

Of course, numerous other poets are investigating the possibilities of poetry. Rob Fitterman, in his magazine *Object #9*, assembled twenty-seven poets who use what he calls "Inventory: sampling, cut-n-paste, summary, assemblage, synthesis, appropriation." Fitterman writes, "As we negotiate or document or influence the end of the century, it seems to me that an inventory poetics more closely reflects today's cultural phenomena of summary or repetition, rather than a 'make it new' poetics of invention" (n.p.). In the projects of these poets there is a noticeable merging of techniques of referential, nonreferential, and hyperreferential investigative poetics. Implicit in many of them is the attention and constant questioning of the position of the writer to both the language and the sources by which he or she is both surrounded and limited. The space of writing is not a manageable space; the laboratory of writing is a vast sampling of information combined with experience. It is a mix of thought that is never static. The fast edit of the documentary, which presents an attempt at a contextual whole out of the various fragments of its editing, is one place where experimental practitioners of poetry are forging mindful spaces.

Poetry will not raise mass consciousness, although it will articulate new systems in which sources, language, lyric, document, collage, and process come together as presentations of an alternative logic. Contemporary research projects do not claim an intersection with the world as a way of assimilating all of its various parts in order to build them up anew. These are projects that take on several guises, which will inevitably expand with time as new forms and approaches to language emerge to confront the content of our times.

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## 1997: Language-Based/Content-Driven (vice versa)

From 1968 to 2000 the speed, variety, and flow of information has been facilitated by electronic communication capabilities; movies and TV have adapted the quick edit that came originally from avant-garde film techniques, and it has trained a new generation of viewers to perceive narrative structures as not demanding fixed sequences of beginnings, middles, and ends; the Gulf War was perceived as having no casualties because every shot of it was taken from the video-game perception of fighter pilots firing missiles on distant targets; ordinary people with video cameras have the power to be surveillance sources for FOX-TV snuff programs depicting car crashes, sports accidents, and aviation tragedies; anarchist politics, traditionally associated with leftist ideology, have been reformulated to right-wing militia groups; Interpol, the international police organization, is operating a global spy network that allows the United States to spy on its own citizens; the World Bank generated \$28 billion in loans to “developing” countries in 1999 under the condition that they destabilize their governments and embrace democracy.

1. *Response* by Juliana Spahr is a book through which the poet works as an inquisitor and questioner of the problematic power structures inherent in poetic language. What constitutes “poetry” is overturned—for the tone of this book is flat, assured, blasé, mechanic. Her sources are drawn from disturbing Oprah shows, Hollywood movies, and alien-abductee stories. *Response* is a response to a surge of sources to which Spahr is the deciphering witness. Through revealing them she challenges us to think through both what sources mean and what language means. The testimonies that we seek to give emotive power to our world are a misrevelation, a nonsensical space, an expanding diatribe with no center from which truth, accuracy, or singular interpretation is possible. The matrix of language as assumed authority is questioned but not to illustrate the impossibility of meaning. The reader’s position—I or he, she or we and you—is constantly shifting. One is not privileged over the other in her critique, and we move through the book as an ever-shifting pronoun, never grasping identity or trusting our appearance.

2. In Alan Gilbert’s *Eve of Jubilee* rigorous documentary research into, for example, the Union Carbide chemical spill at Bhopal, the Hormel meat-packers’ strike, and the random sterilization of Native American women is presented alongside a series of poetic explorations from a tangled lyrical landscape. The contrast between the two voices is startling, and the transitions from reading one into the other are rough along the edges. But the edges are there, present in the intent to challenge poetic language. Gilbert’s poetry tests the capability of the lyrical voice, with its power over meaning and language, to relay hard-hitting information and documentary evidence. The confrontation of lyric and documentary on facing sides of the page questions the way we place value either on a historical source or on a poem. In the space between poetry and document is the breaking down of the definitions of both.

3. Sherry Brennan is also working from within the limitations of the lyric and does not trust its claim to heal the wounds of history by masking them in poetic language. In *Taken* she utilizes the lyric not to patch meaning over the holes of a violent history (in this case the pillage of the Native Americans) nor to intersect with the lost or silent voices of the past. History is not portrayed as a series of patches but as a series of reported occurrences, a sampling of representations, each coming from within the poetic language that attempts to articulate it.

4. Lisa Jarnot, by facing her poems in *Some Other Kind of Mission* with collages of her manuscripts, crossed out and reshaped, provides a constant reminder of the labor and material circumstances that go into the production of a poem. Her work points to an outside that is within the bounds of the book itself, with the text constantly referring back to itself and its modes of production. The sources that are revealed in Jarnot’s book are generated through her own process, but this does not preclude the gesture of the text as reaching for an ever-unreachable exterior. There is no single plane in which the poetic address is situated, no precise or definable reference from which the poet’s voice is inspired. As is the world, so is the text both confused and illuminated within a plethora of possible mergings.

Q. Who played Sgt. Garcia on "Zorro"?

At the heart of  
fight lie two  
assignments  
let me live a-gain  
Gibb B.V.  
Stigwood Music, Inc. Unichappell Music,  
ghts RESERVED

### 1968: The Politics of the Page

The obvious critique of this kind of procedure is that it denies the reader's desire for meaning or analysis, and simultaneously demands a sophisticated, privileged reader who knows beforehand that process and procedure in themselves are ways of reading. The writing is nonreferential: its content is not explicit but rather is buried in the procedure and masked by the language. In anticipation of this critique Osman writes that in fact Darragh's text is implicitly referential and political because it points to the "real" language of 1968 that is suppressed. "Whereas cultural 'revolution' may have been the key-word that most think of when the year 1968 is evoked, it was particularly non-revolutionary vocabulary that was being generated at the time. The real revolution of the time had more to do with fantasy and consumerism than anything else. Language was the true indicator of what the future held" (Osman 7).

Sanders, of course, would disagree. But instead of expecting Darragh's text to be politically accountable, it might be better to value procedural writing in terms of what poet Alan Gilbert has referred to as the "politics of the page": to appreciate the games and experimentation of such processes as a pushing forward of form and a necessary shattering of the expectations of what a poem, or poetry, is or should be. If the vocabulary of the cultural revolution is missing from Darragh's text, then her procedure is not about revolution and does not need to be valued as contributing to a political critique of 1968. On the other hand, Ed Sanders's *1968: A History in Verse* does

use the vocabulary of both the cultural and the consumer revolution. He uses chunks of information from his files of anarchist magazines, FBI files, letters, and photographs. His poem is procedural, but the end result is very different.

In *1968* Sanders displays his skills as an investigative poet, using his own theories of data clusters, information flows, fact strips, etc. to organize a narrative history about 1968. The series of data clusters that make up *1968* flows with lucidity, emotion, precision, and information. This book reveals the social implications of investigative poets who reveal sources in their work as a way of articulating concrete facts to create an alternative narrative history. This is procedural writing in which an alternative form for the articulation of history gestures toward depicting a countercultural past. Evidence drives the poem forward and creates its context. Through sampling, the poem becomes a project that is continually changing along with the social and political forces that shape it. Unlike collage, which decontextualizes and removes the reference from the object by forcing a cohesion with other objects, sampling preserves the reference by presenting it as a chunk of information, rather than as a fragmented cutup. Both recontextualize the original reference—but whereas collage consumes the reference, sampling allows the seams, and the points of convergence with other references, to show.

The point here is not to choose which poet—the "fan" poet or the "data-strip" poet—is better. Nor is it to determine which poet is more or less at the cutting edge of social change. In each is the depiction of a year, 1968. In each is an assembly of information that confronts readers, asking them to evaluate their position within time and history. In each is the document, the source, and the reference foregrounded and opened for readers to discover their own perceptions. In each are the shortcomings of experimental texts: both revelation and alienation are predictable; the dramatics of lyric are as tiresome as the babble of language; both the impulse toward documentary and the impulse toward nonreferentiality are manipulative. But how exciting is the possibility of putting it all together and creating a form that can handle the urge to articulate an explosive content.

he made photocopies of pages from the dictionary, randomly tore and pasted one dictionary page over another, folded the pages into a fan, and finally, transcribed a section and then placed it "between two definitions attributed to having first been said in 1968" (qtd. in Osman 7). What is revealed by his procedural poem, writes Osman, is "a truly provocative insight into an era of American history. Most of the words first coined in 1968 are from the field of communications, science fiction, and sports: 'shot line,' 'tele-player,' 'teletransport,' 'shopper,' 'sidefoot,' 'tie-off,' 'washerette,' etc." (Osman 7). The dictionary sources of Darragh's investigation are revealed as a part of the poem, and what is exposed, according to Osman, is "a side of language that has previously been hidden/suppressed" (Osman 3). Osman wrote that Joan Retallack called Darragh's work "investigative poetry," saying that "there is the ability to identify with the playful inquirer setting out on an investigation and leaving markers along the way" (Retallack qtd. in Osman 6). These markers are the poet's tracks of investigation through newspapers, history books, dictionaries, or encyclopedias that appear ripped from their sources and worked into the body of the poem. Such use of source texts demystifies them as omnipotent, authorial, master texts. The investigative poet is tuned in to this fact and removes these sources from their referential status in order to challenge the manipulative language structures that reinforce the status quo.

• RAPID EXPERIMENT #2: A ONE-DAY LYRICAL FAN STRIP—  
 RE. 1976. KRISTIN PREVALLET EXPERIMENTS WITH  
 DARRAGHS'S PROCEDURE TO REVEAL A MULTIPLE FUNC-  
 TIONING OF LANGUAGE IN THE YEAR 1976.

The Procedure

1. Xerox "fake book" lyrics to songs from *Saturday Night Fever* and tear them into different shapes.
2. Xerox two articles from the first issue of *Mother Jones* (published Feb. 1976).
3. Paste the lyric strips randomly onto the *Mother Jones* articles.

4. Fold into a fan with varying pleat sizes.
5. Cut around the most interesting pleated clusters.
6. Transcribe, and place as answers to questions from the "TV QUIZ" found on page 49 of the first issue of *Mother Jones*. (Correct answers on page 86 of *Mother Jones*, Feb. Mar. 1976)

Q. What are the first two lines to the theme song of "Car 54, Where Are You?"

what wa  
 th-er you're a  
 x women  
 d rapist  
 before he  
 son, twen  
 -ev nos-  
 ated for wounds  
 shoulder and arms  
 detective  
 live,- Stay-in' Alive.-

Q. What was Jim Anderson's occupation on "Father Knows Best"?

-y break-in' and women who do  
 justice. Yet I am On July 18, 1975  
 ies of women who at the time as "si  
 anecdotes of the knifed an accuse  
 Beach, Florida, b  
 is frightening to rested. John Dot  
 I use - my wai- ized and trea  
 -low and I - get high.- omach,  
 ng to  
 Fe  
 A-

Forging an intellectual space where poetry and theory converge to create a life of the mind, this group's procedures were antithetical to Sanders's ideas of "investigative poetics." In a 1977 letter to Steve McCaffery, Charles Bernstein wrote:

What seems exciting abt our diad, to me, is that it doesnt simply use "cut-up" language or neologisms to create a unified field of meaning on one plane, but actually calls into play notions of variant simultaneously existing realms of discourse constantly criss-crossing, intersecting, creating new gells, new forms—very much the description that Wittgenstein uses to describe language—as a city with some streets straight & narrow, other windy &&&.

. . . the simple display of alternative forms of making meaning is alone not enuf—wrk that really attracts me has an impermeability that this open field is really counter to—while this stuff is an opening up that gives the mind plenty of room to move around, associate, pass over—what I mean by impermeable wrtng is its opacity, charged with an electric density you cant get through. (*Line 73*)

Wittgenstein, Derrida, Saussure, and Stein come together to forge the language poets' initial articulation of their "cipheral" poetics, with sharp ideological differences separating them from the projects of the New American poets, the Black Mountain poets, the ethnopoetics poets, and the investigative poets. The distinction between the l=a=n=g=u=a=g=e poets' concern with impermeability, opacity, and method over the investigative poet's concern with generating meaning and writing history is here noted. Also noted, however, is the crossover of interests in data, collage, appropriation, and cutups among both the l=a=n=g=u=a=g=e and the investigative poets. Both see the concept of witness as key to their process, although they define it quite differently:

[*Bernstein:*] A friend recently sd that one of the strongest characteristics of my wrtng was a sense of *witness* . . . looking at yr life

go by while at the same time being in it is the way i've expressed it at times—wch actually is the attitude twrd language itself, the thing thru wch we experience, see things as one thing or another, as meanings. . . . "The record of observation" is not the "world" at least in the sense of the naive concept of the physical world . . . but an observing, a looking out onto, language. (*Line 71*)

[*Sanders:*] Nor shall we forget how the Chilean poet-singer Victor Jara was leading a group of singers while imprisoned in the soccer stadium following the 1973 CIA-coup in Chile, and the killers chopped off his fingers to silence his guitar, and still he lead the singing—til they killed him, another bard butchered because of the U.S. secret police. (*IP 12*)

These differing points of witness center primarily on how language is used to navigate through the "world." In 1976 the differences between how these two approaches were manifest in poetry was radical; in experimental poetry today the two approaches are combined to generate texts. A reflection of the structures of language, and the importance of a confrontational and emotional testimony of events, can now happen at the same time. Language used to witness is simultaneously a witness of language. In the antiofficial verse tradition the moving forward of thought and writing should not be in the prioritizing of one kind of thinking over another but in the process of absorbing multiple influences simultaneously.

### Reading the Procedure

Providing a relevant analysis of this point are two poetic accounts of the year 1968: Tina Darragh's *adv. fans—the 1968 series* and Ed Sanders's *1968: A History in Verse*. Both texts are generated from the raw data of the year 1968, and both can be discussed as procedural poems. According to poet Jena Osman in a paper called "Can you tell me how to reduce 'long' simultaneously with 'fine'?": The Procedural Poetry of Tina Darragh and Joan Retallack," Darragh has collected words whose first usage occurred in 1968.

plummets to its deepest  
recession since the Great  
Depression when the federal deficit hits  
a record \$60 billion also President Ford is mocked  
for his "Whip Inflation Now"  
buttons while 10,000 Cuban  
troops are airlifted to Angola  
with USSR backing and back home  
Cocaine becomes noticeably fashionable . . .

What I did know was that

July 4, 1976

was a bicentennial

celebration: 1776–1976

and since July 2 was my mother's birthday

there was no real difference

between the two.

My mother was not shy

nor was she particularly

patriotic. She was a

beer-guzzling trout fisher

tax evading "stop the arms race" marcher

feminist angry letters-to-the-editor writer

"sit on the tracks" to stop

trainloads of plutonium

en route to Rocky Flats

a John Denver fan

guitar strumming soloist

maker of gigantic felt banners

with cut-out "peace doves" and bumper-stickers

proclaiming her religion:

"Trust in God, She Provides"

and "Adam was a Rough Draft."

There was plenty to be mad about

in 1976: I was forbidden  
from watching *Charlie's  
Angels* and could only  
watch *Wonder Woman*  
once a month.

I was not aware of Leonard Peltier's  
arrest nor that the Stock Market topped  
1,000 while Steve Jobs was starting Apple  
Computer in his basement I didn't know  
that the FBI had burglarized  
the Socialist Party 92 times between 1960  
and 1966 or that Phil Ochs hung himself  
and an Earthquake destroyed  
the city of T'ang-shan nor did I know about  
10,000 students demonstrating in Soweto which left  
128 dead and 1,112 injured.

I did know that on July 4, 1976

America's bi-centennial birthday

my mother wore

a red-white-and-blue American flag Oxford shirt

a red bandanna around her neck

knee-length cut-off jean shorts

red-white-and-blue tube socks

and blue tennis shoes

and I refused to be seen

with her in public.

### 1976: Second Instance

In May of 1976 Ron Silliman, Charles Bernstein, and Steve McCaffery  
began a concentrated correspondence, which McCaffery later described as  
revealing "many of the differences felt in the early struggles of post-referen-  
tial conceptualization outside of academic discourse" (72–73). Although also

social, and cultural forces around him or her. The poet is a manifesto-creating, opinionated, ranting, perpetual surveyor and tireless investigator of history. The poet is busy creating verse grids out of whatever materials are present before him or her at the time; the poet is an appropriator of sources, a thief of facts, a collage-creating scoundrel in a hyper state of awareness and inspiration. Flowcharts, newspaper articles, photographs, etymology, and ethnography become the raw materials for the poet's unique assemblage.

As with all great manifestos, Sanders's poetical goals are lofty and ambitious, outrageous and impossible:

Investigative poetry is freed from capitalism, churchism, and other totalitarianisms; free from racisms, free from allegiance to napalm-dropping military police states—a poetry adequate to discharge from its verse-grids the undefiled high energy purely-distilled verse-fragments, using *every* bardic skill and meter and method of the last 5 or 6 generations, in order to describe *every* aspect (no more secret governments!) of the historical present, while aiding the future, even placing bard-babble once again into a role as shaper of the future. (IP 11)

Although times and poets have changed, the impulse for poets to create an intellectual life for themselves that resists totalitarianisms has not. Sanders's theory, which in "Creativity and the Fully Developed Bard" he called "the multi-decade research project" (238), outlines a strategy for staying intellectually afloat for those who have chosen poetry as a means of living a life of the mind. The procedure is cumulative: pick a project that will take the next sixty years to research. Immediately begin by creating files for the project. As you read through the sources, begin taking notes in verse to be cut up and arranged as "fact strips" (244) on the page. Move them around until the fact strips become a sequence, a shape, a "data cluster" (244). Through this arrangement of data clusters you will slowly develop your own unique system for organizing information. As Sanders writes:

The look & feel  
& the way you array  
your information systems  
in your Creativity Zone  
has meaning  
for your work. (248)

Once you get into the zone, you are able to create sequences of data and poetry anytime, anywhere, whether inspired or not, sick or healthy, stuck or in transit. The creative zone is not just a notebook filled with data clusters—it is an intellectual pursuit, a way of approaching life and being perpetually in tune with the world mix.

Sanders continues:

IT SHOULD BE THERE IN YOUR LIFE  
so that

in your best

creative moments

you can spiffle

through it

for materials

useful to your writing. ("Creativity" 256)

• RAPID EXPERIMENT #1: A ONE-DAY DATA CLUSTER RESEARCH PROJECT FOR THE YEAR 1976. SUBJECT: KRISTIN PREVAILLET EXPERIMENTS WITH SANDERS'S PROCEDURE TO MINE HER MEMORY OF PERSONAL AND CULTURAL EVENTS.

I was ten years old  
and knew nothing about  
what it meant to be alive  
in the year 1976:

Highest rate of bank  
failures since 1933 and the economy

## 9 | Investigating the Procedure: Poetry and the Source

*Kristin Prevallet*

In 1976 a series of events-in-poetry occurred that catalyzed an ideological spill still felt in thought and in action twenty years later by practitioners of antiofficial verse. These events directed poetry away from a quest for transparent meaning and toward the revelation of source texts, procedures, and language experiments within the body of the poem itself. Poets refer to these events using a variety of terms, all of which can be contextualized within specific literary moments occurring before and after 1976. Because these terms were used to specify a particular movement in poetry—projective verse, Language poetry, investigative poetics, open-field poetics—they have been defined as oppositional and not at all reflective of one another. It will take the creation of an entirely new event-in-poetry to reinvestigate this and to bring the various terms into a useful poetic practice based not on opposition but mutual re-formulation.

### 1976: First Instance

In 1976 City Lights published Edward Sanders's book *Investigative Poetry*, which had been presented as a lecture at the Visiting Spontaneous Poetics Academy of the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, in the summer of 1975. Just before the table of contents, Sanders inscribes the unique purpose of investigative poetry: "that poetry should again assume responsibility for the description of history." Sanders designs new forms for poetic presentation based on Charles Olson's manifesto of projective verse. Sanders calls these forms "High Energy Verse Grids" or "Data Clusters" (IP 8). Through these grids or clusters the poet can be a historical scholar, embarking on a voyage through the world, with the facts, theories, statistics, and raw information transformed through the "bard's" singular voice into a "description of historical reality" (IP 7). The poet is a researcher, investigator, interpreter, singer, and prophet who engages in an active relationship with the political,