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# Presentism and Periodization in Language Writing, Conceptual Art, and Conceptual Writing

*Barrett Watten*

In this essay, I contrast three movements of contemporary art practice involving language—Language writing, conceptual art, and the recently emerged movement of conceptual writing—in terms of how each formally and historically encodes concepts of presentism and periodization. While each of these movements constructs a version of “the present,” or sees itself as an art of the “present time,” in formally and historically specific ways, in each presentism and periodization are differently implicated in the work’s formal construction. While periodization as a concept is well understood (after Michel Foucault, Fredric Jameson, and Hayden White), “presentism” is a recently activated and contested term, reflecting specific debates in cultural, gender, and digital studies.<sup>1</sup> In this discussion, *presentism* will stand for an interpretive practice in which object and interpreter are not historically framed, even if temporal indices of present time are invoked (or not); *periodization* provides historical framing for an interpretive practice. Presentism thus connects to nonnarrative representation, in the sense that both rely on the suspension or refusal of narrative, while periodization requires narrative frames. (I propose to include the often-heard usage of *presentism* as “the interpretation of past events in terms of present concerns” within the more general sense of interpretation that does not distinguish between past and present.)

In Language writing, I am interested in how nonnarrative forms as presentist are embedded in periodizing historical narratives, a complementary perspective to how nonnarrative forms may themselves be historical. As combining both the objective and subjective historicity of nonnarrative, conceptual artist On Kawara's date paintings are a crux for my discussion of the historicity of nonnarrative (or a presentism of history), given their referential shifting between the time of production (the day on which they were made) and subsequent historical frames for their represented dates as historical. On Kawara's citation of historical contexts for these dated works, newspaper clippings placed "under erasure"—not exhibited with the date paintings but stored in boxes fabricated individually for them—become formal registers of the historical time frames in which they are made. Following my consideration of On Kawara's conceptualism, I discuss the positioning of the absolute present as the "date," within a series of dates in conceptual writing (after White's discussion of the narrative forms of the annal and chronicle in *Content of the Form*). In the recent emergence of literary conceptualism, I see a historical invocation of the language strategies of conceptual art that paradoxically provides a narrative frame for conceptual writing's claim to be purely an art of the present, to represent nothing but the New, at the intersection of the historically prior practices of Language writing and conceptual art. Finally, I place all three nonnarrative genres at the intersection of aesthetic form, time, and history, renewing an earlier call for a historical explanation of practices of non-narration.<sup>2</sup>

### Writing the Present

Today is **Saturday, December 18, 2010**. As I begin work on the revised version of my article, it is now **10:10 AM**. I began writing the first draft of this essay on **Sunday, October 18, 2009** and first presented it in public on **Saturday, October 24, 2009** at **8:45 AM**. The present version will circulate to the reader on **Wednesday, December 22, 2010**; it will be revised on receipt of readers' comments on **Saturday, January 15, 2011**; it will be published in print and digital form on **day/month/date/year**; and you are reading it on **day/month/date/year**. The relation of the actual date on which these sentences were written, spoken, or read to the dates as

represented here will vary on a sliding scale from identical to yet-to-be-determined, while the frame of reference that determines that relationship will shift continually. The index of the date is in this sense a referential shifter.<sup>3</sup>

On the day I began work on this essay—**Sunday, October 18, 2009**—I had just returned from presenting three lecture/seminars in France on *The Grand Piano*, a multi-authored, ten-volume, collective writing project. On that day, the project was still incomplete but well on its way to completion, with part 9 shipping from the printer on **Wednesday, October 24, 2009**, while the entire edition has now been completed, with the production of volume 10, on **Friday, October 22, 2010**. In my lectures in France, I tried to delineate changes in the nature of the “literary” that took place, as literary history, between the work’s two periodizing frames: **1975–1980**, the six years during which the ten writers met in San Francisco, formed relationships, read their work at the Grand Piano reading series (and other venues), and developed as poets; and **1999–2010**, the twelve years in which the same writers worked on *The Grand Piano* and brought it to conclusion. Presentism and periodization are structurally connected through both time frames, in that the real time in which events took place in San Francisco over six years are reenacted over the twelve-year period in which *The Grand Piano* was written—one period’s duration of present time mapping the other’s in a roughly 2:1 ratio. I also wanted to indicate the difference between speaking of the project in the midst of writing it, in the middle of its not-yet-complete periodizing frame, versus speaking of it in the present, after its periodization, as a fundamental chasm around which literature, and the genre of autobiography in particular, are organized and received. I began my account of *The Grand Piano* in **2009**, with its periodizing frame still open-ended, but am revising it in **2010** and, now that it is done, publishing it in **2011**, when I will look back on it. All literature is split between present and period in this way.<sup>4</sup>

Within this shift from one period to the next, a change in the nature of the “literary” occurred (for writers in the project, but also in a broader historical sense). In the first period, the work of a group of writers (or avant-garde poetic tendency) individually and collectively shared a range of formal features in common: a foregrounding of language as opposed to reference; an emphasis on the material text as iterative or noncommunicative.

tive; an avoidance of the speaking subject, personae, or identity claims; and genre experiments in nonnarrative form.<sup>5</sup> In the later period, the same writers, to greater or lesser degrees, contextualized that work in referential, communicative, and personal terms, within the form of an experimental autobiography that permitted active interrogation of genre as a feature of the writing itself. (At the same time, the group of writers had become geographically dispersed and communicated with each other through new digital media that did not exist at the earlier moment.) Textual nonnarrative, then, is framed within an experimental form of narration, in the open horizon of the serial work, in a manner that reproduces how nonnarrative writing was undertaken as a form of the present within a historical period whose horizons were indeterminate. The possibility of locating a nonnarrative present within a periodizing framework that constructs it as both past and future is returned to again and again in *The Grand Piano*. The following excerpt by Author A constructs an unfolding dialectic of present time and past recollection as a framework for the literary that shifts between past, present, and future:<sup>6</sup>

It is a Saturday in late September, either late morning or early afternoon, a time I associate with writing. Robert Creeley wrote, “What is the / day of the / year we / sit in with / such fear”? Did he mean a general anxiety, or a violent reaction to a particular day? As if to say, the day itself doesn’t matter, only the fear? Or was the day itself experienced as a crisis?

Each day of the year has its problems, certainly, but they may not add up to a fear. Writing in the absolute present (which fades away as I write), I am looking down on a field that was once a stretch of the Berlin Wall, now restored to native grasses. It had been storming last night, but this morning I see someone just waking up who had slept in the middle of the field, under a white blanket. His or her hair also appears to be white. To what degree were trust or terror a factor in selecting that site, from an “open field” of possibility? (4:67; corrected)

As literary analysis, this passage moves between numbers of temporal registers. To begin with, lyric time as a form of the present is invoked through

Creeley's stanza from *A Day Book* (1972), which like *Pieces* (1969) is a sustained meditation of the relation of lyric to experiential time—within the historical period of the Vietnam War and the countercultural movement, it may be added ("That day . . . ; 449). Creeley's question is open-ended and expressed in open form, moving from the "fear" contained in the present to the question of the day the fear is experienced on, the lyric becomes a shifter much like the historical date, even as the date is withheld. Creeley's stanza, as cited, is the site for a prose meditation on the dateless fear that it records on a specific day, a **Saturday**—given a historical register by the "open field" of a stretch of the Berlin Wall, soon to be filled in with new construction. In *his* temporal frame, Author A notes, "In the absolute present (which fades away as I write)," transposing Creeley's lyric paradox into narrative development, but one that still lacks closure. All Saturdays given to writing may be the absolute present, in this sense, while the one Saturday recorded shifts from present tense to historical frame. The historicity of the writing scene is registered, as well, in the hallucination of the white hair of the person asleep in the field who had just woken up, exiting the "open field" of the stretch of the destroyed Berlin Wall in which he had slept, suggesting the terror of the history that it represents. That terror, in turn, may be seen as a comment on the Cold War periodizing frame that is elided in Creeley's lyric but that is restored, retrospectively, in the passage.<sup>7</sup>

Narrative, in both its historical and literary modes, entails a periodizing framework (or a series of them) that is essential for its construction (as made thing and interpretation). The intersection of narrative and non-narrative, then, might point in two directions: toward the containment of the open field of nonnarration by a narrative frame, but also toward how nonnarrative works, like the shifter of the lyric or the historical date, as a transformative and mutable principle informing narrative itself, thus allowing for the kinds of open interpretation of past events and literary works that *The Grand Piano* intends. We see this tension at the many textual moments where the autobiographer—writing in an absolute present and thus in a (hybrid) form of narrative that continues to enact distinctions between the time of writing and the time of the event—recalls a specific moment in time (past) when a specific text was written, read, or became known to him or her. As the writer identifies the specific event of the text (being written, read, or cognized) with a specific tem-

poral moment, the text itself becomes an index, a date, a shifter. In a passage similar to the one just discussed, Author B describes her internalization of a Creeley poem (“The Door”) through an anecdote of the providential arrival of his collection *For Love* to a friend stationed in the Vietnam War:

Sometime around **1971** or '72, a helicopter dropped some books at an American military camp. People snatched them up. David [Brown] was tending to someone's injury when the books were dropped and thus got the last book in the heap: it was *For Love* by Robert Creeley. In my memory, he associates this event with his determination to be a poet and his successful transfer to a military base in Germany.

At the American Poetry Archive, the most frequently reproduced audio recordings were Creeley's and the most reproduced poem was “The Door,” a poem I heard up to several times a week while it was being copied. It is hard-wired in me. Despite the fixity of the words in my mind, the first thing I envision when I encounter the poem is a lowly basement in a state institution with some recording equipment in it. (1:30–31; emphasis added)

There are several moments of text as event that are decisive here. The first is the unexpected arrival, by helicopter no less, of Creeley's *For Love* (published **1962**) into a battle scene in Vietnam (about **1971**); the second is the repeated playing of Creeley's “The Door” (itself a poem that figures a form of repetition in relation to a decisive, and likely sexual, event) in the basement of the American Poetry Center (about **1978**); and the third is the moment of recollection and writing, where the event of the text (past) is worked into the present event of writing (**2006**, and published the same year). The horizon shift of the literary, seen as now including all the contexts of poetry as an event, is being carefully charted in this passage.

In a subsequent volume of *The Grand Piano*, written in late **2006** and published in **2007**, Author C works the same theme of the literary present as 1) a temporal index or shifter; and 2) an event reorganized within a narrative framework—with a degree of anxiety that a fundamental aspect of

Language writing or even poetry in general, its atemporal immediacy, is in danger of being missed within the form of prose narrative as itself “over.” It turns out, however, that present immediacy comes with a historical tag, as in his citation of the opening lines of Frank O’Hara’s “The Day Lady Died,” “It is **12:20** in New York” (written **1959**):

It's **12:20** in New York  
three days after **Bastille Day** no  
not exactly

It's three decades after **1975**  
and the Bastille has been re-erected with a  
vengeance

It has a new name, Guantanamo, but inside  
it's the same old  
with drastically updated techniques of course

The present in writing is what I write to find (and read to find as well). I don’t mean the present tense, which is always archaic, elsewhere: say **12:20** on a muggy **July 17, 1959** in New York. Rather the present (involving both writer and reader)

but think of a better word than “present,”  
which assumes (i.e., short-circuits)

just what I’m longing to get  
to, feel, re-experience

The present (involving writers and readers) is only reachable via intermittent social syntheses. It gets written sometimes and, then again, it’s always only what you care to read. Plus the outside—factory farms, power grids, interior decoration, fashion shows, military displays, torture, amateur and professional. “Present” is a trashed public word. (2:76–77; emphasis added)

Author C encounters the “changing same” of oppression in his reference to **Bastille Day, July 14, 1789**, returned to the present in the dateless event of indeterminate sentencing at Guantanamo as removed from history. As I read

his argument, if the date is merely a shifter, then we can only suffer the indeterminate persistence of arrangements not of our choosing—history not as a failed date of liberation or art but as the iteration of power and inequality. “Present” as “trashed public word” is an authoritarian insistence on existing arrangements—to which writing can add only a feeble alternative within a shifting, historical record of dates. What is still possible, though, is an arrival of writing in the present, as counter to “the same.”

Just a few days ago (**December 29, 2006** to be precise) I had the pleasure of hearing [Author B] give a paper on Poets Theater at the MLA and see her present a videotape of two scenes where [Author D] plays Loop (in her play *Third Man*, taped **July 1980**). The pleasure was intense. [Author Dj’s gesture of resting his hands on the wavy surface of the imagined water was worth the price of admission as he said:

The slender hands, tilted back, just so, and extended, resemble svelte creatures just emerged from a wholesome emerald river silt. The river is broad and light, ancient and playful in retrospect. With such I share no affinity. Forms emerge by disposition. [. . .]

I felt great excitement as well as relief at reestablishing contact with that feeling. There was also the normative small stab of envy: “That’s the way to write. Why didn’t I write that?” The stronger sense, though, was the relief of having one’s writing world made vividly perceptible, present to those in the room. (2:86–87; emphasis added)

Either Author B’s inquiry into writing as indexical date, or Author C’s lament over it—which through the discrepant horizons of historical encounter, processing, and reproduction can only be a referential shifter and thus open to indeterminacy—bears directly on the shift in the nature of the literary that I am pointing to here. For Author B, poetry (present and past) and narrative (past and present) are both events that cannot be dissociated: presentness and periodization are strictly conjoined. But while Author C aspires to a condition of writing that produces the present, he cannot identify it in forms (either poetic or narrative) that represent it as event within

a temporal frame: presentness and periodization are strictly opposed. Either the present can be reproduced through narration or it can only remain nonnarrative.<sup>8</sup>

To expand on this difference of perspectives, I want to propose a series of temporal registers that construct the literary in a sliding scale from present to period, both at work in the unfolding form of *The Grand Piano*. The first register is the lyric poem as datable event, seen as the occasions of Creeley's or O'Hara's poetry but also in their persistence as datable events in their various forms of publication, reception, and citation. The shifting nature of the indexical date in relation to the datable event is central to the effect of the lyric; thus, an original moment of poetry as nonnarrative congeals around the date itself.<sup>9</sup> With the emergence of Language writing, however, there was a move from the datable event to forms of nonnarration that had no other temporal index than the relation of words and sentences on the page; the denial or stoppage of historical time led to the spatial form of the work. What resulted, my second register, is a paradoxical combination of writing as *nonnarrative* and as *event* (in both the event of writing and the event of a *kind* of writing) as a hybrid form: so Language writing was an event of nonnarration for anyone experiencing it in the period in which it was written. In my third register, narrative contains nonnarrative, but in such a way that nonnarrative's temporal and historical irresolution enables narrative's determination of history in its periodizing frames.<sup>10</sup> *The Grand Piano* is “driven” by nonnarrativity but as a narrative form contains and periodizes two forms of nonnarrative: dated and evental. There is not only a sliding scale between 1) nonnarrative datelessness, 2) the shifting date, 3) narrative, and 4) the historical period, but a dialectical relationship between them. In this sense, a fundamental device of *The Grand Piano* occurs in the alternation of moments of atemporal, nonnarrative poetry or prose as index to a date or event within narrative forms that frame them. Poetry as nonnarrative and subjective (“present”) becomes datable and historical as a result, while neither presentism nor periodization can be understood as its master narrative.

### **The Conceptual Date**

The seemingly atemporal and one-dimensional date paintings of On Kawara are exemplary of conceptual art's combination of presentism and

periodization. This signature series of works—formally known as *Today (1966–)*, a continuing sequence of unique paintings in five preselected sizes that present the date of their manufacture in white, hand-drawn lettering in the date style and language of the country in which they are fabricated, on a flat, monochrome background, stored in boxes with a newspaper page from that date—have become icons of the conceptual art movement, displayed in nearly every significant exhibition of conceptual art.<sup>11</sup> As “dated” works that present the moment of their fabrication as a past index of the artist’s work, the date paintings combine both narrative and nonnarrative as immanent in the form of the work and as inextricably linked to its historical periodization. However, it is the nonidentity between radical present and historical period in On Kawara’s date paintings, the gap between them rather than any positive figuration of their historical moment or frame, that makes them historical. I see the date paintings as exemplary of the historical content of conceptual art, even as certain of their features (the meticulous craft evidenced in the details of their construction; their initial referencing of historical markers; the epochal break they make with the artist’s past work; and their production in a temporal series) are atypical of conceptual art in a formalist account (which locates “concept” in the absence of form).

In such an account, conceptual art is defined formally as visual art that abandons its material substrate in order to question the nature of art as a concept or practice; a work of conceptual art may be nothing more than an idea for a work of art, but never actually be made, and it need contain no historical framing at all. Form and history connect, however, through the narrative of art history itself, in the declaration of a style, genre, movement, or period of artistic production of the New; the conventional account of conceptual art would thus begin with the first works that questioned the material substrate of the work in order to reveal the nature of art as a concept or practice. Problems for art history arise, however, when numerous works of Marcel Duchamp from the **1910s** and **1920s** (the urinal; the ready-mades; the rotoreliefs and their mottos; the notes to the “large glass,” and so on) anticipate the periodizing history of conceptual art that begins in the early **1960s**, in one version with the declaration of Robert Rauschenberg’s *Portrait of Iris Clert*: “This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so.”<sup>12</sup> The abstract and formalist periodization that follows, as well, is contested by more plural and historicist narratives that conceptual art is not simply determined

by “the dematerialization of the art object” but exists within a field of practice, or at the intersection of several practices, which foreground its concerns with dematerialization and concept.<sup>13</sup> If the **1970** “Information” show at the Museum of Modern Art introduced the first qualification, by seeing conceptual art within a range of related practices, the **1999** “Global Conceptualism” exhibition at the Queens Museum broadened conceptual art from its assumed Anglo-American origins to a transnational phenomenon.<sup>14</sup> This broader field of practice has, in my view, irrevocably altered the *auteur*-ist, Anglo-American, formalist/idealistic account of conceptual art, positioning On Kawara’s transnational, historicist, materialist date paintings as exemplary.

My own encounter with On Kawara’s date paintings—and my emerging understanding of their seriousness over a decades-long series of encounters—itself has a narrative. I had been aware of his works since the previously mentioned “Information” show in **1970**, and I experienced them with even greater impact at the **1999** “Global Conceptualism” show and at Documenta XI in **2002**. The concern with dates and events in On Kawara’s work is thus readily inserted into a historical narrative, one that with very little effort could be developed into a periodizing framework. The shifting indices of On Kawara’s date paintings give rise to a range of historical meanings that become available through the multiple temporal and spatial forms of their exhibition and reception.<sup>15</sup> As shifters, the date paintings construct and iterate an important paradox between the date as “floating signifier” and the historical frames they evoke and in which they are experienced.<sup>16</sup> Just so, on **Saturday, January 14, 2006**, returning from the University of Göttingen, where I had concluded my four months’ stay in Germany and presented a conference paper, I stopped at the Frankfurt Museum of Modern Art on the way to the airport (see “Return to DE”). There, I encountered several of On Kawara’s date paintings and drawings in *Spinnwebzeit: Die eBay-Vernetzung* [Spinning the Web: The E-Bay Connection], an exhibition that juxtaposed works from the museum’s permanent collection with items purchased on E-Bay (fig.1).<sup>17</sup> This show, one of the more interesting of many innovative recent exhibitions in Germany, created a series of interpretive frameworks between the museum’s collection of “high” works of art (however conceptualist or postmodern) and “low” collectible objects. For On Kawara, a historical framework was created by the juxtapo-



Fig. 1. Copy of Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* (1934) acquired on E-Bay and exhibited at *Spinnwebzeit: Die EBay-Vernetzung* [Spinning the Web: The E-Bay Connection], Museum der Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt-am-Main, 2005. Photo: author.

sition of one of his date paintings (**July 1, 1974**) with a copy of *Time* magazine accessioned on E-Bay (dated **August 20, 1945**; fig. 2). The juxtaposition of the date painting with a record of a punctual event (if there ever was one, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki) created a complex interweaving of interpretive frames. In the *Time* cover, the abstract graphic—the Japanese sun emblem being crossed out by the American X—reduces human tragedy to a cipher and suggested similarly negative interpretations of conceptual art. Just so, in its dominant, Anglo-American form, conceptual art may connect to American war crimes as a distancing form of abstraction that conveys cultural supremacy and denial of humanity. The date paintings thus might refer in some way to the form of denial of the *Time* cover.

Is this a correct reading, or even a possible one? Given this juxtaposition, how might we read the date paintings otherwise as historical? In the most negative account, conceptual art as abstract is rendered equivalent to the denial of a traumatic event occurring at a specific date—but of course, the date represented is not that date. On Kawara's date paintings also can be read in an opposite sense, as a reenactment or repetition after the event.



Fig. 2. Cover of *Time* magazine (20 August 1945) acquired on E-Bay and exhibited at *Spinnwebzeit: Die EBay-Vernetzung*. Photo: author.

Such a reading is supported by a series of drawings of burn victims from Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the next gallery in the museum, representing On Kawara's pre-conceptualist work (1953–56) and published as *Thanatophanies* in 1995.<sup>18</sup> The drawings, which evoke trauma in form and content, access similar psychic material as the surrealist-inflected drawings On Kawara made before his turn to conceptual art and his refusal to return to Japan or to use Japanese characters in his work. A plausi-

ble sequence of interpretations, then, connects the historical event of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the working through of trauma in the drawings to the epochal decision to abandon figural representation to the conceptual abstraction of the date paintings. Such a periodizing, epochal reading is nothing like the mere nominalism of the *Portrait of Iris Clert* as representing the paradigm shift of conceptual art. Particularly significant here is On Kawara's abandonment of the mastery of his drawing technique for the production values of the date paintings, whose high level of craft is masked by their simple formal presentation. On Kawara has thus placed under erasure the work of representation in his form of historical index—by abandoning it. Placing the historical period under erasure recalls the making of the date paintings themselves, which are associated with newspaper pages from the given date and stored with them in prefabricated boxes, but never exhibited with them.

Let us consider the “event” of a specific encounter with On Kawara’s work (in real time and space) in relation to an evental interpretation of his work that negotiates “date” and “period.” On Kawara’s *oeuvre* as a whole is organized as an archaeology of representations of time that reflexively engages the temporal frameworks—or periodized/ing history—in which it was produced.<sup>19</sup> Such periodization is often based simply on the epochal nature of the development of his work (and thus imitates art historical periodization): on **January 4, 1966**, On Kawara made the first date painting; on **September 17, 1979**, he abandoned work on the series “I Got Up,” “I Met,” “I Read,” and “I Went” because someone had stolen the date stamp that he used (offering added evidence for a trauma theory reading of his work). Once On Kawara had stepped over the epochal divide that separated pre-conceptual work from his conceptual period, each of his major series would be structured on a representation of an increment of time—thus reproducing the epochality of the series in the first place, even if concealed in the representation of a date. Seeing the work in terms of such periodizing frames supports readings that go beyond merely a “conceptual” account of the nature of art as an object or practice, so that the date paintings appear to be a much richer text as a result. On the side of production, for instance, we may consider the elaborate preparation for each painting; the care in treatment of the canvas and nuanced selection of color; the detailed handwork of the lettering, which is not done with a stencil; the fabrication of the date paintings in one of eight preselected sizes, along with

a cardboard box for storage; the addition of a newspaper clipping from the date the painting was made; the inscription of a motto or subtitle on the back of the work; and the careful indexing of the work's manufacture. A photograph of the process of making the painting emphasizes, again, its evental nature, in the absence of any representation of the artist making it (*On Kawara* never appears in a photograph; one imagines he may well be conceptual art himself, perpetrated by a shadowy cabal of art dealers). Two additional rules guide the production and display of the date paintings: if they are not completed on the day they represent, they are destroyed; and they are never shown in gallery installations with their newspaper clippings. While the date paintings are conceptual, they are also produced according to a rule, and they convey a material thickness of inscription.

In their reception, the date paintings are generally approached first in terms of the conceptual paradox of the date: the work is made on the date represented, and represents that day indexically, but it is no longer that date.<sup>20</sup> Their "truth value" in representing the date is thus immediately displaced and made ironic if not simulacral. This is an effect that resonates with any re-presentation of a punctual event in the present, as we have seen in the above account of *The Grand Piano*. The date paintings do not stop there, however: by virtue of their elaborate rules for production, their material thickness and contexts for display, unanticipated new meanings are produced. Some derive from the dialectic of temporal displacement and spatial display; some from the differential relation between concept and material. The viewer begins to know herself, in historically specific ways, in terms of the experience of the date paintings, in the series of her encounters with them (however slight they may have initially seemed). As with the Frankfurt exhibition, their reconceptualization through exhibition and publication constructs new meanings, so that the time of the work intersects with the space of display (over several decades, in major cities around the world). As a part of a larger series of meanings built on the unit of the date painting, I would point to 1) the variation in exhibition strategies, including a virtual gallery display; display in contexts not usually associated with art or accessible to the public (a kindergarten classroom); all manner of juxtaposition of different sizes, colors, and years; and 2) their use in a series of architectural images by conceptual photographer Candida Höfer, where the iteration of the date interprets the spatial setting (*On Kawara*); 3) their relation to On Kawara's other conceptual series—"I

Met,” “I Went,” “I Got Up,” “I Read,” and “I Am Still Alive”—many of which use the date as a kind of meme of conceptual representation; and 4) their late relation to the *One Million Years* publication and installation work, in which the dates of 500,000 years in the past and the future are printed and bound in elaborate volumes, and have been read as an installation piece at Documenta XI and elsewhere, with a CD of the recordings of the reading available. In the meaning effects generated by the date paintings, we are far from a mere nominal paradox of representation; rather, the work generates multiple present and periodizing frames.

I have suggested that seeing On Kawara’s date paintings as exemplary of the field of conceptual art practice redefines the canonical art historical narrative in important ways that align with revisionist and historicist exhibitions. Such a reading is supported, in fact, by On Kawara’s contribution to the “Information” show, a series of three canvases (titled *Title*) that read “One Thing,” “1965,” and “Viet-Nam.” The paradigmatically conceptualist moment in the series is “One Thing,” where the abstraction of reference dematerializes any specific object. That is immediately followed, however, by temporal and spatial registers (“1965” and “Viet-Nam”), which in combination create a minimal historical framework for the presentist work. In so doing, On Kawara’s work connects to other works in the show, many of which were aesthetically materialist and politically interventionist. As well, the transnational content of the piece evokes the representation of emerging conceptualist movements, apart from the center/periphery model of the New York-based account, that was further documented by the range of often highly political conceptual art on view in “Global Exhibitions” in Queens. Lastly, Documenta XI’s installation of *One Million Years* places the use of the date, in ways that are inaccessible to direct historical framing, within the historical occasion of exhibition itself. At each of these moments, On Kawara’s strategies of separating punctual date from historical event or context appears as a basically historicist intervention, one that may only be fully realized in terms of the extent of his work—over decades, across continents.

### **Periodizing Conceptual Writing**

The emergence of a self-declared school of conceptual writing, and its twin movement Flarf, over the last decade has been cause for celebration

among followers of avant-garde poetics.<sup>21</sup> For one thing, the succession of poetic avant-gardes as a periodizing history had languished in purely formal concerns after the epoch of hegemonic claims for the Language school had subsided, resulting in a proliferation of post-Language writing strategies that ranged from a return to lyricism and abstraction (the “analytic lyric”), to feminist and New Narrative experiments, to diasporic cultural poetics, and finally to the digital and performative poetics of Flarf.<sup>22</sup> The moment of conceptual writing, above all, has restored a familiar, art-historical, periodizing framework for the avant-grade (as Marjorie Perloff once asked, how could Language writing imagine that it could persist as an avant-garde for more than a decade or so? No other avant-garde has done so).<sup>23</sup> Conceptual writing’s declaration of the New in this sense bears more than a trace of formalist periodization in naming its break from past practice: history and style, within the limits of genre, coalesce to provide necessary and sufficient criteria for writing to be termed “conceptualist.” If we return to the conventional account of conceptual art as “visual art that abandons its material substrate in order to question the nature of art as a concept or practice,” however, what becomes of the dematerialization of the art object, in which art’s opticality is transposed to language, when the medium is language itself?

In poetry, I asked in *Total Syntax* (1985), would it be possible to nominate a work as “poetry” without any of its generic attributes (of duration or development) in the same way that conceptualism could nominate a work as “art” without any of its physical attributes?<sup>24</sup> The resistant properties of language as a medium and poetry as a genre when subject to the dematerialization and abstraction characteristic of conceptual art leads one to wonder just what a conceptual writing might look like. Charles Altieri’s criterion for modernist poetry, “It must be abstract,” would hardly be adequate (or Wallace Stevens would be considered a conceptual writer; 12). In conceptual writers Rob Fitterman and Vanessa Place’s *Notes on Conceptualisms* (2009), to illustrate this resistance to transposition, we find the bald assertion that conceptual writing is allegorical writing, and that “allegorical writing is a writing of its time, saying slant what cannot be said directly, usually because of repressive political regimes or the sacred nature of the message” (13). Unpacking this hybrid formulation yields many high-value memes but little convergence: the locution “X is an art of its time,” a cliché of historically periodized presentness (“its time” not as the

present but as “the times,” either *Zeitgeist* or periodizing frame); “saying slant what cannot be said directly,” referring to Emily Dickinson’s invocation to “tell it slant” but also to Mark Wallace and Steven Marks’ post-Language anthology, representing a range of post-avant strategies that were having a hard time periodizing themselves; “repressive political regimes” as unnamed and generalized, thus the changing same of cultural repression; and the “sacred nature of the message,” pure hype that barely works to ground its dialectical opposite, simulacral writing that puts authenticity and meaning under erasure. With the sentence thus unpacked, we may discern what the difficulties of historical claims for “allegory” might be as providing periodization to determine the present: conceptual writing could be virtually *anything*—as long as it is distinguished historically from work that preceded it. Form and history come undone as they borrow from each other in a set of reinforcements: this must be what *Notes on Conceptualisms* means by allegory, the expansion of meaning by the historical ungrounding of formal means.

Let us consider Kenneth Goldsmith’s answer to an interviewer’s question, “Can you discuss how conceptual writing began?”: “It began in 1999 in Buffalo after I gave a reading there and Christian Bök and Darren Wershler drove down to see me read. [They were] involved with concrete and sound poetry, while I was coming out of a text art tradition, but we all saw our respective paths as dead ends. So, we blended these obsessions to come up with a new way of writing just as the internet was emerging” (Sanders). The declaration of the New as radical break into the present is nothing here if not periodized and specified in terms of form and genre, with a measure of technological determinism to provide a historical frame (even as the internet was well in place as a creative medium by then). An exhaustion of formal procedures combines with a periodizing imperative to create the New, regardless of the fact that all of the formal procedures mentioned continue in what has been claimed for the field of conceptual writing. The New determines its own periodizing frame. Doubts arise, even as they are put to rest by the self-conscious charm and consistent inauthenticity of the periodizing narrative as it enacts, rather than defines, practice. Goldsmith’s claims are by no means subtle:

How to proceed after the deconstruction and pulverization  
of language that is the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s legacy. Should we

continue to pound language into ever smaller bits or should we take some other approach? The need to view language again as a whole—syntactically and grammatically intact—but to acknowledge the cracks in the surface of the reconstructed linguistic vessel. Therefore, in order to proceed, we need to employ a strategy of opposites—unboring boring, uncreative writing, valueless speech—all methods of disorientation used in order to re-imagine our normative relationship to language. (“I Love Speech”)

As with traditional art historical periodization, an *epochal* claim is made in terms of a *formal* one—providing the period with its motivation in organizing a historical series of production. What is notable is the capaciousness of the narrative of this periodization: it took the entire twentieth century to produce the pulverization of language, which ends with the Language school as embodiment of every form of radical particularity. In response, Goldsmith proposes strategies of citation, iteration, nonauthorial production, and their resulting defamiliarization as a site for “re-imagining our normative relationship to language”—the precise program of the preceding but now antedated avant-garde, enacted not by pulverizing language “into ever smaller bits” but by taking “language as a whole”—by means of downloading, copying, vocalizing it. A distinct formalism underlies this claim—the binary opposition of one formal feature, linguistic fragmentation—that is aligned with a modified technological determinism in suggesting how a range of techniques will produce the New. It assumes a radical reduction of the concerns of the previous period, seen as pulverizing language and trading on a poetry of the fragment; being averse to speech and the communicative transparency of language; and manufacturing a universal formal device, the New Sentence, as its sole response. Such a reduction of practice to formal elements must then lead directly to a new art historical framework in which digital citationality and practice open, by contrast, a new set of possibilities.

The problems with this reductive argument are so many that it is hard to know how to begin. First is its ambitious marketing strategy: what we have is a business plan, and prospects are good; we may discount such motives as common to any avant-garde and move on. The major periodizing difficulties cluster around several related issues for the “avant-garde”

seen in terms of a logic of succession: the first is the inability to historicize the range of formal procedures that conceptual writing inherits from conceptual art in its development from the **1960s**; the second is the appropriation of the goal of defamiliarizing language by mere reversal of the Language school's range of formal values from the **1970s** and **1980s**; and the last is the problem of a proliferation of post-avant strategies, many of which depend on some version of Language or conceptual writing, during the **1990s** and **2000s**. Conceptual writing, as a periodizing concept, depends on a revaluation of each of these components, as an account of the range of its practice as representing the New. Strangely, however, neither editor of the soon-to-appear anthology of conceptual writing *Against Expression* (2010) attempts to account either historically or formally for these distinct periodizing elements. For Goldsmith, the underlying motivation for conceptual writing is the epistemic shift of digital technology: “It’s simple: the computer encourages us to mimic its workings” (xviii).<sup>25</sup> Thus a key paragraph in his introduction merges art historical and technologically determinist frames:

What we’re dealing with here is a basic change in the operating system of how we write at the root level. The results might not look different, and they might not feel different, but the underlying ethos and modes of writing have permanently changed. If painting reacted to photography by moving toward abstraction, it seems unlikely that writing is doing the same in relation to the internet. It appears that writing’s response will be mimetic and replicative, involving notions of distribution while proposing new platforms of receivership. Words very well might be written not to be read but rather to be shared, moved, and manipulated. Books, electronic or otherwise, will continue to flourish. Although the new writing will have an electronic gleam in its eyes, its consequences will be distinctly analog. (xxi)

It is hard to tell what is really being claimed here for conceptual writing’s inauguration of the New. While it might look and feel exactly like writing from other periods, its underlying difference—like Pierre Menard’s rewriting of *Don Quixote*—is imperceptibly subtle but profound. Goldsmith’s strong claim is that conceptual writing is akin to word processing in the

digital age—Involving cutting, pasting, optical character recognition, hypertext coding, visual display, data storage, and speech synthesizing; for him, new form is identical to new technology, which undeniably has a periodizing narrative. But it is hard to see how the range of work represented by Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin's anthology is adequately described here, except that it is all text in a digital world. Dworkin's introduction, as the more developed of the two, goes considerably farther in historically framing conceptual writing's innovation:

The works presented here share a tendency to use found language in ways that go beyond modernist quotation or postmodern citation. The great break with even the most artificial, ironic, or asemantic work of other avant-gardes is the realization that one does not need to generate new material to be a poet: the intelligent organization or reframing of extant text is enough. Through the repurposing or *détournement* of language that is not their own (whatever that might mean), the writers here allow arbitrary rules to determine the chance and unpredictable disposition of that language; they let artificial systems trump organic forms; and they replace making with choosing, fabrication with arrangement, and production with transcription. In these ways, previously written language comes to be seen and understood in a new light. (xliv)

While Dworkin's criteria for conceptual writing marks a significant distinction from conceptual art, he is only partly successful in distinguishing conceptual writing from Language writing or later post-avant developments (as well as from precedent figures such as David Antin and Kathy Acker). To begin with, he represents convincingly—although by means of an art-historical and formal rather than cultural or historical framework—the tradition of conceptual art, its practices of nomination and rematerialization in the **1960s**, leading to practices of inauthenticity and appropriation by the **1980s**. His account of conceptual art is thus a primarily postmodern one, though it is also conservative in terms of both form and genre: revisionist historical or interdisciplinary concerns—as delineated in the above account of On Kawara—do not obtain. As a result, Goldsmith and Dworkin's anthology is not primarily concerned to document concep-

tual art's "turn to language" in a comprehensive way; rather, differences of genre and technique preserve the epistemic shift between two moments and two genres. Conceptual writing is concerned with repurposing existing forms of language rather than dematerializing existing conventions of art, as with conceptual art, in short. But here Dworkin's account of the Language school's technical innovations—more broadly, the entire range of experimental writing from the **1970s** on—is nonexistent. Faced with an overwhelming proliferation of techniques, conceptual writing seems to narrow their range and force to methods of citational or algorithmic "repurposing" or "organization." But there have been simply any number of avant-garde techniques not defined as conceptual writing that may be understood in this way, from John Cage and Jackson Mac Low's chance procedures to the New Sentence and OuLiPian constraints. Finally, a specific motivation for this narrowing of formal possibility may be imagined in the proliferation of work broadly characterized as "post-avant" in the **1990s** and **2000s**. In relation to this proliferation of styles, conceptual writing issues a call to order, or declares a school, based on a restriction of practice necessary for aesthetic reception. Conceptual writing, while based on the distancing and dematerializing frameworks of conceptual art, appears to be a subtractive procedure that at the same time claims a material density and technological moment. The test of conceptual writing's epistemic shift, thus, may be in reading its results—but not its periodizing frame.<sup>26</sup>

Can there ever be an art that is only of the present, "of its time"? If so, how is that present determined by a periodizing logic, or many of them, or is it possible none apply? If On Kawara's works interrogate the immediacy of the date as a shifter that continually rehistoricizes itself, is that true for any index to the present? If all representations of the present depend on periodizing logics, how can there be any such thing as "present time" in a form of representation? Is there an "absolute present (which fades away as I write)," as *The Grand Piano* often asks? I am moving toward a conclusion in comparing the problem of conceptual writing's periodizing narrative with the present in On Kawara's date paintings, which bring together form and history, and the narrative of *The Grand Piano*, in which the defamiliarizing New is read in relation to its historical frames. Rather than a historical *present*, conceptual writing invokes a defamiliarizing, inauthentic *presence*, a turn to the author as allegory for empty time and to the work as reinscription of already existing language. *If* conceptual writing

can give this empty time a sufficient range of specific values beyond the declaration of the New, it may be able to claim a periodizing frame—but it has only partly done so yet.

I will end by looking at four moments of conceptual writing in relation to the epochal New they claim. The first is Kenneth Goldsmith's *Fidget*, performed on **Bloomsday, June 16, 1997** and published in **2000**), in which the author straps on a recording device for one day to record, by speaking into a microphone, as closely as possible the bodily states he is aware of.<sup>27</sup> Performed over a twelve-hour period, the work is subdivided in sections at every hour (imitating a kind of unfolding epochality); as the psychological pressure of the piece increases, Goldsmith drinks, on his account, a bottle of whiskey and lapses into a somewhat incoherent, though embodied, speech, typographically rendered by printing the text backwards after the **22:00** mark. *Fidget* is a perfectly respectable example of the application of a predetermined procedure to writing, focusing on the phenomenality of bodily cognition and the material textuality of the result, and mediated by the recording technology it employs. In addition to the reference to Joyce and the Bloomian “day,” works of conceptual art focusing on the interaction of body and text are evoked, from Vito Acconci’s masturbation project (*Seedbed*, **1971**) to Tehching Hsieh’s chaining himself to Linda Montano for a year (*Rope Piece*, **1983–84**).<sup>28</sup> Related works from the Language school might include Ron Silliman’s *BART*, where the poet comments in real time on his first ride on a BART train in **1978** and transcribes the result; or Steve Benson’s performances *Blindspots* and *Reverse Order*, as they are complicated by recording and feedback technology. At the intersection of the two series, it is remarkable how self-conscious and literary, as opposed to existential and documentary, the work is compared to conceptual art, and how referential, present-tense, and speech-based it is in comparison to Language writing. The pure present that it presents is mediated in two senses: formally, through the use of pre-planned strategy, recording devices, and textual transcription; and historically, in terms of two series of prior strategies. The New comes with a degree of self-consciousness and an art-historical pedigree here; what is New must be seen as a relation between them.

A second, more developed representation of the pure present is Goldsmith’s *Day*, a complete retyping (or computer-based retypesetting) of the entirety of the *New York Times* for **Friday, September 1, 2000** and pub-

lished in **2003** (fig. 3). The gap between these dates is important, as between the day the work records (its date, in On Kawara's sense) and the date of its reproduction lies an epochal horizon indeed: **September 11, 2001**. The traumatic moment is not anterior to the epochal break of concept and material, as it is with On Kawara, but the work's presentation contains it in some way.<sup>29</sup> Reading *Day* in the present (which fades away as I write), an evident nostalgia is invoked for the merely quotidian activities, from art events to murders to stock trading, that took place unself-consciously on such an ordinary day. *Day* restores the self-consciousness of art practice, evoking numerous periodizing frames from past conceptual art, even Joyce's use of a newspaper for *Ulysses*, through the historical periodizing frame, the before and after of a traumatic event. It is as if the date is contained within the unfolding historicism of the newspaper, in a reversal of On Kawara. At the same time the typing or re-typesetting of the entirety of day's edition is likewise an event; the form of the conceptual project intersects with its periodizing history in a compelling and legitimate way. Some significant formal aspects of the project would be: the physical labor and tedium involved in typing the newspaper; the shift to OCR technology at some point in its composition, with OCR's indiscriminate rendering of type regardless of visual design or layout a marked feature of the result; its telephone-book like massiveness and unreadability of the resulting tome (Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* is a prime literary example in the series here); and the defamiliarization of the details of everyday life that attends reading the newspaper in this way, so that every stock quotation may be a poem. Conceptual and literary precursors are many, from Duchamp's readymades to the poetry of Burma Shave.<sup>30</sup> The work archives the present as a mechanically produced index of a historical date, bringing together the concerns both of On Kawara's date paintings and his *One Million Years*. Form and period are located at a provocative conjunction in this work.

The success of Goldsmith's brand of conceptual writing may still not be enough to satisfy the claims of a historically periodized emergence of the New. We must identify more examples to support the claim of new area of art practice emerging with conceptual writing, contrasted with the emergence of the more identifiable Flarf and distinguished from conceptual art and Language writing. I will end by briefly considering two additional examples of conceptual writing: Rob Fitterman's *Metropolis XXX*

"All the News that's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

Late Edition

New York: Today, mostly cloudy, high 83. Tonight, warm and muggy, low 73.

Tomorrow, cloudy with a few showers, high 80. Yesterday, high 83, low 72.  
Weather map is on Page A20.

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\$1 beyond the greater New York metropolitan area.

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PENTAGON LIKELY TO DELAY NEW TEST FOR MISSILE SHIELD

JANUARY DATE EXPECTED

Deployment Decision Would Fall to Next President — Treaty Issue Remains

By ERIC SCHMITT

WASHINGTON, Aug. 31 — The Pentagon will probably postpone the next test of a national missile defense system until January, administration officials said yesterday. Any decision to deploy the antimissile shield now seems certain to pass out of President Clinton's hands to his successor's.

Administration officials had previously said Mr. Clinton would decide this summer on deploying a \$60 billion antimissile system that would be ready by 2005. To meet that schedule, the Pentagon has been under heavy pressure for two years to conduct enough flights to show Mr. Clinton and his advisors whether the system was technologically feasible.

But now officials are signaling that Mr. Clinton merely plans to decide whether to go ahead with the program's initial development. The change follows events that include test failure, opposition from Russia as well as European allies and a legal dispute over how far the system could proceed before violating an important arms control treaty.

To keep that option of initial development open for Mr. Clinton, the Pentagon has requested bids for initial construction of a radar site in Alaska, setting Sept. 7 as the deadline for technical and cost proposals from contractors. The first contracts would have to be awarded by December to permit building to begin next spring and to have a working system in place by 2005. Under the schedule the Pentagon has set in light of conditions in Alaska, it has to start the process soon, subject to later presidential approval.

The more politically volatile decision of whether to field the system — and break the Antiballistic Missile treaty of 1972 — would be left to the administration, whether that of Al Gore or George W. Bush.

In a sign of this political evolution, senior military officers, including the program's executive officer, Maj. Gen. Willie Nance of the Army, have argued that there is no more reason to rush more tests. Critics of the program have consistently complained that the military operation was on an artificially fast schedule.

"General Nance is not going to conduct a test unless he's fully confident that everything is fully ready for the test," said Lt. Col. Rick Lehner, a spokesman for the Ballistic Missile Defense Organization.

Mr. Clinton is awaiting a recommendation from Defense Secretary William S. Cohen on the project and

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Ozier Muhammad / The New York Times

Fig. 3. Kenneth Goldsmith, *Day*, p. 1. Reproduced by permission.

(2004) and Craig Dworkin's *Parse* (2008; fig. 4), seen in their respective motivation of form in terms of historical periodization. The two works vary widely, in fact, in their negotiation of the gap between form and history, to the extent that we may provisionally contrast Fitterman's contextualist and historicist poetic sequence as a "Left conceptualism" to Dworkin's appropriated and procedural work as a "Right conceptualism." (The distinction evokes, of course, the contrast between Left and Right Hegelians made by Karl Marx in *The German Ideology*, discussed in relation to modernism in my "Left Modernism.") In Fitterman, a partly procedural, partly authorial reinscription of vernacular nonaesthetic language from fifteen sources—such as rubber duck catalogues, miniature golf courses, social web sites, tour guides, and other disposable texts—is allegorized as formally correlative to a specific epochal frame: global late capitalism and its reduction of everyday life to reified exchange. Each source is processed twice, somewhat differently, resulting in a symmetrical series that asks to be read, somewhat opaquely, in terms of the master narrative of Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–89). In the reified, mediated world of Fitterman's texts, dates mean nothing more than the index to entries on a social web site; thus "**11:27 PM 1/12**" could be any time and date of our Late Capitalist epoch. However, the major form of the volume, its separation into "Decline" and "Fall," ironically locates these moments in the cycles of expansion and contraction, long waves of capital reproduction and brief moments of market collapse, that characterize our posthistorical present. This present thus can only be represented in a form of irony—not allegory, as the authors of *Notes to Conceptualisms* would claim, but rather an insufficiency of the index as formal device in relation to historical period provides the historical register of the work (as symptomatic of the vacant texts of Late Capitalism).

The use of materialist irony as epochal frame is pushed to the limit in Dworkin's *Parse*, which laboriously recodes a genre novel by substituting the mere names of grammatical parts of speech for each word of the text, resulting in an obdurately unreadable work that can only be understood as the result of the decisions that created it. Form and period coincide here insofar as they are determined by the limits of technical possibility as an aesthetic strategy. Dworkin's work, thus, becomes the best example of the kind of textual repurposing that he theorizes in his anthology introduction:

**Adverb preposition of the infinitive Transitive Active  
Voice Infinitive Mood Verb indefinite article Singular  
Direct Objective Case Noun period**

Indefinite Article Noun auxiliary verb preposition and noun combined as a colloquial adverbial phrase infinitive verb and passive incomplete participle all taken as a complex compound passive verbal construction parenthesis cardinal arabic numeral parenthesis adverb indefinite article Noun comma parenthesis cardinal arabic numeral parenthesis adverb noun genitive preposition indefinite article Active Incomplete Participle Used As An Adjective Noun adverb definite article noun conjunction third person singular pronoun auxiliary verb infinitive verb comma locative preposition and noun taken together as an adverbial phrase comma *passive incomplete participle adverb indefinite article Adjective noun* comma *alphabetic letter used as the abbreviation of a latin pronoun period alphabetic letter used as the abbreviation of a latin verb period* adverb indefinite article Adjective conjunction Adjective Noun period

Second Person Subjective Case Pronoun modal auxiliary infinitive verb adverb definite article noun genitive preposition definite article noun conjunction Noun present tense third person singular verb parenthesis adverb parenthesis preposition of the infinitive infinitive verb adjective Noun period Syncategorematic noun comma marks of quotation active participle marks of quotation modal auxiliary infinitive verb and past participle taken as a passive verbal phrase adverb em dash

Fig. 4: Craig Dworkin, *Parse*, p. 143. Reproduced by permission.

in the radical deployment of the technique of sentence diagramming Stein valorized, the work creates a textual space in which no time at all is represented, only a nominal representation of the grammatical structure of language. The time necessary to read the work, if anyone could do so, would approach infinity or impossibility. Language writing, indeed allegorically, is both invoked and distanced as a prior example through this procedure, resulting in an epochal shift to a new horizon of writing of which *Parse* is the prime example. While Dworkin's conflation of the periodizing framework of conceptual writing with his unique example is successful, one is left to wonder how many similar works might be generated, and by what procedures, that would fit the claim to a new literary movement just as well. As with conceptual art, it must be admitted, the formal provocation of Dworkin's *Parse* points in the direction of new values and possibilities for writing, simply because nothing quite like it has been attempted before.<sup>31</sup> If Language writing may be characterized as nonnarrative writing that occurs as a historical event, Dworkin's project is to radicalize nonnarrative, along the lines of conceptual art, so it loses its origins as an event (thus paralleling the "dematerialization of the art object" in conceptual art). A defense of the formalist account of conceptual art as pure concept intersects with an ahistorical materialist account of Language writing to yield a hybrid, one-off result that claims the New. To restate, a Left conceptualism, exemplified by Fitterman's *Metropolis*, allegorizes its periodizing framework (the decline and fall of global capitalism), while a Right conceptualism, demonstrated by Dworkin's *Parse*, nominates itself as conceptual writing as dateless present.

While there are common concerns that link the four examples I have cited, they are so heavily rifted with frame structures from conceptual art and Language writing that their claim to the New can only be seen as either a historical negation or a formal synthesis.<sup>32</sup> And this is where my interest in this work begins: not in its self-conscious presentation of a break with the past, but in the reinterpretation and redeployment of the many available and viable procedures in the historical present in which conceptual artists, Language writers, and conceptual writers (plus post-avant and Flarf) are working. Given the multiple overlap of these techniques and their motivation toward a common horizon of unmasking the automatized and quotidian for its underlying structures, a new order of theory and practice (and pedagogy) emerges. While claims of conceptual

writing to reinvent the wheel are bunk, I welcome the expanded community of practice within a common horizon of nothing less than social transformation. “It is not yet **12:20** in New York”; it is **December 22, 2010**, in Detroit.<sup>33</sup>

## Notes

This essay was first presented at the inaugural conference of the Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present, University of Tennessee, **22 October 2009**.

1. The stakes of “presentism” as an interpretive framework opposed to historicism within cultural studies are unclear at present. A **January 7, 2011** Modern Language Association session on “Pastism” invoked its opposite, “presentism,” in only the most general terms, as it variously defended the study of the past; Gayatri Spivak remarked, with some levity, of the presentism of certain of her students: “History ended to produce them so that they are free to help others.” In queer theory, Judith Halberstam has called for a “perverse presentism” in which states of desire are not seen as the culmination of a progressive or rational development, as they would be in a historicism (53, citation thanks to Sarah Ruddy). Presentism in this sense resists historicism in seeing identity claims as not a part of a master narrative (Enlightenment and/or normative sexual development). I can imagine a similar account of digital culture that would resist understanding the present state of a technology as a developmental series, even as such an account recalls the structuralist distinction between *synchrony* and *diachrony* and is hardly new. “Theory” itself could be seen as presentist since its abstract categories are not historically marked. There is sufficient distinction between each of these uses, however, that they cannot be seen as applying to all cultural objects, even if the often granted imperative to “always historicize” may be questioned.
2. In an essay begun in **1990** and published in **2003**, “Nonnarrative and the Construction of History,” I read the use of nonnarrative forms in American Language writing and Soviet conceptualist art at the epochal fault line of **1975**: for Americans, the end of the Vietnam War; for Soviets, the middle of the Brezhnev Era, as it was then known as *stagnatsiya*. In so doing, I proposed a four-part typology of nonnarrative forms: “Temporal sequences in nonnarrative . . . may be punctual, accretive (in modular units), associational (in nodal clusters), and circular” (200). In the present essay, I am concerned mainly with punctual and accretive forms of nonnarrative.
3. The date is thus a hybrid entity that combines features of the pronoun as “shifter,” for Émile Benveniste, with the proper name as “rigid designator,” after Saul Kripke.

4. This formulation is suggestive for writing not originally thought of as literature—for example, a historical document such as Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address—which may originally be referenced to a historical date but that at a later (indeterminate) date becomes “literary.”
5. The vast literature on the poetics of Language writing, at this date, may be reduced to a set of thumbnail features, which would need to be further tested against a corpus of innovative writing by scores if not hundreds of writers, a task clearly outside the limits of this essay.
6. In the interest of deprivileging the individual author within the form of our multi-authored work, I will not identify the individual authors of excerpts from *The Grand Piano* in the text.
7. The reference to an “open field,” of course, cites the poetics of the New American poets and “composition by field” in relation to the historical period in which they formulated it.
8. The authors cited are A) Barrett Watten, B) Carla Harryman, C) Bob Perelman, D) Steve Benson, and E) Kit Robinson.
9. For a very early instance of a date associated with a lyric poem, see the canonical lyric, “O westron wind . . . .”
10. I see the relationship between destabilizing nonnarrative and active narrative form particularly in the numerous recounts of the “Brat Guts” writing group. As Author C describes the “Brat Guts” moment, “That’s one way of characterizing the writing project [Author E], [Author D], and I did. As [Author D] would read, I was filled with glee landing on the purely wrong word, which would prove arbitrary and move, not just slipping out from what was being said, but launching us into the lunar gravity of Tropeville, where one could jump in amused arcs, quite high indeed” (1:9). What the Brat Guts group produced is condensed in the single line, “Instead of ant wort I saw brat guts,” a syntactic but ambiguous sentence that came from nowhere, had no author, and became endlessly available for use as a type of nonnarrative, atemporal *poeteme*. It is distributed, almost as a spacing device, throughout many of the work’s narratives.
11. As of **February 5, 2011**, the artist has declined to grant permission to reproduce images of his work for this essay. On Kawara is represented by the David Zwirner Gallery, New York; images of his work, including the date paintings and their installation, can be found at <http://www.davidzwirner.com/artists/13>; a good selection of date

paintings from the exhibition “Paintings of 40 Years” is located at [http://www.davidzwirner.com/exhibitions/100/selected\\_works.htm](http://www.davidzwirner.com/exhibitions/100/selected_works.htm).

12. While a vast literature exists to establish periodizing frameworks for Duchamp’s work, it is important to note that Duchamp was highly conscious of the construction of this periodizing narrative and indeed used it as a material of his work, thus anticipating conceptual art proper. On the discontinuity of art historical periods, see George Kubler’s *Shape of Time*. On the nomination of Rauschenberg’s *Portrait* at the origins of conceptual art, see Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Against Expression* xxv. For Peter Osborne, however, the first works of conceptual art are “instruction pieces” by Yoko Ono and Robert Morris (21). My own first account of conceptual art (*Total Syntax*, chap. 7) was predominately informed, and from my present perspective limited, by the formal account and its narrative of historical emergence.
13. See Lucy Lippard’s ground-breaking historical nonnarrative (or chronicle) *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object . . . .*
14. See the *Global Conceptualism* and *Documenta 11\_Platform 5* exhibition catalogues, as well as Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer’s *Reconsidering the Object of Art* and Goldstein’s *A Minimal Future?: Art as Object*.
15. Catalogues of On Kawara’s works consulted for this essay include René Denizot’s *On Kawara, On Kawara: “The ’90s,”* *On Kawara: Paintings*, and *On Kawara: 10 Tableaux*. 40.
16. The term “floating signifier,” as distinguished from “empty signifier,” is drawn from Ernesto Laclau; on iteration, see Jacques Derrida.
17. No catalogue is available of this show, but the museum did produce a listing of all the items acquired on E-Bay and a set of postcards depicting a number of them (*gesucht/gefundene*). The items include: the cover of Gertrude Stein’s *Wars I Have Seen*; a postcard from “The Sky Room/24th Floor/Hotel Empire, San Francisco”; a hand-painted magic lantern slide with a comic scene; a framed family snapshot with broken glass; a publicity still for an American TV series, *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*; a photographic portrait of Josephine Earp, Wyatt Earp’s widow, and so on. For a contemporary review, see Ralf Schlüter.
18. For On Kawara’s preconceptualist work, see *On Kawara 1952–56 Tokyo and Thanatos-phanies*; several images from this period are reproduced in *On Kawara (2002)*.
19. For a chronology of On Kawara’s work, see David Zwirner Gallery’s listing online: <http://www.davidzwirner.com/resources/61569/OK%20Bio%202010%20WEB.pdf>.

20. On the making of date paintings, see Ann Rorimer; on the rules for making the date paintings, see Kathryn Chiong; on the importance of the “index” in conceptual and minimalist art, see Robert Morris’s *Card File* (1961), as well as the work of Art-Language and Fluxus. For a critical account, see Rosalind Krauss’ “Notes on the Index” in *Originality of the Avant-Garde*.
21. Dworkin and Goldsmith’s *Against Expression*, a definitive anthology of conceptual writing, is imminently due to appear; a similarly defining anthology of Flarf is rumored to be following close on its heels. Rob Fitterman and Vanessa Place, on the other hand, either refuse or make intractable anything like a definitive account of conceptual writing in *Notes on Conceptualisms*.
22. In *Silliman’s Blog*, Ron Silliman has numerous posts contrasting the general proliferation of avant-garde poetics as “post-avant,” in contrast to the vestigial aesthetics promulgated by creative writing programs, which he terms the “School of Quietude,” a.k.a. “the school which is not one.”
23. Perloff to Barrett Watten, correspondence, n.d. For Perloff’s account of the epistemic break of conceptual writing, see *Unoriginal Genius*.
24. “On Explanation: Art and the Language of *Art-Language*”; in that discussion, I held to the decontextual account of conceptual art since criticized in the previous section of this essay.
25. Thanks to Craig Dworkin for providing a prepublication copy of the introduction and table of contents, as well as a .pdf of a page of *Parse*; thanks also to Kenneth Goldsmith for the .pdf of the first page of *Day*.
26. The evidence is so far is thin: in the several existing accounts of conceptual writing, I see a range of practices, some conceptual, some digital, some derived from Language writing, that do not cohere in an epochal way. Goldsmith’s *Harriet* column mentions Jordan Davis, Mel Nichols, Sharon Mesmer, K. Silem Mohammad, Nada Gordon, Drew Gardner, Gary Sullivan, Caroline Bergvall, Christian Bök, Fitterman, Goldsmith, Craig Dworkin, and Place. The majority of the work tends toward Flarf, language-centered writing, sound text, or performance, with conceptual writing as a distinct minority, even as Goldsmith divides future possibilities of writing into conceptualism and Flarf. The bibliography in *Notes*, while valuable, presents Language-centered Flarf practice as evidence, by virtue of nonintentional procedures and digital technology, of conceptualism. While one can only speculate on the convergence or divergence of texts in Dworkin and Goldsmith’s forthcoming anthology, the table of contents indicates a similarly broad (at this point even inexplicable) range of contribu-

tors whose work ranges from highly procedural, nonintentional, or appropriation-based practices to writing where compositional organization, of the kind that conceptual writing is supposed to go beyond, is evident. Selections of from Coolidge's *The Maintains* (1973) and Silliman's "The Chinese Notebook" (1975), perhaps the two most influential examples of conceptual writing by language-centered writers in the 1970s, are not included.

27. Other time-valued works by Goldsmith include his "American trilogy," *Weather*, *Traffic*, and *Sports*.
28. On Hsieh's performance, see Adrian Heathfield.
29. Rumor has it that Goldsmith is preparing another typed appropriation of the *New York Times* for **September 10, 2001**. I will bracket here a reading of *Day* informed by Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York*, which was shot before **September 11, 2001** but edited and released afterwards.
30. As the author epochally remarks on the back cover, "Nearly one hundred years after Duchamp, why hasn't appropriation become a valid, sustained or even tested literary practice?"
31. However, in *Reading the Illegible*, Dworkin's criticism addresses a range of texts valorized for their "illegibility."
32. For an amusing descant on "the New," see Mathew Timmons' *New Poetics*.
33. As I finish revisions of the text for publication, it is now **January 16, 2011**; having corrected the proofs, it is now **February 20, 2011**.

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