerates conceptual writing beyond capitalism's control, as something too unstable to domesticate. When these works hyperextend the singular logic of turbo-capitalist production, *they go too far ...*

First, rather than overworking the worker, conceptual writing overworks the machineries of writing and publishing, in a post-industrial spirit of tooling and subcontracting. As a conceptualist approach, it is premised on a creative repurposing of found techniques. Those repurposings become manifest as highly competent misuses of everyday machineries. Those machineries are the basic means of production for both (1) subject-to-subject communications in networked societies and (2) the contemporary literary industry. Those machineries range from strictures on grammatical analysis to desktop publishing softwares.

Second, although the synthesis of consumption and cultural production in conceptual writing could be the perfect channeling of cultural energy for capitalism, at the moment Western societies are not yet ready to live with the full consequences of this collapse. Capitalism has not yet smoothed the whole of life quite enough to stop citizen-subjects believing that – rightly or wrongly – literary writing should be better than the languages with which they administer and communicate their everyday lives, even though those administrations and communications happen through semi-discrete publishing channels, like email, which depend upon the same networks as indiscrete publishing. Historically, culture has always been an ideological apparatus that provides a vent for differently purposed creativity and a sandbox that can be capitalized for R&D. If the culture industry fully accepted the alterity of conceptual writing, the very tenets of that industry, like intellectual property, would be brought into disrepute. By overworking this paradox conceptual writing exploits one of the inherent contradictions of capitalist life. If all literature was conceptual writing, then we would have something like a paralysis *or* nervous breakdown of the category “literature.”

4. Towards New Literacies

Transposing the anti-institutional utopianisms of the last century as critical frameworks for conceptual writing will always create unnecessary political impasses. These utopianisms are inappropriate for two main reasons. First, the spectrum and make-ups of institutional models within the civic and non-civic fields of culture have grown so rapidly in the last thirty years that the identity and function of “the institution” assumed by those utopianisms are out of date. That identification might not be wrong, but it is now too simple to be right. Second, as I have claimed above, the institutions of literature plus its criticisms are (along with the horizons of the publishable) the very conditions for the existence of conceptual writing.

Rather than being anti-institutional, conceptual writing operates immanently as an institutional critique that uses conceptualist processes to produce kinds of textualities that those institutions cannot prevent because they cannot imagine (them). Without these tensions with the institutions of literature, conceptual writing would be indistinct from the cultures of YouTube, the book arts etc.; or maybe worse, it could be muddled with the bland internationalist neo-conceptualism that dominates the culture of contemporary gallery art. (If conceptual writing is, or rather was, *Conceptual Writing*, then its limit propositions and historical dialectic *may* have been played out already, or it *may* have been just another post-conceptualism right from the start.)

However, I want to advocate a different kind of utopianism. Zygmunt Bauman has made a sociological life project from attempting to recover the idea of socialism as an active utopia from any actually existing socialism. As an active utopia socialism might form a horizon that can unveil the realism of capitalism as supposed not natural. This kind of utopia is made active, as opposed to being *merely* idealistic, when communities are willing to live towards its horizons, as if they were principles based on an incentive but without any promise of their fulfilment.¹³ *This* kind of utopianism, with an emphasis on the question(s) of community and work, might be an ethical framework with which conceptual writing can continue to excavate its peculiar political potential, if that potential is, as I am speculating, based on an absolute over-engagement with the relations and machineries of being significant in the contemporary everyday.

I have argued that the conceptual writer is a trickster who hyperextends the singular logic of turbo-capitalist production before capitalist ideology has become really real enough to smooth society into accepting that literary culture might be the purely surfacial work of non-Authorial labourers. This unique

intensity – based on the tensions created by overworking the machineries of publishing and the institutions of literature plus its criticisms through conceptualist writing methods – can render conceptual writing’s specific textualities *conceptually productive* for a politics that is willing to work towards a different kind of realism. But if that politics is to have any social purchase, and if my earlier claim (that how conceptual writing works as work depends as much on what we do *with* conceptual writing as it does on what we do *as* conceptual writing) is correct, then the community needs to figure a notion of responsibility with which it can work open the specific question(s) of community that only it can pose to politics, beyond the limitations of given statuses like Conceptual Writing or “pirate.”

I suspect that that collective process of figuring what responsibility means for conceptual writing’s community members will involve developing newly appropriate literacies that might fully unfold the guiding question “Who takes responsibility for that text?” again and again and again and ... and always differently. To my mind, developing these literacies so as to figure what responsibility might mean for contemporary writer-subjects who work (through praxes) towards desubjectivation is the specific political potential of the dis-symmetrically doubled consumer-writer-qua-consumer-writers. Unresolving this approach to writing as a stubborn, wild bastard of a common noun makes this potentiality conceptually productive in a way that Conceptual Writing prematurely closes down.

Notes

- 1 Transcript of a lecture given at Bristol University, 1987. Printed in *New Left Review* 1.175 (May–June 1989): 48–52.
- 2 This diagnosis, of capitalism having become a social realism, was eloquently developed by Mark Fisher in *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zero Books, 2009).
- 3 The idea of a “conceptualism in the wild” was coined by Darren Wershler. On the idea of humans as creative beings capable of positive and negative praxes, see Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844) and *German Ideology* (1846).
- 4 Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and *German Ideology*.
- 5 Under different conditions, and with a different kind of political self-consciousness, this was the terrain of Andy Warhol, who may prove as provocatively valuable to Conceptual Writing as Marcel Duchamp was to Conceptual Art.
- 6 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction. Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002): 18.
- 7 For instance, in McCaffery’s 1977 first version of “The Death of the Subject” he committed to a “Language-centered writing” that aims to disrupt the fallacy of referentiality by making the cipher in poetry something polysemic and

complicating. Disjuncture, decomposition, and fragmentation are all aesthetic traits of said Language poetry, aligning the work of Language poetry with the Marxist-Althusserian tradition of subject-centring resistance and anti-commodification after Adorno and the early Frankfurt school.

- 8 Cornelia Klinger, "On the Aesthetic Ideology of Modernity," in *Modernologies* (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani, 2009): 25–38.
- 9 Ali Dur and McKenzie Wark, "New New Babylon," *October* 138 (Fall 2011): 37–56.
- 10 On the constitutive relationship between literarity and "the horizons of the publishable," see Rachel Malik, "Fixing Meaning: Intertextuality, Inference and the Horizons of the Publishable," *Radical Philosophy* 124 (2004): 13–26.
- 11 Étienne Balibar, "Citizen Subject," in *Who Comes after the Subject?*, ed. E. Cadava et al. (London: Routledge, 1991): 33–57.
- 12 Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World* (New York: Northpoint Press, 1998). Also, Jean Fisher, "Towards a Metaphysics of Shit," in *Documenta XI – Platform 5: Exhibition Catalogue* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2002): 63–70.
- 13 Zygmunt Bauman, *Socialism: The Active Utopia* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1976). On the idea of utopias as "imaginative incentives" see Leszek Kolakowski, "The Devil in History," a conversation with George Urban, *Encounter* (January 1981): 12.