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Everyday Practice Before and After Conceptual Writing

It is only possible to be ambivalent about conceptual writing,[1] and always has been. The reason for my ambivalence has a lot to do with the relationship between conceptual writing and the notion of literary genius, both in terms of what it obscures, and what it has become.

THE TROUBLE WITH GENIUS

Precisely in order to describe the author-function of conceptual writing, Marjorie Perloff dialectically refines the notion of the modern genius to make it useful in the contemporary moment. She accomplishes this by unburdening the genius of the criteria of originality.

> Once we grant that current art practices have their own particular momentum and *inventio*, we can dissociate the word *original* from its partner *genius*. If conceptual poetry makes no claim to originality—at least not originality in the usual sense—this is not to say that *genius* isn't in play. It just takes different forms.[2]

What I want to discuss is the importance of the negative complement to Perloff's own dialectic: the ground which the brilliance of genius (even the uncreative kind) obscures. This ground is the condition for the appearance and continued existence of unoriginal genius in a literary context.

As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe in *A Thousand Plateaus*, modern methods for creating openness and multiplicity in the fragmented

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work of art might succeed on the level of literary innovation, but totaliza-tion reaffirms itself at the level of the author. The genius of the experimental modernist author is that such an author can produce a fragmented mas-terpiece more realistic than realism: "The world has become chaos, but the book remains the image of the world […]. A strange mystification: a book all the more total for being fragmented."[3] The unity of the author as subject remains more or less intact, which is convenient for critics, because it reifies traditional literary values and allows for the production of literary inter-pretations to proceed. The cost for that totalization is a series of systemic exclusions to which contemporary literary studies remains oblivious.

We could call this the "Wives of Geniuses I Have Sat with" problem. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein, in the guise of Alice, writes:

> Before I decided to write this book my twenty-five years with Gertrude Stein, I had often said that I would write, The wives of geniuses I have sat with. I have sat with so many. I have sat with wives who were not wives, of geniuses who were real geniuses. I have sat with real wives of geniuses who were not real geniuses. I have sat with wives of geniuses, of near geniuses, of would be geniuses, in short I have sat very often and very long with many wives and wives of many geniuses.[4]

The wives of geniuses are supposed to serve as the ground against which the figures of the geniuses stand out. Stein makes the ridiculous and arbi-tary structure of this relationship visible, first occupying the position of the male genius herself, then ocupying the position of Alice to comment on it. As Barbara Will describes, "the result is a massive send-up of con-ventional norms of gender, identity, and discursivity within which genial male authority or wifely passivity can be articulated."[5] Here's the difficulty: Stein could point to this structure, but it was politically and aesthetically important for her to occupy the ambivalent space of the modern genius in order to do so. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, the result is that the struc-ture of the genius author remains intact, despite the way in which Stein's experimental text makes its support-structure suddenly and embarrass-ingly evident.

Genius and avant-gardism aren't going to go away as cultural catego-ries, but I don't think they're where the production of cultural difference

is actually located. Ostensibly countercultural groups like poets are very much a part of contemporary cultural machinery. They have established roles, practices, modes of production and circulation, and their own criteria for success. Change occurs elsewhere.

So, what is the ground of unoriginal genius?

There are several ways to answer that question, and none of them are flattering. A growing number of poets and critics have pointed out, and continue to elaborate on, the predominance of white, cis-gendered upper-middle-class males in conceptual writing, and the ideological formations that have made that positioning possible (see especially Julia Spahr and Stephanie Young's "Foulipo"[6] and recently, Fred Moten's "On Marjorie Per-loff"[7]). My response to such critiques is simply, yes. I'm not interested in attempting to refute them and I'm not the person to articulate them further. But they are not the subject of this essay, which concerns the nature of my own longstanding, well-documented ambivalences about conceptual writing as a practice from before it had its name or its current notoriety, and extending into the uncertainties of the present.

Conceptual writing had a potential for a particular critique of literary studies in general and the culture of poetry in particular, but that potential remained embryonic because of the manner in which events unfolded over the last two decades.

What I was hoping for, at minimum, was that conceptual writing would be the occasion to recognize the richness and sophistication of everyday cultural practice in a networked digital milieu, and that the vehicle for that recognition would be conceptual writing's engagement with the media, formats, and genres of digital information. In a best-case scenario, such a recognition would have been accompanied by a serious interrogation of the objects and methods of literary criticism, of the author-function of the poet, and of the deeply parochial nature of poetic culture.

Instead, conceptual writing became conceptual poetry: that is, yet another way to write more poems. The machinery of literary production (let along the machinery of culture at large) remained untouched by the entire process. Subsequently, contemporary celebrity culture discovered that it could use an unlikely mixture of everyday conceptualism and conceptual poetry as a tool to enhance its own power. Ironically, this occurs when celebrities use conceptual practice as a tactic for asserting that they too are "just folks."

In what could be called poetic justice, unoriginal genius becomes the ground for celebrity conceptualism.

EVERYDAY AMBIVALENCE

There are a set of contemporary everyday practices and cultural techniques that precede, exist coterminously with, and have survived the demise of conceptual writing. To varying degrees, interest in these practices appears in Flarf, conceptual writing, and electronic literature. For want of a better term, I call these practices "everyday conceptualism."

Both "everyday" and "conceptualism" have complex intellectual histories that extend back decades (and, by some accounts,[8] by centuries). For an introduction to theories of the everyday, Stephen Johnstone's anthology *The Everyday* is helpful.[9] For conceptual art proper, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson is a good starting point.[10] Michael Sheringham's *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* is particularly useful, because it emphasizes the imbrication of the two terms: "Since the 1960s, artistic practice has often consisted in doing away with the artwork and devising ways of focusing the viewer's attention on 'mere real things.'"[11] But this is not, and has never been, a simple process that invariably produces successful results, because its object is far from simple.

As Henri Lefebvre, the major theorist of everyday life in modernity has noted, the salient feature of the everyday is its ambivalence. The everyday is "[a] mixture of nature and culture, the historical and the lived, the individual and the social, the real and the unreal, a place of transitions, of meetings, interactions and conflicts."[12] It is the site of the mundane and the tedious grinding processes that characterize human existence, but also of the events that escape them. Everyday life contains the possibility for critique and thus for its own transformation. Even before yoking the everyday to any form of conceptual art practice, then, it's necessary to be thinking about how to conceive of the everyday while holding these aspects in tension.

In "Everyday Speech," Maurice Blanchot concurs:

> Always the two sides meet: the daily with its tedious side, painful and sordid (the amorphous, the stagnant), and the inexhaustible, irrecusable, always unfinished daily that always escapes forms or structures (particularly those

of political society: bureaucracy, the wheels of government, parties). And that there may be a certain relation of identity between these two opposites is shown by the slight displacement of emphasis that permits passage from one to the other; as when the spontaneous, the informal—that is, what escapes forms—becomes the amorphous and when, perhaps, the stagnant merges with the current of life, which is also the very movement of society.[13]

Blanchot's point, which he reiterates thoughout the piece, is the slipperiness of the concept: the everyday constantly eludes our ability to easily categorize it. It takes on different flavours and textures at different levels of society, as people perform their everyday practices in myriad ways.

One of the complex things about the everyday is its relationship to the creative process. Lefebvre insists that the everyday exists in productive tension with creativity rather than serving as its opposite: "it is in everyday life and starting from everyday life that genuine creations are achieved, those creations which produce the human and which men produce as part of the process of becoming human: works of creativity."[14] For Lefebvre, the creative and the mechanical aspects of the everyday form "a permanently reactivated circuit."[15] Mike Featherstone elaborates: as forms of specialized theoretical knowledge like the arts and sciences develop, they separate from the ground of the everyday, until the knowlegde they produce feeds back in order to "rationalize, colonize and homogenize everyday life."[16] Everyday life is what authenticates creative acts, but these acts in turn interrogate our sense of what is possible within everyday practice.[17]

Johnstone jokes that "most artists don't read Henri Lefebvre or Michel de Certeau in order to discover the ordinary,"[18] but few people in general read or view the work of the artists who spent the last century "discovering the ordinary." Even when non-artists do encounter art that concerns the everyday, as Johnson observes in reference to the range of perspectives in his anthology, "the question of what actually happens to quotidian phenomena when they are recoded into art is still a thorny issue for many critics."[19]

I think that what everyday conceptualism investigates isn't the individual writing subject so much as it is "the linguistic and cultural community in which that self is a participant."[20] The writing subjects engaging in such practices are often unaware of or completely indifferent to the long history of experimental aesthetic strategies, though their entire culture is steeped

in them. They don't always identify as poets or artists. Some aren't even human. They don't call what they produce art or literature, nor do they circulate it through the machinery of literary or artistic production. But because the people who encounter everyday conceptualism don't think of it as art or literature, nor do they imagine its creators as literary authors or artists, it remains largely invisible to scholars, theorists, and critics.

As Michel De Certeau, Fredric Jameson, and Carl Lovitt note in "The Oppositional Practices of Everyday Life," the inability of scholarship to comprehend everyday practice is not a new problem:

> [Research institutions tend] to retain from such practices and activities the merest physical or linguistic *objects*, which are then labelled according to their thematics and their places of origin, placed under glass, offered up for exegesis, and asked to disguise […] the legitimation of an order which its custodians consider to be immemorial and "natural." In other cases, from the *languages* of such social operations, they extract tools and products to be ranged in exhibits of technical gadgets, spread out inertly along the borders of an untroubled system.[21]

The artifacts (textual or otherwise) that any given practice produces are not the same as the practice. The institutions and disciplines that extract and circulate objects from such practices do so for their own purposes, which are often inimical to those of the practitioners. The ongoing controversy over Dominic Gagnon's film *Of the North* is a case in point. The film is a 74-minute mashup whose director says "he drew from around 500 hours of footage of the circumpolar region and stitched it together at his computer in Montreal. The soundtrack is made up of Inuit musicians—also taken from web clips—and sound design by the filmmaker himself."[22] The film description on the website for Dokufest, The International Documentary and Short Film Festival, situates *Of the North* in the history of revolutionary critique: "[Gagnon] creates an anti-exotic Vertovian 'Kino-Eye,' which reveals trashy and unbridled acculturation and takes apart the existing clichés about the Inuit, too often confined to the borders of the contemporary world."[23] That many people, including, but not limited to, Inuit artists and filmmakers, continue to argue that the film perpetuates the very stereotypes which it claims to criticize, demonstrates the range and gravity of the problem.

In the specific case of literary studies, scholars still have not developed a vocabulary to talk about the aesthetic aspects of daily practice in general without claiming them for literature, or insisting that poets have some sort of special status as a result of doing what many others are also doing. Engaging with these practices could have taught us how to interpret them—and, by extension, it might have made us realize that the materiality, production, circulation, transfiguration, and consumption of media-forms should matter more to literary studies than they do. It might even have led to an interrogation of what matters to literary studies, and of the kinds of claims that we make for literature's power.

Perloff's question is "how has the digital dissemination of new poetry and poetics […] affected the writing of poetry itself?"[24] Mine is different. Has thinking about daily cultural practice in a networked digital world sufficiently affected how we think about aesthetic categories like poetry or the author-function of the poet?

EVERYDAY CONCEPTUALISM
In order to make sense of this question, we first need to ask another. What does everyday conceptualism look like? Some examples follow. I have years of accumulated folders of such things, but these four will do for now.

1 *Pepys' Diary*.[25] On 26 December 2002, Phil Gyford launched the blog *Pepys' Diary*, on which he posted a new entry every day from the voluminous diary of seventeenth-century British Parliamentarian and businessman Samuel Pepys. Gyford completed the project for the first time on 31 May 2012, then rolled it back to the start and began again. Gyford comes from the world of strategic design, so this is not a literary project, but, as Russell Davies wrote, part of "the non-commercial, hobbyist web that destroyed so many business models back then and which no one talks about any more."[26] On one hand, then, the *Diary* is close to the notion of everyday practice as a kind of popular "rip-off" tactic,[27] but it's also complicit with the functioning of the neoliberal "creative" economy. In terms of its prescience, duration, scope, and execution, *Pepys' Diary* vaults over the head of any number of conceptualist literary book-reblogging projects, but makes no claims for the refined sensibilities of its creator or for its own aesthetic

merit. It's a vital bit of context for many examples of digital conceptual writing practice, but I've never heard a literary critic even mention it.

2 **Every death in the Game of Thrones books, tabbed.**[28] This is the title of a Reddit post from 2013 that received 2,493 points (91 percent upvoted) and garnered 1,019 comments. It is still popular enough that it occasionally drifts back on to the Reddit front page and has been circulating on Twitter as well. This example is much humbler in scale and aspiration than my first. It resembles any number of aesthetic, treated-book projects, but it moves through different channels of circulation. Because it's associated with a Reddit username ("force-duse" https://www.reddit.com/user/forceduse), it has a very different author-function than a poet or an artist. What's important here is not just the ostensible contents of the image that appeared on Reddit—a snapshot of the five published volumes of the *Game of Thrones* series in a stack on a table, with coloured Post-it tabs protruding from the top end, each marking the death of a character in the book. What matters is the documentation of this object as a digital snapshot, its posting on social media, the rituals of commenting, upvoting and downvoting, subsequent reposting on other networks (with and without attribution), the algorithmic oversight and metadata gathering associated with all of these activities, and the business models of companies like Reddit that position its users as their product. *This* is the material and political economy of contemporary textual production, literature included, and it needs to figure in critical interpretation (not just literary criticism, which sorely needs such analysis) far more than it does.

3 **The Leila Texts.**[29] From 2007 to 2012, writer Leila Sales saved and blogged the messages that were sent to her (on average, five times a day), all of which should have gone to other Leilas on the Verizon network. What's of interest is not just the mildly humorous content of the texts. This "side project" is exemplary of the casual projects of collection and curation elsewhere online, and, for that matter, in poetry and art, but this project would be excluded from consideration by many critics because its author writes young adult fiction. I've written elsewhere about the formal resemblance between conceptual writing and fanfiction,[30] so I won't go into detail here. Back on the subject of

political economy, I'd suggest that we need to address more than the way that affect and syntax shift to accomodate the formal and medial contraints of cellphone screens and SMS protocols. The circumstances of its production and appearance in the context of the largest U.S. provider of wireless communication services, and the vertical integration of hardware platforms, software and carriers, is worth considering, as is the fact that this is the sort of thing that can result in bestselling books (like the Tumblr feed *Texts from Dog*)[31] or bestselling books *and* a television contract for a situation comedy, starring William Shatner (as in the case of the Twitter feed *Shit My Dad Says*).[32]

4   **The Nanex Crop Circle of the Day**.[33] Given that somewhere between 49 percent and 61 percent of Internet traffic is now robotic, depending on whose numbers you believe,[34] it's worth mentioning nonhuman aesthetics at this point. Procedural and algorithmic writing have been around for a long time, but humans have been minority producers and consumers of text for years (somewhere, Friedrich Kittler is grimly satisfied). In 2010, a stock monitoring company called Nanex began posting examples of visualizations of bizarre patterns produced by robotic price-cycling, which was occurring hundreds of times a day, even when robots were minor contributors to online stock-trading activity. On the *Harriet* blog, Christian Bök has described these patterns as "unique, visual poem[s]."[35] But seeing these visualizations as poems is part of *human* aesthetics. We also need to think about what nonhumans write, and how they read (each other and us), if we're going to understand twenty-first century textual economies.

There are multitudes of other things I could have cited here. These examples skew toward the "successful" end of the spectrum, at least in terms of finding an audience of some sort, for some period of time, which is not always the desired outcome for everyday conceptualism.

In the early days of Twitter, for example, I noticed that I was being followed by a Japanese account that only followed people named Darren. There were maybe seventeen Darrens at most on the "Following" list, and the account never posted a thing. People making pixelated murals in office windows out of Post-it Notes have an audience of their co-workers and random passersby, but only for as long as they can maintain the goodwill of

management and the custodial staff, are also engaging in everyday conceptualism. And so are the throngs of people making and posting the "fanboy supercuts" first described by Andy Baio in 2008.³⁶ Or the funny and clever Amazon reviews, Craigslist ads, and eBay auctions that each constitute new literary forms. The top positive and top critical reviews for "BiC for Her Medium Ballpoint Pen—Black, Box of 12," on Amazon.co.uk, for example, demonstrate how a form like the online consumer review, a genre whose ostensible purpose is conveying consumer information, becomes a vehicle for social satire:

Top positive review
See all 342 positive reviews›
2,837 of 2,897 people found this helpful
5.0 out of 5 stars Great product!
By A keen skier on 3 September 2012

My husband has never allowed me to write, as he doesn't want me touching men's pens. However when I saw this product, I decided to buy it (using my pocket money) and so far it has been fabulous! Once I had learnt to write, the feminine colour and the grip size (which was more suited to my delicate little hands) has enabled me to vent thoughts about new recipe ideas, sewing and gardening. My husband is less pleased with this product as he believes it will lead to more independence and he hates the feminine tingling sensation (along with the visions of fairies and rainbows) he gets whenever he picks it up.

Top critical review
6,460 of 6,538 people found the following review helpful
1.0 out of 5 stars Insufficent, 28 Aug. 2012

By Mr. J. Stevens
Normally I only use pens designed and created for real men, in colours appropriate to such instruments of masculinity—black like my chest hair or blue like the steely glint of my eyes, or the metallic paintwork of my convertible Mustang sportscar. Imagine then the situation I found myself in when, upon taking delivery of another shipment of motorbike parts and footballs, I reached for and grasped not my normal BIC pen, but a "BIC for Her

Amber Medium Ballpoint Pen" (evidently ordered by my well-meaning, but ill-informed girlfriend whilst my back was turned). I knew something was wrong when I had to physically restrain my hands, gnarled and worn from a lifetime of rock-climbing and shark- wrestling, from crushing the fragile implement like a Fabergé egg. Things only went downhill from there.

Normally my hand writing is defined and strong, as if chiselled in granite by the Greek gods themselves, however upon signing my name I noticed that my signature was uncharacteristically meandering and looping. More worryingly the dots above the I's manifested themselves as hearts, and I found myself finishing off the signature with a smiley face and kisses. Obviously I had no choice but to challenge the delivery man to a gun fight on the rim of an erupting volcano in order to reassert my dominance. Had I not won this honourable duel this particular mistake might have resulted in a situation that no amount of expensive single malt whiskey and Cuban cigars could banish. I leave this review here as a warning to all men about the dangers of using this particular device, and suffice-it-to-say will return to signing my name with a nail gun as normal.[37]

Such personal practices interest me even more than the examples that I've listed above, but they are more difficult to document.

Everyday conceptualism includes a wide range of author-functions, formats, and genres, all of which lie well outside the ambit of poetry, and arguably of literature itself. It occurs on the level of the everyday, and tends to manifest itself in the forms that John Guillory refers to as "information genres."

INFORMATION GENRES AND THE POET AS ANTENNA

I've been trying to find a way to write about this sort of phenomena since the late 1990s. Reading John Guillory's article "The Memo and Modernity" in 2004 gave me a language to do so.[38] Before there was a clear consensus about what it was or what it was going to be called, what conceptual writing did was to draw attention to the rhetorical aspects of mundane forms of writing that canonical literature usually neglects: weather reports, legal transcripts, social media feeds, stock quotes, Usenet posts and so on. These texts make up the bulk of everything that's written, but we pretend that they

don't matter in any capacity other than the moment. Guillory describes such texts as belonging to what he calls "information genres."

In order to use these genres to convey that peculiar modern invention we call "information," we have to pretend that they have no rhetorical value of their own that might taint it.[39] By repackaging great swaths of information in media and formats other than the ones in which it initially appeared, conceptual writing drew attention to the fact that all writing is poetic in that it always says more than we intend, and we assign value to it in keeping with large sets of external factors that sometimes have little to do with the ostensible content.

What everyday conceptualism demonstrates is that poets are far from the only ones who engage in such practices, and that they're not necessarily the best at them when they do. Further, the framing of such practices as literary or artistic might draw attention to them in a limited capacity, among literary critics, but it also turns them into something else—a style that can be mobilized elsewhere, to very different effect. What I wanted to have followed on the heels of conceptual writing was a general interrogation of literariness, poeticity and the author-function in the contemporary moment, but what happened instead in both theory and practice was a redoubled emphasis on the figure of the poet-celebrity as an exemplary conduit for emergent media practice.

The "artist as antennae" has been one of the command metaphors behind the discourse of poetry and technology for about a century.[40] In 1922, Ezra Pound declaimed that "Artists are the antennae of the race."[41] Marshall McLuhan expanded the metaphor in 1964, writing that "Art as radar acts as an "early alarm system."[42] Christopher Dewdney's "Parasite Maintenance" updated the technology in McLuhan's metaphor for the late twentieth century, imagining the poet as a satellite dish: "The radio telescope becomes a model of the bi-conscious interface between 'the mind' and signals from the 'outside' which the poet receives."[43] What these models have in common is that they imagine communication in terms of a more-or-less linear transmission whose success hinges on the refined sensibilities of the artist. As James Carey pointed out, the transmission model of communication is always wrapped up in "complementary models of power and anxiety."[44] But poets don't lead, and it's time to get over our anxiety about that.

Moreover, the model of poet-as-*bricoleur* (or, to use the metaphors of the moment, "curator" or "DJ") reifies the notion of genius in the form of

the person with an especially refined sense of taste (with all of the class implications that that implies left intact). For want of space and time, I'll recommend "Post-Postmodernism?"—Owen Hatherley's critique of Nicolas Bourriaud on this subject.[45]

So, I'm not impressed by projects like 89Plus and Hans Ulrich Obrist's "Poetry Will Be Made By All!" because it entirely misses the point.[46] When everybody makes poetry, the residual cultural privilege that clings to the position of the poet should disappear. In 2014, poetry sales in Canada hovered around 0.17 percent of all book sales,[47] and they haven't changed much from that figure over the last half decade. At such a time, gathering "1000 Books By 1000 Poets" is much less interesting to me than what everyone other than self-identified poets do in other contexts. What we have overlooked for too long are the messy, contingent ways in which media, formats, and genres overlap each other. Rather than origins or influences, it might be more productive to consider, as Foucault suggests, institutionalizations, transformations, affiliations, and relationships.[48]

The cycling between everyday and aesthetic conceptualism isn't an either-or proposition, "art = good; everyday = bad" or "everyday = good; art = bad." Nor is it simply a matter of maintaining a kind of homeostasis, because the dialectic can take genuinely surprising turns—and such turns can be antithetical to anything resembling critique. The most recent ambivalent, dialectical transformation in the long series of pairings of the everyday and the exceptional is the development of celebrity conceptualism.

CELEBRITY CONCEPTUALISM

For at least half a century, critics and artists have been trying without cease to use art and daily life to correct each others' perceived shortcomings. As Featherstone notes, the process of "de-differentiation" that I imagined would result after conceptual writing has happened before, in other contexts. This struggle can take (and has taken) a number of forms, one of which is the critique of the artist as heroic or special in some way:

> [T[his can also be manifest in the critique of the heroic image of the cultural specialist, the scientist, artist or intellectual as hero, in favour of an emphasis upon everyday mundane practices which are regarded as equally capable of producing what some want to regard as extraordinary or elevated insights or objectifications.[49]

Featherstone's larger point is that the value of everyday life relates to the value of its counter-concept. When artists are culturally important, everyday life is downplayed. When the cultural capital of art drops, populism prevails. So what happens in the contemporary moment, which is dominated by a discourse of celebrity?

Celebrity studies is a large and growing field with a substantial critical literature, and it is of increasing relevance to all aspects of cultural studies, including literary studies, where authors at all levels are now arguably celebrities first and producers of texts second. If the everyday and the aesthetic have long mainted themselves in a sort of dialectical impasse, the discourse of celebrity derives much of its power by subsuming both categories in what P. David Marshall calls a "contradictory discourse of both value and valuelessness." Celebrity is at once a way of becoming visible on the world stage, while at the same time admitting that it's entirely possible to achieve such visibility without having achieved anything of cultural significance.[50] For Marshall, celebrity is the antithesis of earlier notions of cultural heroism, where the hero's actions matter precisely because they emerge from, and make a contribution back to, everyday life.

Several conceptual writers have achieved some degree of fame, or, at least, notoriety. They are, however, still poets, and thus most likely to serve as vanishing mediators in a process that is currently allowing actual celebrities to bolster their fame by making incursions into the everyday via avant-garde artistic strategies from the previous century.

The next logical step after the period of cycling between the aestheticization of the everyday and the corresponding secularization of the aesthetic is yet another dialectical elaboration, which subsumes the whole process: celebrity conceptualism. This practice allows a celebrity to demonstrate simultaneously that they have a more refined aesthetic sensibility than other celebrities *and* that they are "just folks" messing around with social media in the same goofy ways as the rest of us, without any tedious mucking about with the world of small-press poetry and university professors.

Celebrity conceptualism is an identifiable part of the shift in the cultural logic of celebrity that Marshall has described as a move from a regime of representation (where celebrities provide a point of identification for a mass audience in an era of broadcast media) to one of presentation (where they ostensibly open their private world for public consumption in an era

of networked digital media).[51] This is not an entirely new phenomenon, and it probably has its relative beginnings in the 1980s. By the end of the 1990s, Brian Joseph Davis was lampooning it in *Portable Altamont*.[52] But as a result of smartphones, tablets, and other forms of mobile media, it has increased in its frequency and visibility.

What does celebrity conceptualism look like? Here are some examples (and again, there are many, many others):

1 **Richard Dreyfuss reads the iTunes EULA.**[53] On 8 June 2011, tech journalists at *C|Net* posted a dramatic reading by actor Richard Dreyfuss of the Apple iTunes End User License Agreement (EULA). These documents are notoriously long and incomprehensible to anyone other than contract lawyers—in other words, they are a textbook example of an information genre. There was already considerable public discourse about Apple's EULAs in particular, because two months earlier (27 April, 2011), *South Park* first screened its infamous episode, "HUMANCENTiPAD,"[54] detailing the horrible things that befall those who do not read the fine print. By popular demand, *C|Net* subsequently made audio files of the performance available for remixing, indicating not only popular demand to do so, but the long-established de-skilling of digital remixing into something that is now an established part of everyday practice. As for Dreyfuss, who had been out of the spotlight for many years at this point, he had more to gain from participating in this exercise than not.

2 **Cindy Crawford photographed reading Uncreative Writing**[55] In the year 2011, celebrity conceptualism broke. In November, the Poetry Foundation's blog *Harriet* posted a photo by New York paparazzo and book enthusiast Lawrence Schwartzwald, who photographed supermodel Cindy Crawford reading Kenneth Goldsmith's *Uncreative Writing*. Schwartzwald specializes in photographs of celebrities, poets at launches and other events, New Yorkers reading, and, occasionally, New York celebrities reading poetry. The Crawford photo is thus part of a well-developed aesthetic practice. In Schwarzwald's body of work, there is at least one similar example (also from 2011), capturing Katie Couric in the act of reading Charles Bernstein's *Attack of the Difficult Poems*,[56] another work of avant-garde poetics

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by one of the few members of the preceding avant-gardes to receive conceptual writing with an open mind. What these examples point to is that celebrity conceptualism is not an individual process that stems directly from celebrities, geniuses, or other special individuals, but the culmination of complex assemblages of agents. Entire communities of individuals figure into this production, including writers, editors, and celebrities (in this case, supermodels and news commentators), artists from other fields, as well as people on the street, all willing to be staged, photographed, and viewed. The publishing schedules of institutions like established literary journals are involved, as are technologies like database-driven weblogs, RSS feeds, social media, and print books. Techniques like candid photography, blogging, reading series, book launches, and social media posting, all play a role. Celebrity conceptualism did not just *happen*, nor did it *happen to* poetry in some regrettable predatory fashion. The poetry community played an active and willing role in producing it.

3 **Jennifer Garner reads Go the Fuck to Sleep for Vanity Fair**[57] The commissioned, celebrity stunt is now not only part of the production of the conceptualist celebrity; it is also an established journalistic genre. That it appears in *Vanity Fair* means that it serves the double duty of performing not just for a general audience, but for other celebrities. The prose of Joanna Robinson, author of the piece, draws on the cadences and tropes of a voiceover advertising a new situation comedy: "Samuel L. Jackson recorded the audiobook in classic deadpan, while Werner Herzog put an accented spin on his version. But what those and other celebrity readings lacked was the chipper-but-frazzled delivery of a mother on the verge." The everyday travails of a divorced mother of three are inseparable from both the archness of an established aesthetic sophistication and a lifestyle of nearly unimaginable wealth and privilege. Incidentally, *Go the Fuck to Sleep* was published in 2011.

4 **Shia LaBeouf** There was nothing bizarre about LaBeouf's behaviour in 2014–2015. A generous reading would be that his behaviour was perfectly continuous with more than a century of avant-garde practice, from Dada onward (and for the non-generous reading, substitute "art-school boy" for "avant-garde" in the previous sentence). Moreover, his

behaviour was also typical of the mode of "parallel publicity" that Marshall described in 2006 as part of the celebrity regime of presentation:

> We are seeing an acceleration of scandal not between acting assignments for major stars but during the release of films to generate parallel publicity. The film star's aura of distance and distinction is breaking down as the film commodity's capacity to generate unique cultural capital dissolves. For actors, this is a new level of publicizing to strengthen their own presence and capital—but it betrays a decline in overall significance of the industry and their stars. It also underlines the dispersal of information about celebrities as it proliferates via the Web and its blogs, via fan websites and through the new mediascape more rapidly and with less possibility for industry control.[58]

Another entire essay could be written about the manner in which LaBeouf imbricated conceptual writing into his stunts during this period—and how conceptual writing aided and abetted the publicity process. (I pointed out LaBeouf's plagiarism of *Uncreative Writing* to Goldsmith in an email on 2 January 2014, and he began speaking to the press about it shortly after.) But again, what interests me is the way that everyday conceptualism rather than conceptual writing established the conditions for this phase of LaBeouf's career two years earlier. The posting of the song "Shia LaBeouf" to SoundCloud by the musician Rob Cantor in 2012, followed by its subsequent spread through Facebook, Reddit, Tumblr, and the open web, with a revival in 2014 after the video release of a melodramatic operetta online,[59] all demonstrate a collective desire to imagine, if not a collective striving to produce, LaBeouf as someone more interesting than the earlier, blander phases of his career might suggest. Becoming a celebrity conceptualist was the most predictable thing that LaBeouf could have done.

BASTA

By way of conclusion, I'd like to return to the thesis that conceptual writing will serve as the vanishing mediator between everyday conceptualism and celebrity conceptualism. It's worth noting that one of the major organs of digital, popular memory has neatly excised conceptual writing from its recounting of this period of LaBeouf's career, although it's easy to find in journalism all over the web. Kenneth Goldsmith appears twice in all of

Know Your Meme, but as of this writing, not in any of the entries on Shia LaBeouf's conceptualist phase.[60] And, if conceptual writing and unoriginality was briefly contrary to popular desires and practices, it is no longer so. As Ian Bogost notes, "The truth is: nobody wants new experiences. Not many of them anyway. And that's fine. Nobody wants new genre fiction, either. Small shifts."[61] We are in a deeply unoriginal cultural moment, and conceptual practice is a daily occurrence.

The most radical thing that we white, cis-, upper-middle-class poets could do, for the moment, would be to embrace that vanishing to give up the Modernist author-function of poet-genius. That is, to accept the demands of the moment, and to evacuate the role in favour of something else: a sustained attention to everyday, creative practice, which now, for better or worse, also includes celebrity conceptualism. As Sheringham notes, to pay attention to the everyday is to focus not upon "the niceties of individual psychology," but upon "a commonality of experience that is endlessly forming and reforming in human activities and encounters."[62] Sometimes being an agent of history is about knowing when to shut the fuck up.

NOTES

1 CONCEPTUAL WRITING is an umbrella term for a heterogeneous set of early twenty-first century writing practices that respond to the implications of a networked digital milieu for the creative process, for the social function of authorship, and for the economy of publishing. Conceptual writing makes frequent (though not exclusive) use of compositional constraints (for example, alphabetization, organization by syllabic length), which act as a means for organizing their source material—often appropriated at length from discourses that have been neglected by canonical literature (for example, weather reports, legal transcripts, Usenet posts). Conceptual writing eschews the syntactic opacity that has characterized L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, even though the former draws inspiration from many of the latter's texts. See Darren Wershler, "Conceptual Writing," *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Digital Media*, eds. Marie-Laure Ryan, Lori Emerson, and Benjamin J. Robertson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2014).

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