

MISC. NOTES ON FLARF, CONCEPTUAL WRITING & C. (NOTHING IS NOW CLEAN SLAYNE BUT ROTTETH)

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Q: What happens when a gaggle of middle-aged financially-secure nobodaddys tell an old boring joke as if it were new and not boring?

A: Their ponzi schemes are backed by cultural and economic muscle and richly rewarded. The Whitney. The latest issue of *Poetry*. Viz. whoever's got the cash can make it sing. Nothing tough or edgy in making cultural capital that challenges nothing sing like a nightingale. It always has the blessing of power.

Or:

GRANDMA'S EXPLODING DIARRHEA
=
GRANDMA GOT RUN OVER BY A REINDEER

The joke is safe—like a knock-knock joke. As such boring and old. We share these side-splitting, hilarious jokes with our grandparents over Thanksgiving dinner. These jokes are a species of gratitude that never go unrewarded. We give thanks by reproducing them.

And if we ironize the boring jokes our grandparents so admire?

Perhaps then we can share them with our grandparents *and* our friends and cop cheap laughs from both. We can stay out late, impress our pals with something resembling avant-garde “edginess” and at the same time climb into the good graces of the old folks at home. We can have our cake and eat it too. And we can say let them eat cake and boldly call it a shit sandwich because it really is a shit sandwich and our grandmother looking back on her own care-free days as a sprite middle-aged fleamarket giveaway will say, “Those zany kids. They’re a wild bunch. But at least they pay their bills on time.”

The joke is. Is why we pay our bills on time. Is what guarantees the interminable flow of bills. In other words, the same virtues we admire in the succesful sale of the joke are those we admire in Bernie Madoff. Ponzi schemes are nothing new. Like any appeal to avant-garde practice they promise futures based on forward-looking projections engineered to fool and fail and reproduce themselves like rabbits. They gleefully enter into an already entrenched feedback loop and are in fact produced within it. Like capital. A feedback loop. They profit by it—are constitutive of it—are grist for the mist-producing mill.

The avant-garde is a risk taken at another fool's expense. Like financial markets, avant-gardes anticipate future outcomes. They anticipate anticipations of future outcomes. They make poorly informed investments based on the probability of these outcomes and when their far-sighted investments give way to catastrophic but highly profitable short-term results they're handsomely rewarded by the market and protected from their failure by the state. Their failures are regarded as forms of success achieved by way of a certain daring-do.

Put differently, what publicly announces itself as avant-garde through market and state funded megaphones scarcely ever is. Their daring lies in doing what others have done with the blessing of the market.

(NOTE: The spectacular failure of GM should not be considered apart from its decision to manufacture military vehicles—the Hummer—for civilian consumption. Responding in part to Arnold Schwarzenegger's desire for a street-legal version of the HMMWV, the American Motors Corporation began churning out a civilian version of the Hummer in 1992 and then sold the brand name to GM in 1998. Defending the manufacture of these super-sized, hyper-aggressive, utterly inefficient, economically insensible, rolling disavowals of community, Schwarzenegger exclaimed, "Look at those deltoids!"

It wasn't until GM was muscled into filing for bankruptcy and the Obama admin. insisted Rick Wagoner step aside as CEO that GM began brokering deals to unload the Hummer on China. Yet Wagner's disastrous reign at the helm of GM from 2000 to 2009 was rewarded rather than punished, allowing him to saunter into the sunset with millions. After GM lost \$30.9 billion in 2008 and accepted however many billions in federal bailout loans, Wagoner's salary increased by 35 percent. In 2007, after announcing the closing of four GM plants, Wagoner's combined pay rose 64 percent to a total of \$15.7 million for the year.

Here we find a cowardly form of failure which is in fact a smashing financial success for the engineers of this failure. To laugh all the way to the bank on the back of a destructive joke generated by market forces. The joke is called avant-garde. And like the civilian version of the Hummer, any notion of an avant-garde cannot be disentangled from its martial character. The avantgaird—the coward called hero—can never be considered beyond its relation to notions of leadership, aggression, power and, in the end, military conquest and domination. Shock and awe. This preceded the ground invasion of Baghdad. And this is what the cultural "avant-garde" call for? To be shaken, grabbed by the shirt collar, enraged, unsettled, disgruntled, disturbed and eventually awakened into new forms of consciousness by way of cultural hijinx? This is the joke. From Stein to Tzara to Fluxus to Warhol these challenges to dominant forms of consciousness and the sway of an unconscious grounded in the logic of capitalist accumulation have been for more than a century financially lucrative and economically sound. Warhol behaved like a ruthless investment broker and we worship him for it. There's a marked difference between a rhetoric of struggle and the rhetoric of military aggression. And any identification with an avant-garde or commitment to innovation paves the way for a promising career in the culture industry.

Introducing flarf and conceptual writing for the second or third or thirtieth time in the current number of *Poetry*, Kenny Goldsmith situates what he claims are two "movements" as "two sides of the same coin." Are these social or cultural "movements" as

such? Where does Eurocentric economically-privileged coterie end and the expansive popular appeal of a “movement” begin? Are these “movements” global in scale (and do they cut across internally differentiated communities) or is this simply another artificially-constructed self-appointed center presenting itself as representative of the whole (viz. the bulk of contributors to the feature are grounded in the US)? Is disjunction really “dead” or is it a strategy that continues to offer different but nonetheless productive ways of grappling with similar or shared concerns? Must one practice be disavowed, smeared and disarmed in order to valorize or identify the usefulness of another? This either/or logic is oddly reminiscent of Bush admin rhetoric (i.e. you’re either with us or you’re with the terrorists) and curiously in alignment with the ill-tempered, bourgeois rhetoric of avant-garde manifestos from the nineteenth century on.

For Goldsmith “digital environments” set flarf and conceptual po apart from other approaches, allowing this “new writing” to “continually morph from printed page to web page, from gallery space to science lab, from social spaces of poetry readings to social spaces of blogs.” Fuck. This just seems like a negligibly small part taking credit for the work of the whole. If we can bracket out the digital divide and issues of economic privilege, who in the whole of the western world is not producing work that “continually morphs” in this way? Kamau Brathwaite’s *x/self* provides a powerful and well-known early example of the overdetermined relation between digital and print technologies Goldsmith insists characterize *this* (viz. his) “new writing.” If we consider contemporary letterpress production, much of it wouldn’t be possible without digital technologies (i.e. the electronic transfer of photoshopped image files for the production of photopolymer plates used on otherwise obsolete proof presses). Who isn’t aware of the interplay and confluence of conventional, obsolete and emergent technologies that make the present multiplicity of poetics and poetry communities possible?

The insistence that this writing is fundamentally “new” is itself nothing new and in fact disguises in an especially pernicious way commitments to unnamed traditions and tendencies (i.e. the fetishization of newness and innovation that emerges with the rise of industrial production and consumer culture; the slavish privileging of a temporality that destructively pits a hastily discarded past against a recklessly misread present and ill-conceived future).

Nihil Novi. WCW remarks somewhere or other that the avant-garde is nothing more than a set of stubborn peasant loyalties. An uninterrogated fidelity to innovation is undoubtedly one of these loyalties.

But if this writing is “new” in some fundamental way (recall the necessity of newness as an indispensable category for Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory*; his careful theorization of the new that insists on the separation of surface charm from deep structural differences), then how is it new? Plagiarism, poaching and citationality are practices old as the hills and were certainly coeval with the rise of Enlightenment commitments to authorship, copyright debates and notions of intellectual properties. Goldsmith tells us no practitioner of flarf or conceptual writing has written even a word in the conventional sense: “It’s been grabbed, cut, pasted, processed, machined, honed, flattened, repurposed, regurgitated, and reframed from the great mass of free-floating language out there just begging to be turned into poetry.” Based on this description, what appears to separate the “new writing” from, say, Eliot’s *Wasteland*, Pound’s *Cantos*, Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* or any number of Alan Halsey texts is that this work is not disjunctive or “shattered” but crammed “into towers of words and castles of language with a stroke of the keyboard.” In other words the practices Goldsmith regards

as fundamentally new are heaps of (presumably unedited, uncurated and potentially unread) signs. Heaps of them.

Referring to his *Historia Brittonum*, Nennius remarked in the eighth century, “I have made a heap of all that I could find.” In this heap are any number of indeterminacies, ambiguities and contradictions that Nennius was arguably aware of. David Jones, a disciple of Eliot’s, begins his *Anathemata* with this quote from Nennius and then, after an unusually long preface not unlike those found in works of conceptual poetry, invites us to enter into his impressively complex and contradictory heap of information. But in the case of conceptual writing and flarf it’s unclear what is particularly new beyond the use of digital technologies (for instance, how can we not see the continuity that cuts across procedural conceptual works like Jackson Mac Low’s *Words and Ends from Ez* and Caroline Bergvall’s *Shorter Chaucer Tales* or Steve McCaffery’s “The Property: Comma” and Christian Bök’s “Great Order of the Universe”)?

To beg the question again and again: what makes any of this new? Unrelenting critiques of subjectivity (a deep skepticism of identity, expressibility and sincerity)? These have been with us for — wot — more than half a fucking century, as have investigations of flux, fluidity, indeterminacy and undecidability.

Beyond insisting on the newness of the new writing, Goldsmith also leans on “materiality” as a concept. But he seems to confuse it with perhaps mass or excess. In the production of digitally produced excess (viz. the “repurposing” or “regurgitation” of excess information in works like *Day*, *Traffic* and *The Weather*) Goldsmith believes “Materiality, too, comes to the fore: the quantity of words seem to have more bearing on a poem than what they mean.” In other words, not representation or signification — no exterior scene or self mediated through a seemingly transparent system of signs and corresponding referents — but a sort of truth to materials as old as Mondrian and Stein. Appeals to notions of materialism and materiality get a lot of play these days, but when a figure like Žižek refers to himself as a materialist philosopher he means this in the post-Hegelian sense (arguably the Marxist sense precisely *in spite of* his early critiques of Marx by way of a Hegel filtered through Lacan). But what Goldsmith seems to mean by materiality is grounded in the quantity/quality split, matter over mind, body over spirit, etc. Investigations of materialism and materiality in the present moment typically refuse or trouble this split and seek rather to consider the overdetermined relation between the material and ideological conditions of existence (that is, the *relations* of production are recognized as *material* relations. Materiality as a concept usually addresses much more than simply the product manufactured by way of these relations. In any case — given Warhol & c — attention to “materiality,” citationality and reproducibility is in itself nothing particularly new.

Google: what flarf folk do with search engines, wiki technologies and other web-based applications Ashbery, Bruce Andrews, Bern Porter, Charles Ives, Carl Ruggles and innumerable others have done with print objects and sound texts.

At bottom there’s nothing at all fundamentally new about the “new writing.” The new boss bears a striking resemblance to the old boss. Perhaps defetishizing innovation and directing attention away from newness and toward shared concerns or sources of pleasure might be the most innovative thing any contemporary writing could hope to achieve.

If we think about Lang Po as an Anglophone “movement” or (richly heterogeneous)

tendency we don't have to look too hard to find calls for innovation and newness (Ron Silliman's *New Sentence* being the obvious example). But for my money the most useful catalog of Lang Po concerns and achievements appears in a 2007 academic book review by Steve McCaffery and mentions neither innovation nor newness but instead the practices that emerged out of a culturally specific historical conjuncture. Reviewing Jennifer Ashton's *From Modernism to Postmodernism* for the summer number of *Twentieth-Century Literature*, McCaffery critiques Ashton's narrowly defined view of Lang Po and writes:

A contrived textual indeterminacy was but a single facet of Language poetry, a facet alongside a critique of voice and authenticity, an embrace of artifice, a laying bare of the method of production, a preference for heteroglossia over monoglossia while at the same time rejecting narrative modalities, and a general critique of instrumental language under capitalism, mass mediation, and the consciousness industry—all key elements in its early theorizing. Moreover, fragmentation, disjunction, grammatical transgression, and catachresis are...modernist tactics reincorporated in a different historical moment...

Beyond associating with Lang Po *all* of the characteristics (except use of digital technologies) that Goldsmith suggests separate flarf and conceptual po from earlier tendencies, McCaffery avoids the rhetoric of innovation in this description of Lang Po's concerns and achievements.

Recall Goldsmith's January 13, 2009 posting to the Poetry Foundation's *Harriet* blog—a post saturated with nostalgia for an early twentieth-century avant-garde he identifies himself with, unabashedly referring to himself as an “avantist.” Comparing the economic and political contours of the present moment to those that characterized the shift from roaring twenties to depression era thirties in the last century, Goldsmith buys into the utterly untenable split between high art and low art, good art and bad art, illegible or difficult work and intelligible or popular work. He predicts *this* historical conjuncture (marked by Obama's tenure as president) will yield a base and terribly unsophisticated populist order of cultural production. For him this moment recalls “the exile of adventurous art during the Depression when intelligibility wiped innovation off the map...”

The crucial terms in the statement are of course “intelligibility” and “innovation”—terms Goldsmith sets up as mutually exclusive categories. Here intelligibility is equated with the low, the popular, the seemingly readable—in other words, forms of culture so dummed-down that a slobbering rabble untrained in the arts can apprehend and delight in cultural objects produced by formally trained intellectuals and artists. But Goldsmith would be the first to point out that such intelligibility, such accessibility, is itself only an illusion grounded in the notion of a mythic popular audience, a mythic popular reader, a mythic masses. What Goldsmith seems to fear most is that artists and writers, scholars and critics, will buy into this myth. By buying into the myth of a popular intelligibility Goldsmith believes we foreclose on the possibility of popularizing—or exposing the rabble to—*authentic* forms of cultural and artistic innovation (i.e. formal techniques that can somehow be authenticated by an advance party, a messianic few, and then set apart from those forms that aspire to reach a seething mass of idiots through intelligibility). Goldsmith situates innovation and newness in a privileged position, one that attempts to conceal the relation between the culture industry's lust for innovation on one hand and the market forces that rely on appeals to innovation and newness on the other. Goldsmith also fails to point out

that what Peter Bürger long ago referred to as an historic avant-garde—an avant-garde historically located and responding to specific situations—stood in aggressive opposition to the institutions and institutionalization of art. In other words, the very same avant-garde of the nineteen teens and twenties that Goldsmith nostalgically looks back to worked in fact to destroy the cultural institutions Goldsmith presently supports and depends on.

These notes necessarily incomplete. And at the Niagara International Airport a few days back I saw an adolescent dragging a set of clubs after what must've been a lovely stint on the golf course in Myrtle Beach. He wore a shirt with a smiley face, smile turned upside down into a frown and a tear rolling down the cheek. The text above the face read "CHEER UP EMO KID!"

Aside from wondering what's especially innovative about Gary Sullivan's Brain-ardesque comic in the *Poetry* mag flarf feature, I also wonder how dated, banal and completely inoffensive the emo joke is. For a community that fetishizes contemporaneity and innovation, it's surprising to find such an old boring joke still in circulation. Emo = bowdlerized pejorative for emotionally needy bourgeois kids that first emerged as a subgenre of music with DC's Rites of Spring in the mid 80s. Later what? K Records? The mid-90s Olympia scene? In any case, a handful of the records sit here within arm's reach but in the end a genre I was never particularly fond of. In its present usage, a community of kids (adolescents? or for Sullivan confessional poets committed to bankrupt notions of creativity and self-expression?) that make a delightfully easy target.

yawn

Like spitting on a scrub at the front of the cheese wagon, who of *any* consequence will come to their defense? Isn't this what the culture industry wants, produces, demands — that ridiculing, hyper-competitive cultural mirror of market forces that privileges muscle at the expense of those without? Where's the courage, the risk, the avant-garde bravado, in ridiculing a defenseless and (evidently for Sullivan) vaguely defined community of poets, artists or knuckleheads otherwise shoved around by hyper-masculine frat boys, high school football heroes or former cowards with a narrow slice of cultural and economic clout? This is precisely the sort of Malthusian survival-of-the-fittest approach to cultural production and criticism that greases the gears of the market. These approaches are always rewarded. Big fucking surprise.

posted by damn the caesars at 11:47 AM

Addendum

An earlier draft of this essay was posted July 2, 2009 at <http://damnthecaesars.blogspot.com> and was foremost—as it appears here—a response to Kenny Goldsmith's introduction framing the flarf and conceptual writing feature in the July/August 2009 number of *Poetry*. But this response is also built on careful consideration of several other comments produced by Goldsmith, with special attention to the following: the talk given at the Conceptual Poetry and Its Others conference hosted by the University of Arizona's Poetry Center in May, 2008; a January 13, 2009 posting to the Poetry Foundation's *Harriet* blog; the introduction to the "Flarf vs. Conceptual Writ-

ing” event held at the Whitney April 17, 2009. To clarify some of the points made here *without* covering my tracks I have decided against revision and in favor of notes.

There’s no such thing as a single shooter. What concerns me here *is not* the work of Goldsmith or flarf or conceptual writing specifically—some of which I’ve long been grateful for (i.e. Caroline Bergvall’s philologically-oriented work) and some of which I find, as Goldsmith might say, “boring boring” (i.e. most flarf). Instead what primarily concerns me is a tendency in the arts encapsulated in the *tactics* poets, artists and writers often appeal to in order to legislate and guarantee the terms of their own critical reception. These tactics are strikingly similar to those appealed to in marketing campaigns. The logic of these tactics insists that when operating within the limits of a market economy the valorizing rhetoric that packages a product must render competing commodities obsolete. So I take issue—at least for the moment—not with the product as such but the active construction of the frame wrapped around it. The most pernicious but seemingly harmless of these framing tactics is a destructive pretense to newness—the claim that a given figure or movement has produced work or developed a practice that signals a fundamental rupture separating new from old, past from present, craft (i.e. labor; the work of bodies) from art (genius; the work of minds, managers and leaders).

I make no claim to authority in *thinking* this problem further. But I do insist on the destructive character ensconced in claims to newness and innovation—and also in identifications with *the* avant-garde, a singularizing concept that places the burden of cultural research and development on a vanguard community assigned (often retroactively) to carry us as all further as an internally undifferentiated civilization. While the work produced by artists recognized as avant-garde may deal in conceptual poetics, procedural or constraint strategies and investigations of indeterminacy articulated with critiques of Enlightenment reason and postmodern theories of subjectivity, the concept of the avant-garde as such tends to be deployed in the singular, as though there were only ever one internally coherent forward-looking avant-garde raging toward the future in a single-minded and linear fashion like an unstoppable juggernaut. Further, theorizations of the avant-garde—sometimes packaged in Marxist terms or aligned with critiques of global capital—often refuse to responsibly account for economic, cultural and geographical difference, allowing non-western *and also* class-specific “popular” (or “legible”) practices within the west to be contained and effectively ghettoized under the mantle of an ethnopoetics, ethnomusicology or cultural studies. “Legibility”—the bogey man aligned with notions of the “popular” and the “mainstream”—is central to theorizations of the avant-garde for *popular* writers like Charles Bernstein and Goldsmith and demands consideration.

But the concept of an avant-garde itself is deployed in a number of contradictory and troubling ways it may be useful to address. In one sense the avant-garde stands as a self-conscious fundamentally western social formation grounded in specific forms of cultural production—that is, since the early twentieth century there has never been a shortage of artists in Europe and the US that identify themselves and their work as avant-garde. Many a lucrative career has been built on identifications with an avant-garde. In another sense the avant-garde is an organizing category into which artists and works are absorbed and situated in opposition to mainstream culture, official verse culture, school of quietude poetry and other strategically positioned straw men that mask the mainstream status of the avant-garde itself. Consider the “Recantorium” Bernstein read at the conceptual poetry conference in Tucson and then again in Buffalo at the symposium organized around Raymond Federman’s 80th birthday. The poem—a mockingly ironic apologia renouncing the “obscurantist” critical work of Language poets and praising authenticity, sincerity and accessibility—shores the fury

of what Bernstein himself might regard as an expression of white male rage against a largely imagined mainstream fighting tooth and nail against innovative, experimental and inaccessible poetry. If we concern ourselves *only* with National Poetry Month or the poets US presidents select as poets-laureate then perhaps Bernstein has a point. But if we redirect our attention to the Library of America catalog (which includes titles by Stein, Pound, Crane, Zukofsky, Stevens, Koch, Fearing and Ashbery) or the fact that Ashbery was selected poet laureate for MTV—or the amount of federal, state and private funding invested in “innovative” poetries—or simply the fact that poems by Bernstein himself have appeared in *Poetry*, *Harper’s* and *The New York Times*—then the “mainstream” Bernstein situates so much of his more vitriolic work against seems suddenly complex and even deeply invested in particular forms of illegibility and obscurantism. But most important is how the role of the mainstream as a sort of beating post for Bernstein masks his totalizing vision of poetry as a homogeneous forward-moving genre with shared concerns. When he rails against the mainstream he advances an idea of poetry with a capital P and leaves little if any space for the work of contradictory but mutually productive poetries. This notion of a curiously vague and undertheorized mainstream plays a similar role in Goldsmith’s sense of an avant-garde. Take the introduction to flarf and conceptual writing for the Whitney event in April:

Poetry is an extraordinarily conservative world. In fact, there still is an avant-garde in poetry. Unlike in the art world where, since the dawn of modernism, the mainstream has been the avant-garde, there are still two separate flows in poetry: the mainstream and the avant-garde. And the dividing wall is very big. The mainstream in poetry is very visible: every time you pick up the *New Yorker* and see poetry snuggled next to the cartoons, it’s mainstream poetry; ever Sunday when you peruse the *New York Times* Book Review and see what books of poetry are reviewed, it’s mainstream poetry. If you picked up a book of that poetry at its most adventurous, you’d get pretty much the equivalent of early modernist painting: a bit disjunctive, slightly dissonant, but with representation and sincere emotion fully intact. It’s usually competent and fairly academic stuff that neither challenges nor offends anyone.

For Goldsmith both poetry and its avant-garde wing are singular—each presumably identifiable through its relation to legibility. In this vision of a mainstream and its antagonistic avant-garde there is no room for difference and no space for internal differentiation. The statement assumes all artists that recognize themselves as such willingly participate in a linear forward-moving race toward some sort of undefined finish line and—as the Brion Gysin comment Goldsmith’s fond of quoting suggests—poetry must *catch up* to the plastic, performance and visual arts. Where the arts are concerned there is only a single temporality within which all work is measured by the hands of one clock. The implications of this rigidly linear sense of time (i.e. climb on board with the new or get tossed out with the old) are especially destructive when spatialized and mapped onto disparate cultural communities with different and often deeply antagonistic interests.

At the present moment—and arguably since the turn of the twentieth century—the museum and university industries, profit-driven and fundamentally bourgeois in character, do not refuse avant-garde work in any of the arts. They welcome, embrace and promote it. They sustain this work financially—have mobilized a complex system of production, distribution and consumption around it. In fact, the insistence within the avant-garde on its own illegibility—which stands in relation to its exclusivity and the *illusion* of its inability to be popularized—has deeply economic underpinnings grounded in class difference. Illegibility is the avant-garde’s stock-in-trade and commitments to this illegibility are to the avant-garde what grape scissors and bread forks

were to privileged Victorians: instruments of distinction.

Consider for a moment how avant-garde artists are lampooned and effectively interpellated through caricaturish representations of the avant-garde in network television and Hollywood film: from Roger Corman's 1959 *A Bucket of Blood* to the more recent Schoener family skits on *Saturday Night Live* a commitment to unintelligibility in the production of contemporary avant-garde art is always already assumed. In this way we find Bernstein, Goldsmith, mainstream culture and the market economy that drives it in curious agreement: avant-garde work *is* opaque, impenetrable, illegible. For decades now the avant-garde has *never not* been a perfectly hailed caricature of itself—so much so that one could reasonably insist television and film police the boundary between mainstream and avant-garde cultural production as enthusiastically as Bernstein and Goldsmith.

I focus here on the issue of illegibility because valorizations of illegibility—especially among avant-garde artists—tend to identify investigations of the unreadable with cosmopolitanism, newness, innovation and exclusivity while accessibility (or the illusion of accessibility) is aligned with the primitive, the provincial, pastness and the popular. We could add to this string of oppositional concepts *writing* (on the side of illegibility or avant-garde practice) and *speech* (on the side of mainstream or popular practice). In the US and the UK these distinctions tend to identify speech-based work with the primitive, the popular and the legible and text-based work with cultural sophistication and technological advancement. A discourse of race runs through these oppositions that intersects in an elusively overdetermined way with the economic. In fact, it is perhaps this same racialized discourse that would segregate the speech-based and largely class-specific poetics emerging out of the Nuyorican Café in the 1970s from writing-based Language and post-Language poetics in the US. The situation is similar in the UK where dub and other forms of performance-based work are entirely cordoned off from critical assessments of Linguistically Innovative Poetics.

There are of course slam and dub poetics that are entirely scripted or text-based (Tracie Morris in the US and Patience Agbabi in the UK come to mind) and there are examples of Language-based and “innovative” poetics that are speech or performance oriented (Hannah Weiner and Bruce Andrews in the US or Maggie O’Sullivan and Caroline Bergvall in the UK). There is also a tremendous body of important work by poets like Nathaniel Mackey, Steve McCaffery, Harriet Mullen and others—much of it decades old—that specifically targets and troubles the speech / writing split. We could even draw the lens back centuries earlier and articulate the present fetishization of avant-garde illegibility with the modern *textual* invention of popular and ancient orality during the antiquarian turn and rise of philology, looking at anthologies “edited” by figures like Evan Evans, Thomas Percy, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, FJ Furnival or John and James MacPherson. Whether romanticizing popular “readable” work or dismissing it as ideologically constructed drivel, those who command economic and cultural capital tend to identify the *ochlos*—both “the people” for whom one has affection *and also* “the rabble” one disdains—with orality, readability, pastness and simplicity while identifying themselves with writing (technology), illegibility, innovation and sophistication. A good deal of critical theory has called attention to the constructedness of this split, marking its limitations and identifying how this opposition between “singing and signing,” as Aldon Nielsen calls it in *Black Chant*, serves to construct and reproduce economically and racially encoded subjectivities that effectively determine the movement of real bodies in the world. But despite these investigations the avant-garde willfully continues to trip over its own work, falling back on deeply entrenched concepts that are neither challenging nor offensive but safe and profitable, offering the promise of a largely warm critical reception only a fool would dare refuse.

When Robert Grenier bluntly bellowed “I HATE SPEECH” in the first number of *This* in 1971—now nearly forty years ago—the declaration resonated among a small community of US poets as an axiomatic rejection of the authenticity of voice at a moment when the production of “mainstream” or workshop poetry was predicated on the assumption that the speaking subject was fixed and coherent and the medium of poetry—language itself—was a transparent veil through which one could accurately name, point, express, share, confess. But this aphoristic statement—one that distilled an immense and complex body of then-recent critical theory—responded to a *specific* historical situation, a particular conjuncture of social forces, that has since shifted and revealed a different set of contradictions that Grenier’s declaration is no longer capable of adequately addressing. Read outside the specific set of conditions that would give rise to such a statement, the declaration “I HATE SPEECH” performs differently, again inscribing and reinscribing the opposition that aligns speech with the primitive and pits it against writing as a technology central to innovative or avant-garde work. But the status of “speech” as we read it today is markedly different from the way such a word might have been read in 1971 and what is at stake in the difference cannot be overstated.

In the end what the contemporary avant-garde so masterfully conceals—even from itself *as* it builds work around theories of the constructed, unconscious or fragmented character of subjectivity—is its reliance on a highly essentialized and class-specific notion of genius. Genius is the elephant in the room no one wants to name for fear of ending the party. A notion of genius and the messianic (*reframed* as the ability to identify, read or produce illegible work) is what lurks behind these claims to newness and innovation.

Rather than consider the extent to which popular forms of cultural production might themselves be illegible, self-reflexive and delightfully difficult to the communities that produce them (i.e. Eskimo “throat poetry,” Shaker “visual poetry” or the typographically complex and semantically indeterminate work produced by everyone from anonymous graffiti artists to children manipulating information with wiki technologies and html editors), the avant-garde insists only on its own ability to identify and produce *productively* illegible work. But what most separates avant-garde work from popular *and* mainstream work (the avant-garde is always careful to hedge its bets by conflating the two) is not a thoroughgoing investigation of the aesthetic or its relation to capital but capital itself. Recognition (precisely *in spite* of careers built on the refusal of fixed identities), canonization (precisely *in spite* of critiques of canonization) and the flow of capital are what is at stake in claims to innovation. Instead of recognizing historically, geographically and technologically specific forms of cultural production as a collaborative or collectively constructed response to a particular conjuncture of social forces, the avant-garde insists on retroactively assigning credit to itself for leading the way within the frame of a single temporality. Work which is not properly illegible is dismissed as unproductive or irrelevant. Such work is usually considered craft (labor) and not art (genius). And even art that foregrounds labor—as many of Goldsmith’s projects do—privileges the concept, the vision, the form or frame of a work over the labor invested in it. In this way labor is subordinated to the concept, stripped of its intellectual capacity and utterly devalued. When Warhol aspires to be a machine and Goldsmith aspires to be a word processor both make a gesture toward privileging instruments that manage and administrate information in almost precisely the same way a manager might legislate the productivity of a workforce or an administrator the function and flow of a department. The scale and scope of Goldsmith’s projects—the insistence on administrative frames through which content is subordinated, contained and carefully reprocessed to perform in particular ways—mirror global economic developments specific to the rise of neoliberalism. I find this

reflectivity in one way very useful but in conjunction with Goldsmith's critical statements I also find it deeply troubling. From Ubuweb to *Day* to the series of introductions and blog postings that actively struggle to determine the reception of flarf and conceptual writing Goldsmith is careful to position himself as a managing or executive liaison—the frame (or more accurately the gate) through which forms of cultural production must pass or be turned away. Here I find myself—for a host of markedly different *and* congruent reasons—in agreement with Barrett Watten when he claims in “The Expanded Object of the Poetic Field” that “class relations are a ‘cultural logic’ in ways that filter down to a baseline of the aesthetic.” At a moment in the US when the industrial base has long since fled, labor has been devalued and executives continue to be richly rewarded for creatively mismanaging information in ways that ruthlessly consolidates the flow of capital it is not surprising to find that the virtues of management and administration are those most privileged by the avant-garde.

All of the concerns raised here need to be considered much further but my sense of the destructive ideological underpinnings of claims to innovation and identifications with the avant-garde is what it is. If the avant-garde as an operative category can somehow be recuperated—and I don't believe it can—I remain convinced contemporary practices that might fall under the rubric of a carefully theorized avant-garde would never disclose themselves as such.

