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Against Against Affect (Again): *Æ*ffect in Kenneth Goldsmith's *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*

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Against Against Affect (Again):

Æffect in Kenneth Goldsmith's *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*

by

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

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Recent scholarship on conceptual writing has turned to the role of affect in poetry. Critics such as Calvin Bedient claim that by using appropriated text and appealing to intellectual encounters with poetry based around a central "concept," conceptual writing diminishes or even ignores affect. Bedient in particular is concerned with affect's relationship with political efficacy, a relationship I call "æffect." I make the case that because of its use of appropriated material, we must examine the transformation from source text to poetic work when discussing affect in conceptual writing. Kenneth Goldsmith's *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, which consists of transcriptions of audio recordings made during and immediately following major American tragedies, involves a specific kind of affective transformation: the cliché. I discuss what makes a cliché, especially in relation to affect, before turning to Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* and her concept of "stuplimity." Stuplimity is an often ignored and not easily articulated affect that arises from boredom and repetition. Stuplimity is critical for *Seven American*

Deaths and Disasters, especially for the "open feeling" that it produces in its wake. This uncanny feeling indicates a changing tide in conversations about conceptual writing. Rather than focus on the affect of æffect, we should instead turn to the effect.

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Conceptual Writing and *Æ*ffect

The invocation of "conceptual writing" in recent scholarship refers to a diverse series of contemporary experimental poetic practices that rely heavily on appropriation and constraint-based methodologies in composition. The two major schools of conceptual writing, Conceptualism and Flarf, rose to prominence following a portfolio in the July/August 2009 issue of *Poetry Magazine*. In the years since the publication of this issue, conceptual writing has gained increased traction and cultural cache in contemporary poetry. There have been two major anthologies of conceptual writing published since 2009, *Against Expression* (Northwestern UP, 2011) and *I'll Drown My Book* (Les Figues Press, 2012), both of which include not only contemporary practitioners of the form, but precursors such as John Cage and Kathy Acker.[1] Perhaps most significantly, the 2013 publication of the second edition of Paul Hoover's *The Norton Anthology of Postmodern Poetry* features poems by ten of the thirteen poets in the *Poetry Magazine* portfolio, as well as three statements of poetics by conceptual writers.[2] As conceptual writing has drawn widespread attention, many critics have scrutinized the apparent lack of affect in a practice that emphasizes a procedural approach in creating the eponymous "concept" of the work. However, in order to understand the proliferation of critiques surrounding affect in conceptual writing, we must ask: what is the meaning of the term "affect," and why might it be inseparable from poetic practice?

1 *Against Expression* in particular pushes the genealogical implications of conceptual writing, including W.B. Yeats, Samuel Beckett, Tristan Tzara, Marcel Duchamp, and Andy Warhol, among others.

2 As Marjorie Perloff notes in "Whose New American Poetry?: Anthologizing in the Nineties," the anthology is "designed largely for classroom use. Hoover's Norton anthology is meant to complement (and be used in tandem with), the 'regular' or 'mainstream' Norton; it even has a teachers' manual." As such, it is enormously influential in determining what kinds of poetry are taught in academic settings.

In his essay “Against Conceptualism,” Calvin Bedient taxonomizes poetry based on a binary opposition between the “conceiving head” and the “intuitive heart.” He considers the former an ally of conceptual writing, and aligns the latter with lyric poetry. Bedient defines affect as “anger, fear, joy, crippling shame, jealousy, grief—emotions that bear on a vital self regard,” conflating the terms affect and emotion, as well as emphasizing the relationship between affect and individual subjectivity. The chief affect for him is melancholy, which he characterizes as a mode of authentic expression that recognizes the inevitability of death. Melancholy allows for “militancy,” or the possibility of political and ethical agency in both the poet and the reader. Melancholy and militancy are vital elements of poetry in Bedient's view, as they “cannot be excised from literature, in favor of methodology, without both emotional and political consequences: misery in the first instance, cultural conformity in the second.” For Bedient, melancholy and militancy are what what make poetry poetry.

While Bedient's definition of the term “affect” (and especially his emphasis on melancholy as the chief affect) will be reworked and redefined in the following pages, his concept of "militancy" brought on by the swelling of emotion is an example of a concept that I would like to call *æffect*. Æffect considers affect and effect as related motivating experiences, rather than abstract and unrelated consequences felt by a passive subject. Æffect affects individuals as potential for feeling to motivate action. While æffect lacks specific telos, the possibility of political agency emerges from an æffective experience.[3]

3 Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* exemplifies the stakes of æffective experiences (as well as the possibility of affect without effect). The psychoactive pharmaceutical *soma* at the heart of the novel produces intense affective states in its users, yet it limits the individual's agency in challenging political authority—it pacifies the population by making them happy.

If “as a poet, you affect the public sphere with each reader, with the fact of the poem” (Bernstein, 226), then æffect's potential to stir readers to action makes it a cornerstone in poetry's possibilities as political discourse.

If æffect is inseparable from poetry's station in a political ecology, then why turn to procedure and methodology over lyrical self-expression? Conceptual writer Kenneth Goldsmith, the first MoMA poet laureate and editor of *Poetry Magazine*'s portfolio on conceptual writing, places his work in the theoretical footsteps of Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades and Andy Warhol's reframing of iconic images. He argues that the proliferation of conceptual writing is a response to the emergence of digital technology and the ubiquity of computers in everyday life. The ease of copying, pasting, and moving text in an technocratic culture has stirred within poetry “an appropriate response to a new condition in writing today: faced with an unprecedented amount of available text, the problem is not needing to write more of it; instead we must learn to negotiate the vast quantity that exists” (*Uncreative Writing*, 1). Among Goldsmith's works are *No. 111.2.7.93-10.20.96*, a 600 page collection of rhyming phrases ending with “r”, organized by syllable count and ending with a 7,228 syllable rhyme, which is an exact reproduction of D.H. Lawrence's “The Rocking-Horse Winner”; the “American Trilogy,” a collection of books consisting of transcriptions of radio broadcasts of weather reports, traffic updates, and the longest regular-inning baseball in MLB history; and *Day*, an entire copy of the New York Times retyped from start to finish—advertisements, stock quotes, and even crossword puzzle included.

It is unsurprising that critics such as Bedient lament the loss of affect in

conceptual writing. Goldsmith's statements about his own work only fuel the debate: “My books are impossible to read straight through. In fact, every time I have to proofread them before sending them off to the publisher, I fall asleep repeatedly. You really don't need to read my books to get the idea of what they're like” (*Being Boring*). However, this characterization belies conceptual writing's active engagement with affect, æffect, and political discourse. Goldsmith's most recent book, *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, is a quintessential example. It turns to some of the most important (and engrossing) American tragedies in the last 50 years: the assassinations of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Robert Francis Kennedy, and John Lennon; the Challenger explosion; the Columbine High School shootings; the attack on the World Trade Center; and the death of Michael Jackson. Each chapter is a transcript of the audio from one or more recordings, most of which are radio broadcasts occurring during, or immediately after, the unfolding of each tragic event.

As a work consisting of appropriated text, *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* is the type of poetry that Bedient places in the realm of the “conceiving head.” However, the notion that conceptual writing limits the experience of affect is inherently flawed. Consider the case of a 911 call made by teacher Patti Nielson from the library of Columbine High School: “[whispering] Oh, God. I'm really...frightened. [More shots, extremely close] I think he's in the library...He's yelling at everybody get up right now. [More shots] He's in the library” (*SADD*, 124-5). Although the ability to articulate the affect of these lines beyond Nielson’s experience may seem difficult, affect is undeniably at stake.

This difficulty in describing the range of affect in conceptual writing comes from the limitations inscribed by the conflation of the term “affect” with the related terms “passions” and “emotion.” For Bedient, the limitations are twofold. First, he considers affect's structure in its ability to be narrated in relation to the possibility of death. However, in her book *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai uses narrative as a way to distinguish between affects and emotions. Drawing on the work of Brian Massumi, she writes that affects are, “*less* formed and structured than emotions, but not lacking form or structure altogether; *less* 'sociolinguistically fixed,' but by no means code-free or meaningless; *less* 'organized in response to our interpretations of situations,' but by no means entirely devoid of organization or diagnostic powers” (Ngai, 27). Secondly, by only considering “emotions that bear on a vital self regard,” Bedient limits the possibility of affect to the experience of an ephemeral “self,” presumably the poetic subjectivity aligned with the speaker of a poem. By considering affect as more than a synonym for emotion, we gain the possibility of considering affects that are ambient or impress upon texts and objects.

It is from this expanded notion of affect that I will examine the critical conversation surrounding affect and conceptual writing, focusing on Kenneth Goldsmith's *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* as a specific kind of conceptual text that exemplifies the affective possibilities of conceptual modes more broadly. I make the case that because of the use of appropriated material, we must examine the transformation from source text to published work when discussing affect in conceptual writing. Because it concerns massive tragedies that have become ingrained in American culture, *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* involves a specific kind of affective transformation: the

cliché. I will discuss what makes a cliché, especially in relation to affect, before turning to Sianne Ngai's "stuplimity." Stuplimity is an often ignored and not easily articulated affect that arises from boredom and repetition. Stuplimity is critical for *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, especially for the "open feeling" that it produces in its wake. This uncanny feeling indicates a changing tide in conversations about conceptual writing and suggests that rather than focus on the affect of æffect, we should turn to the effect.

The Affect Network at its Source

In “Lyric Backlash,” Rachel Galvin responds directly to Bedient's essay, writing that due to his bias towards lyric poetry, Bedient assumes a common misunderstanding that because of its appropriative techniques, conceptual writing lacks an individual subjectivity (commonly associated with lyric poetry), which is seen as the only source of affect. Galvin directs readers to the poetry of Oscar Vallejo and M. NourbeSe Philip, both of whom Bedient mentions in his essay, to argue that conceptual writing, as a post-structuralist and post-colonial practice, fractures and deforms hierarchical language and canonical writing, allowing the expression of previously marginalized forms of subjectivity and affect. Thus, not only does conceptual writing have the possibility to engage with subjectivity (and therefore affect), its potential to utilize æffect as political practice is more expansive than the potential for lyric poetry.

Galvin's approach, which echoes the discussion surrounding L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry in its attempts to deform the lyric “I,”[4] closely aligns the poet's subjectivity with affect. However, Drew Gardner, also responding to Bedient, articulates affect as a networked structure based on “the poet's affect, the poem's affect and the reader's affect.” All three function independently in poetry, but all three must be examined in connection with one another when negotiating the role of affect in poetry. Bedient and Galvin, insofar as they tend to equate subjectivity with affect in poetry, end up trapped in a post-Confessional discourse anchored on the importance of the poet's

4 As Galvin points out, “Maybe the most striking thing about this new debate is how old it is.” She takes the debate at least as far back as the OuLiPo writers in the 1960's, although she frames the debate around Bedient's assumption of the necessity of the lyric “I,” and not the role of affect in poetry.

affect.[5] Gardner suggests that a central premise of conceptual writing is an emphasis on the reader's affect as much as the poet's affect, violating the expected contract between reader and poet, characterized in lyric poetry as affect that is "rented" from the author by the reader.[6]

I would like to adopt Gardner's tripartite structure of the poetic affect network, but make one major revision. When referring to the appropriated text in a conceptual work, it is insufficient to categorize the affect of the source text under the poem's affect. "C*ontext is the new content"* (3), Goldsmith repeats as a refrain in *Uncreative Writing*. While the text may be the same functionally, we must distinguish between the *Don Quixote* of Cervantes and Menard. When referring to the affects of conceptual writing, it is imperative to differentiate between the source text's affect and the poem's affect, without reducing the difference to an attribute of the poet.

The difference between the affects of the source and the poem is in fact a contentious point that has not been sufficiently addressed in critical conversations. While critics such as Bedient, Galvin, and Gardner are quick to discuss the theoretical and historical implications surrounding authorship in conceptual writing, little attention is paid to the text itself, ironically enacting a version of Goldsmith's suggestion not to read his works. After all, if the author tells us not to read the book, it makes more sense to

5 Gardner also picks up Galvin's articulation of conceptual writing as a possible answer for post-structural critiques of the author: "Attributing an overabundance of agency to particular individuals is particularly problematic when social structures feature dominant hierarchies."

6 Gardner ultimately uses this network of affect to advocate for Flarf, a kind of conceptual writing that is sculpted from Google search results. A flarf poem, according to Gardner, "blurs the difference between the poet's affect and the affects of the text it is appropriating." That is, it becomes difficult to tell the difference between what the poem says, and what the appropriated text says.

discuss the author and the process, rather than the actual text.[7] This creates an easily imagined danger for conceptual writing: affect drains from original (and often emotional) source texts, reproducing a flat affect-less xerox.

A prime example of affect desiccation is Goldsmith's "American Trilogy." Each of the three books, *Weather*, *Traffic*, and *Sports*, is a transcript of radio broadcasts towards which people have highly affective responses. Many people respond emotionally to the weather, whether it's a child excited for a school-canceling snow day or an average person caught in a storm without an umbrella. A traffic jam will set just about any driver's passions aflame (especially when the traffic involves drivers trying to get out of Manhattan on a holiday weekend, the spatiotemporal setting of *Traffic*). *Sports* features a baseball game between the New York Yankees and the Boston Red Sox, perhaps the most storied and passionate rivalry in baseball history. And yet, these books are exactly as Goldsmith describes them—boring to read. While the source originally may have had highly affective stakes, the poems demand a different kind of engagement—an intellectual (and often times heavily allegorical) response.[8]

This is the fear that Bedient circularly articulates when he worries that the "conceiving head" triumphs over the "intuitive heart." It is based on the

7 As Vanessa Place writes in her review of *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, entitled, "What Makes Us?," "No one could be happier than those who swallow the bait about not reading conceptual poetry, for they conveniently miss the corollary that one might at least think about it." ("What Makes Us"). The temptation NOT to read Conceptual works can be a red herring—one that especially makes us avoid thinking about the text at hand.

8 For example, Marjorie Perloff, in "Moving Information: On Kenneth Goldsmith's *The Weather,*" reads the weather reports in dialog with John Cage's *Lectures on Weather* (a piece composed for America's bicenntential celebration, consisting of excerpts of Thoreau's "Essays on Civil Disobedience") to demonstrate the political undercurrents of the text. In "Conceptualist Bridges/Digital Tunnels: Kenneth Goldsmith's *Traffic,*" she reads the descriptions of cars stopped under green lights in Manhattan alongside Hart Crane's "To Brooklyn Bridge" and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby,* highlighting issues of mobility in American society. She has not yet performed an allegorical reading of *Sports*.

misunderstanding that through appropriation, a reproduction cannot command as much affect as the original text. By eliding the affect of the source and the poem into a single text, the conceptual work at best can only be equal in affect to the original. This view is flawed however, as conceptual work makes different demands of the poet and the audience than the source text. As Gardner writes, “Every decision that is made to produce a poem involves affect.” While he is specifically referring to the node of the poet's affect, we can extend this line of reasoning through every component of his poetic affect network—now including the source text. Every poem involves affect. This is true even if exhaustive boredom felt by the reader is the only available affect to articulate.[9]

Rather than draining affect, the act of transforming a source text into a poem has the potential to expand what we typically consider as the affect felt by the reader. This compositional strategy reflects Galvin's articulation of post-structuralist and post-colonial texts' deforming of language in order to produce new political possibilities. Emphasizing the role of the reader's affect in the poetic affect network expands the possibilities of considering affect in conceptual texts. But more than that, if we consider the transformation of the source text into the poem, we open the possibility of properly considering æffect and appropriation together.

9 Sianne Ngai makes a similar observation in *Ugly Feelings* when considering feelings of disorientation and confusion: “Despite its marginality to the philosophical canon of emotions, isn't this feeling of confusion *about* what one is feeling an affective state in its own right?” (14). Once we consider non-narrative feelings as affective states, it becomes impossible to conceive of an affect-less text.

Absorbing Cliché

There are many ways to consider the transformation of affect in the source text when dealing with appropriation, and these will differ between conceptual works, especially considering the heterogeneity of the field. Given the poignancy of the tragedies in *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, there is a particular emphasis on the relationship between affect and cliché. Poetry, at least as far back as William Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 ("My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun"), has shown interest in regaining creative power from the cliché. But while Shakespeare's sonnet accomplishes this by challenging common metaphors and the genre of the blason, major contemporary tragedies are more complex figures. In order to understand how poetry might reclaim affect from a complex cliché, it is vital to understand how cliché functions.

Kenneth Goldsmith discusses cliché in the afterword to *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, writing, "Cliché often begins with sublimity and degrades into numbness. Like stereotype, cliché is an oversimplification of complex phenomena—often through a fatigue inducing process of repeated exposure—resulting in a gross, yet comprehensible, caricature" (170). At the core of cliché is exhaustive repetition that limits literal and metaphorical power—the encounter that happens too similarly and too often produces neither emotion nor a call to action. Cliché not only lacks æffect—it is a phenomenon that used to be æffective, that used to stir feeling and motivation, and whose repeated invocation has left it a withered husk.

Each of the events portrayed in *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* is clichéd in some way—the older tragedies seem significantly more clichéd if for no other reason

than the amount of time that has passed allows them to be repeated as cultural constructs. This is most apparent in the example of JFK's assassination, the tragedy from which the most time has lapsed. The 2014 film *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, for example, released a promotional video days after the 50th anniversary of JFK's assassination featuring actor Michael Fassbender as the metal controlling villain Magneto, standing on the grassy knoll controlling the "magic bullet." This pictorial "evidence" includes Fassbender photoshopped under a layer of black and white static to make it resemble photography from the period. Rather than asserting emotional timbre, one of the most traumatic moments of American history becomes period piece set dressing—the assassination of a President has the same function as Don Draper's cigarettes: costuming that makes us say, "How quaint," in passing. Tragedy becomes the material of mass market pulp fantasy. Tragedy becomes cliché.

The process by which national tragedies become cliché begins immediately after they occur. The main culprit of this process is the media. This seems especially obvious in the over-reporting culture of the 24-hour cable news cycle,[10] although the same process can be seen in various forms for at least the last half century. Faced with unprecedented and unimaginable events, the media must describe what is happening. And in the immediate aftermath of tragedy, they invariably struggle. This is in fact one of Goldsmith's major concerns in *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*. He writes that every chapter was,

10 *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* often catalog this phenomenon. A common subject of both is the absurd lengths to which cable news goes in either stretching a story or sensationalizing banal events.

> selected based on the fact they were unraveling in real time, thus highlighting the broadcasters' uncertainty as to what they were actually describing. While I found broadcasts depicting the assassinations of, for example, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, no media were present during those shootings; by the time reporters arrived on the scenes, the language was more flatly characteristic of standard reportage: confidently and deftly delivered. (*SADD*, 174)

Goldsmith is interested in every "um" and "ah" as the media wrangles with tragedy—as they demonstrate the process of narration that begins the slide towards cliché. In order to cope with and limit shock, tragedy must be flattened. There must be a story so that events can be internalized. The downward slope towards cliché begins by making tragedy easier to absorb.

In "Artifice of Absorption," Charles Bernstein examines absorption as an artifice that, like affect, is always at stake in poetry. Absorptive principles can be extended to all texts, including news reports, insofar as they make an attempt at communication. Absorption can function in many ways, from a simplified vocabulary, to the extent to which the speaker stands in the foreground: "Texts are written to be read or heard, that is, exhibited; but the degree the 'teller' or 'way it's told' are allowed to come into focus affects the experience of 'what' is being told or 'what' is unfolding" (Bernstein, 31). If a speaker hides behind crafted speech lacking rupture, they create a more absorptive text. However, the more a speaker differentiates themselves from the text, they more they create an anti-absorptive text. One of the ways in which we might examine a text's absorption, then, is to look at the methods by which individual speakers limit their presence while narrating unnarratable events.

In order to smooth their initial shock and disbelief and make tragedy easier to

absorb for both themselves and their audience, reporters attempt to tell a story. In telling this story, they begin a process of closure around complex phenomena, limiting the full emotional resonance of tragedy. They begin the process towards cliché. There are two major narrativizing absorptive techniques at play in *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*: fitting tragedy into the context of a historical narrative, and assigning blame as a structure of cause and effect.

Placing tragedy in an historical narrative involves drawing a direct comparison between an event and a similar precursor. The intended effect is not unlike using sandpaper to apply a finish to wood. By using the similarly abrasive events of the past, tragedy can be smoothed—made to make sense, as if everything went according to plan. In the JFK chapter, broadcasters attempt to fit the assassination into the narrative of American history: "Were that true, Joe, it would be the second time in American history that a Johnson had seceded [sic] to the presidency from the death of a president, that last time having been, of course, the assassination of President Lincoln and he was, of course, seceded [sic] by Andrew Johnson" (36). The coincidence of the name of the Vice President is utterly pedantic given the gravity of the situation, yet the broadcasters repeat it several times throughout the broadcast. Mere coincidence is offered in the absence of cause, as a way to structure the events, to make them more familiar.

There is a similar occurrence in the John Lennon chapter. Following the police announcement of the name of the assassin, a broadcaster states, "Mark David Chapman, three names straight off the police blotter. Three names like many accused assassins—Lee Harvey Oswald. James Earl Ray. Mark David Chapman" (87). The reporter offers

three names as a kind of *modus operandi* of murder in American history to rationalize and contextualize tragedy. Like the JFK assassination, the reporters turn to nomenclature, using correlation in place of causation.

When reporters code the emotional resonance of tragedy with examples from American history, they enclose the event to make it absorptive. One may argue, however, at least in the case of John Lennon's assassination, that the intertextuality with such recent assassinations instead expands emotional registers by relating it to events within the audience's recent experience. I believe this is misguided for two reasons. First, any attempt to describe or narrate the experience of tragedy necessarily limits as a signifying practice, placing borders and beginning a process of closure, regardless of any individual's experience of a similar tragedy. Second, by taking the use of intertextuality to the extreme, we can see that not only does a historical narrative lead to the cliché, it is also ineffective at describing tragedy.

This extreme is best demonstrated in the Michael Jackson chapter of *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*. During an NPR interview, "media critic and historian" (165) Robert Thompson states, "It's a really almost Greek-tragedy-like story" (166). This sentence—the closing line of the book—exemplifies the danger of attempting to narrate tragedy in an historical context. The death of the "King of Pop," whose album *Thriller* is not only the top selling album of all time, but has sold almost twice as many copies of the second best-selling album (Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*), was a tragic experience for millions of fans. The abuse of prescription drugs leading to an overdose is a real occurrence—neither fantastical nor theatrical. But instead of reacting to the tragedy as it

is, Thompson places the death in a literary historical context by evoking figures such as Oedipus and Antigone, a gesture so over the top that it borders on a poorly constructed cartoon.[11] Thompson deflates the event's emotional register through melodramatic hyperbole. But Thompson cannot even maintain the melodrama. He constantly inhibits and couches his statement: “really,” “almost,” and “-like,” diminishing his comparison with Greek tragedy as he makes it. And so, at the extreme of historical contextualization and intertextuality with tragedy is the attempt to narrate by comparing to figures so inapplicable and so far removed that meaning begins to vacate. By evoking ancient categories, cliché becomes more immediate in its destruction of complex meaning.

Eventually historical contextualization extends even beyond the tragedy itself. Events with no connection to the situation at hand come into view. “Ironically the record...has a single which is titled Just Like Starting Over” (*SADD*, 82), a broadcaster states about John Lennon's recently released album following his assassination. The reporter can't help but read the title of the song as inflected by a grander narrative. It doesn't heal the tragedy of the assassination, but it does craft a story to explain it, to make it seem like it was fate or destiny, making it easier to absorb.

Besides responding with an appropriate historical narrative, the media makes tragedy absorptive by looking for a party to blame. By attaching blame, a logical cause and effect relationship follows—as rational human beings we can understand the tragedy

11 Some might object that it is actually Michael Jackson who made a cartoon of himself with his outlandish lifestyle and media presence. But as Goldsmith states in an interview with *The Committee Room*: “The evening that Michael Jackson died, I was in Harlem attending a performance at the Studio Museum. The Harlem community was devastated by this loss. So profound was this incident, that prayers and a moment of silence occurred before the performance...So I find the idea that my inclusion of Michael Jackson as a joke to be offensive and racist.”

and respond to it appropriately. The chapter concerning the attacks of the World Trade Center, one of the most expansive chapters in the book, features this process in several ways.[12] Early on, the broadcasters know that a plane struck the tower, and they begin asking questions:

> This is not normally an area where you would see some sort of aircraft, certainly, obviously, that low. That is not a high traffic area in terms of flights? I don't know about flights...I have always wondered if anyone would get too close to the building and accidentally bear into it. (133)

The media is convinced that the attacks are an accident—a plane accidentally struck the World Trade Center. Something happened, and reasoning must be offered immediately. Blame must be assigned.

After the buildings collapse, the broadcasters continue to seek explanations and assign blame. As two broadcasters argue, one offers an explanation for the now-agreed-to-be-terrorist-attacks:

> I think it's fair to say to say that people in the Middle East have declared America to be the big Satan...Who had the targeted the World Trade Center before?...Ron, can we talk probabilities, though? Is it more likely that this might have had something to do with the Middle East than it does with the Michigan Militia? (149)

This broadcaster makes use of historical narratives in their reasoning, but more than just relating to previous tragedies as a gesture that recovery is possible and inevitable, they use the past to assign blame. By making this a story that we have seen before, we can more easily absorb it, as the same parties are responsible.

12 The broader political climate after 9/11 also demonstrates the importance of blame in responding to and internalizing tragedy. Once the federal government knew that the responsible party was terrorists living in Afghanistan, assisted by the Taliban, the military could take appropriate action. Once they knew that there was a failure in intelligence gathering, Congress could pass the PATRIOT Act as a response to patch the holes that caused the tragedy.

The discussion over who to blame introduces another structure of the media response to tragedy—the misreading. By misreading the events as they unfold, reporters demonstrate that absorptive narratives can be dangerous in the ways they shut down emotional response. The instance of a plane accidentally striking the tower is the pinnacle of this danger. It refuses the full range of emotional reaction by misinterpreting the situation. Misreadings can accept tragedy, however, as long as they play on prejudice to structure the narrative and make it absorptive. This can be seen in the assassination of Robert Kennedy, as reporters discuss the identity of the assassin. They state, "Two reports...one that he was Negro, another that he was Latin American" (66). Sirhan Sirhan, who was arrested on site and was not the subject of a manhunt, is in fact Palestinian. But in the 1960's, in a political climate rife with domestic violence and civil unrest, race is a construct of pure alterity. Race, acting like historical contextualization, asks the audience to structure (and limit) their grief accordingly. Rachel Blau DuPlessis describes a similar situation in *The Pink Guitar:* "I remember 'Remember our brothers at Kent State'! I remember going to them, the grieving mourners and saying, 'but women were killed too.' If it took two women two days to drop out of history, events burnt into us—what equation can we extrapolate here?" (42). In the case of Kent State, gender is written out of the event in order to make it more absorptive, both emotionally and as a catchphrase. The equation we can extrapolate is that by telling stories, whether true or not, that place tragedy in an historical context, clearly assigning blame where applicable, limiting unexpected interference from the margins, indescribable tragedy rife with complex emotions can be ordered, bounded, and absorbed. They can be made cliché.

Stuplimity's Open Feeling

And yet, a cliché event is not void of the possibility of affect. Goldsmith notes in the afterword to *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*:

> The cliché has the ability to teeter between states, being at once truthful and exaggerated. The seed upon which a cliché is built remains firmly embedded within, ready to re-reveal itself at any given moment...The power of a cliched news photo, long dead to us through overexposure, might instantaneously reassert itself under the right conditions. (170)

What are the "right conditions," then, that might allow the seed embedded in the cliché of American tragedy to sprout again? Conceptual writing offers an answer. By transforming a source text into a new context, it asks readers to approach the text in a new light. However, there seems to be an inherent contradiction in appropriation as an appropriate poetic process—if pure exhaustive repetition makes an event a cliché, then shouldn't repeating the text without any changes simply make the text more of a cliché? This would be true if we understood the experience of reading conceptual writing to be the kind that both Goldsmith and his critics advocate—don't read the book, just think about the idea, and attempt to understand its overarching concept. Conceptual writing, however, is not homogenous in that way.

Besides the diversity of compositional techniques, conceptual writing demands diverse reading strategies. *Notes on Conceptualisms*, a theoretical treatise co-authored by Vanessa Place and Rob Fitterman, locates appropriated work between the poles of "pure conceptualism" and the "baroque." "Pure conceptualism negates the need for reading in the traditional textual sense—one does not need to 'read' the work as much as think about the idea of the work...Impure conceptualism, manifest in the extreme by the baroque,

exaggerates reading in the traditional textual sense" (Place and Fitterman, 25). These two categories—"pure conceptualism" where one does not read the text, and "the baroque" which exaggerates reading—are the outer limits of conceptual reading strategies. All conceptual writing consisting of appropriated text falls in between. We might imagine a work of pure conceptualism at the upper limit as a textual art object, a book that is never opened, can never be opened, and whose text would be entirely inaccessible in any way.[13] At the lower limit would be a labyrinthine text so massive that one could never reach its end.[14]

Hence the difficulty in saying that any work of Conceptualism is simply "pure conceptualism." That kind of label would not mean that the book is boring, or that readers inevitably fall asleep out of sheer boredom. One always reads, to some degree. Rather than Goldsmith's self-characterization of his work as unreadable, it would be more accurate to say that *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* occupies a different point on the scale of conceptual work. While Goldsmith's other texts may be closer to "pure conceptualism," *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* is closer to the baroque. It wants to be read. It begs to be read.

Even the design of the book enacts its readability. In opposition to Goldsmith's

13 A project such as the Hall of Names in Yad Vashem, Jerusalem's Holocaust memorial, gestures towards this upper limit, but still falls short. In this exhibit, visitors enter a massive room surround by books, inside of which are the names of victims and the testimonies of Holocaust survivors. The books beg to read, but the distance between the railing-lined viewing platform and the physical texts makes reading them impossible. The only reason that this project falls short of an upper limit of "pure conceptualism" is that the names and testimonies are available to read elsewhere—there is still access to the text in some way.

14 One might imagine Jorge Luis Borges' Library of Babel, a collection of books containing every permutation of the alphabet in 410 pages—every book up to that length, that has ever, or could ever be written, is contained within. The baroque as a limit to the text demands that we read every word on every page—a task that would take many lifetimes in Borges' imaginary library.

previous works, the length is moderate (the book comes in at 176 pages) and there are clear divisions into chapters and subsections. Each chapter is printed in a different font, limiting the monotony of graphic text. The book has bookmarking flaps, so that readers may mark their place and read at their leisure, despite the fact that the book is softcover.[15] And, perhaps most importantly, the book itself is the size of a standard trade paperback. In *Uncreative Writing*, Goldsmith discusses the importance of the size of a published book as an important paratextual authorial decision: "What size is the book going to be and how will that impact the reception of the book?" (119). By making *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* the size of a standard trade paperback, Goldsmith presents the book as something to be read anywhere. He wants the book to be approached as a New York Times Bestseller: read every exciting word and tell all of your friends to read it too.

By asserting a position on the baroque end of the scale of conceptual writing, Goldsmith asks us to approach the text again, taking in the words in a new way—reading them instead of listening to them. He asks us to dwell within the words, where we may find cliché's affect-seed buried deep in the text. This is why we must separate the affect of the source text and the poem. Even if the source text deals with clichés, the poem, in its request to be read, may expose the affects still attached to the events.

Given cliché's focus on narration, it is a mistake to only consider easily narrated affects. Instead, we must consider the affects that give rise to the title of Sianne Ngai's 2005 book, *Ugly Feelings*. *Ugly Feelings* is an investigation into often ignored "weak,"

15 *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* has already been through several printings in the first year since its release. The first printing of the first edition was softcover edition with a removable dust jacket. Subsequent printings dropped the dust jacket in favor of a cover with attached flaps.

non-narrative affects. Among these "ugly feelings" are envy, irritation, anxiety, paranoia, disgust, and one affect whose name was coined by Ngai herself—*stuplimity*. Drawing examples primarily from Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* and Samuel Beckett's *Worstword Ho!*, Ngai defines stuplimity as "a concatenation of boredom and astonishment—a bringing together of what 'dulls' and what 'irritates' or agitates; of sharp, sudden excitation and prolonged desensitization, exhaustion, or fatigue" (Ngai, 271). A portmanteau of the words "stupid" and "sublimity," "stuplimity" is a transcendent lowering into the materiality of words. Incessant repetition is the most common feature of stuplime texts—the constant repeating dulls the other senses and tests the limits of the reader's patience.

Sianne Ngai's discussion of stuplimity in fact features Kenneth Goldsmith—she uses the example of his book, *Fidget*. In order to write *Fidget*, Goldsmith strapped a tape recorder to himself, and narrated every movement his body made over the course of a day. He then transcribed his descriptions to create the text of the book. *Fidget* interests Ngai for its "focus on the tedium of the ordinary: the monotony of routines...the movements of a body not doing anything in particular" (258). A key part of stuplimity is tedious boredom—the "stupid" of the stuplime.

Despite the gravity of the events it depicts, tedium and boredom creep through the text of *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*. This is not an indictment on the readability of the book. Rather, boredom is a transformative effect in the movement from source text to conceptual work. The book's sources are all originally audio pieces, not transcriptions. There is a natural discrepancy between speech and writing which is exposed in the

transition from one to the other. As Don Ihde states in "The Auditory Dimension," "I cannot see the wind, the invisible is the horizon of sight. An inquiry into the auditory is also an inquiry into the invisible. Listening makes the invisible present in a way similar to the presence of the mute in vision" (24-5). Both vision and hearing limit and expose—if vision allows sight into what is unheard in the radio broadcast, it also removes the unique aspects of speech that must go unseen.

What the reader may end up seeing, however, is just how vacant and meaningless the words actually are. For example, the JFK chapter features commercial advertisements punctuating the news bulletins that shots have been fired at the president's motorcade. One commercial reads:

> The best meat from the farmer goes to Armour and from Armour to the butcher to you. If you want the best from the farmer ask for Armour and do what the butchers do. Be sure it's Armour, the meat the butcher brings home. Say, if you fix lunches for the family every day, there's a mighty happy solution to the variety problem. Armour Star lunch meat. Why, there are so many varieties, you could go for a couple of weeks without ever repeating. Nourishing? Four slices of Armour lunch meat in a couple of sandwiches pack all the wallop of a bowl of beef stew. Get Armour Star lunch meat for the kids. The sandwich meat the sticks to your ribs. Lots of different kinds. Easy to make. So for goodness sake, be sure it's Armour. The meat the butcher brings home. (12-3)

Although the fact that the commercial almost seems to recognize that it is repeating itself —something it wants the consumer to avoid with the lunches—the information the advertisement communicates is remarkably dull. The internal rhyme in the first few sentences, created by the words "farmer," "Armour," and "Star," creates an acoustic effect not unlike the metronome that Ezra Pound warned writers to avoid. A semantic satiation begins to go into effect on the word "Armour" as well—the constant repetition

and rhymes dulls the enunciation and transforms the word from meaningful into verbal noise. This noise can make a brand name go unnoticed when listening to a commercial—something that resembles subliminal messaging—but the transformation of aural to visual in the act of transcription only makes the constant repetition more obvious.

The jingle of radio advertisements is not the only aspect of sound that demonstrates a vacuum of expression. There is equally vacuous communication in stutters and failures of description. In her 911 call from Columbine High School, Patti Nielsen variously states, “Yeah. Yeah. Everyone's...Uh, everyone stay on the floor! Stay on the floor! Stay under the tables! Um...I...I don't know. I...I don't know. I didn't...I said...what...what has that kid got? He was outside at the time. And...and...and, um, I was on hall duty” (*SADD*, 124, all ellipses are Goldsmith's). Despite the urgency and the demand for as much information as possible in the emergency call, the words do nothing to communicate.

And yet, the text of the poem also keeps one from seeing what could otherwise be heard. Consider the chief of police in Dallas, answering a question about suspects in the JFK assassination: “Well, we're busy right now. Did you get it off the radio or, uh...? It's a white male, thirty-three caliber rifle and, uh, uh, I believe it's at Elm and Houston where it came from. Now, I don't know definitely and I don't like to say...” (*SADD*, 18). This passage is unmarked next to the rest of the text, but when it repeats in the chapter, with a completely identical transcription of words and punctuation marks, it is recognizable as a sound-bite—a recording of a different voice made in an acoustical setting different from the rest of the broadcast. The polyphonic character of the radio broadcast collapses in

transcription, disrupting the text's ability to create an absorptive narrative. The text becomes more boring.

Another example of the limitations of transcribed text occurs in Andrew West's recording of the RFK assassination. The transcript reads, “Get that gun! Get the gun! Get the gun! Stay away from the gun! Get the Gun! Stay away from the gun!” (43). The struggle between Kennedy security and Sirhan Sirhan is obvious, but the utter anxiety, shock, and terror, along with the volume and pitch of West's voice—everything that connects it to a body—vanishes. Although we might start to imagine the original performance of the lines, the text remains remarkably flat, especially in comparison with the audio from which it has been transcribed.

The temporality of speech also exacerbates the monotony of the text. All language must necessarily occur in time, yet the rate at which language unfolds for speech is much slower than written communication.[16] Writing can be read quickly or slowly, it can be skimmed or scanned, but speech must unfold as it occurs, and no faster. Perhaps the best demonstration of this occurs at the beginning of the Challenger chapter, which features the countdown and blast-off of the space shuttle. “T minus 15 seconds...That's the voice of Launch Controller Hugh Harris of NASA. 10...9...8...7...6...We have main engines stating...4...3...2...1 and liftoff...liftoff...” (101, ellipses are Goldsmith's). Unless there is an attempt to vocalize the text as dramatic reading, the expectation of the next number in a series necessitates that this passage be read in less than 15 seconds.

16 Jacques Derrida writes that, “What constitutes the originality of speech, what distinguishes it from every other element of signification, is that its substance seems to be purely temporal” (500). Among all forms of signification, speech is the only one that must unfold in real time.

These are the textual transformations from source text to conceptual writing that occur in the process of transcription—evacuating the meaning of words, flattening the dramatic aspects of speech, and rupturing the temporal unfolding of tragedy. These transformations can make the text more dull, more difficult to understand, but also more stuplime. A key tactic of stuplime composition is what Ngai calls a "strategy of agglutination." The agglutination of language involves "the mass adhesion or coagulation of data particles or signifying units. Here tedium resides not so much in the syntactic overdetermination of a minimalist lexicon...but in the stupendous proliferation of discrete quanta" (263). The text of *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* constantly thickens through its transformations, becoming more and more monotonic.

From this description, it may sound like *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* is not a stuplime text. In fact, through the ways in which the text agglutinates, the process of textual transformation—of appropriation—sounds like a more extreme version of the process of cliché. This is because stuplimity and cliché are closely related. As Goldsmith writes, "Cliche is *stuplimity* in reverse...the *stuplime* begins with triviality and rises to transcendence" (*SADD*, 170). The processes by which texts become cliché or stuplime are closely related. Both processes involve a sense of exhaustive boredom and monotony —but while boredom is the finish line for clichés, it is only the beginning of stuplimity. All of the aspects of the source text that made it more cliché—the contextualizing historical narratives, the focus on blame as a logical construct, and the misreadings of events—become ways in which the text agglutinates after the move from source to poem.

The techniques of absorption, then, become valuable in creating a sense of

stuplimity. The stuplime text demands to be absorbed, to be read, to have the reader dwell within its words. Only through internalizing the text can the “sublime” of the stuplime be achieved. This sublimity is not part of Classical aesthetic theory, it is detached “from its spiritual and transcendent connotations and its close affiliations with Romanticism” (Ngai, 271). Instead, the sublimity is,

> something like the 'open feeling' of 'resisting being'— an indeterminate affective state that lacks the punctuating 'point' of an individuated emotion. In other words...stuplimity might be said to produce another affective state in its wake, a secondary feeling that seems strangely neutral, unqualified, 'open.' (284)

“Open feeling,” a term which Ngai borrows from Gertrude Stein, is a state of rejuvenating responsiveness, equivalent to turning on the light after standing in a completely dark room. Following the blinding and disruptive initial shock, the contours of the room come into focus. What felt like a table in the dark turns out to be a chair in the light. This is “open feeling,” the receptive state of sublimity arising out of boredom.

The stuplimity that comes from appropriation in conceptual writing opens up new avenues of affect unavailable to traditional lyric poetry. These possibilities are twofold. First, the state of “open feeling” created in the wake of reading the stuplime text allows the reader to re-encounter the affects of tragedy as if it were the first time. In his essay, Calvin Bedient writes, “To write is to make cuts, says Derrida, and to write with feeling is to be cut.” Bedient's unsourced paraphrase of Derrida seemingly gestures to the inscription of a mark that also inscribes in its iterability. Words affect us, and given Bedient's leaning toward affects structured by death, the violence of the metaphor of cutting is not unusual. This metaphor is slightly refigured by Vanessa Place and Rob

Fitterman, who write that, “When the word is the wound...there are two extreme forms of mimetic redress: isolate and seal the word/wound (pure conceptualism), or open and widen the word/wound (impure conceptualism and the baroque)” (*Notes*, 55). By forcing the reader to dwell within words in a new way, the baroque conceptual work widens the wound of the word, leading the reader to approach affects that were previously ignored as cliché in a new way.[17]

Secondly, conceptual writing has the unique ability to approximate the act of witnessing disaster. Approaching *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* as a book of poetry asks the reader to step away from their previous knowledge of these tragedies, and to approach them as distant and unfamiliar. Goldsmith describes his personal experience of September 11, 2001, and one of the impetuses in writing the book:

> As I stood silently on the corner of Bleecker Street and Sixth Avenue watching the towers fall, a parked car with a powerful loudspeaker system blasted an AM radio station that was narrating the very events I was witnessing. There was a strange disconnect—a feeling of simulacra and spectacle—as if this show had been planned and presented the way that, say, reality television had recently begun to permeate our lives. The live events were removed from reality” (*SADD*, 171)

This disconnect between simulacrum and spectacle—a sense of uncertainty as to the reality of an experience—this is the uncanny feeling that occurs in the moment of tragedy that reporters attempt to narrate away. This is also the affective state of “open feeling” that is neither sociolinguistically fixed, nor narratable, nor relatable. The stuplimity of the text creates a substitution for the experience of tragedy.

In either case, whether stuplimity leads to an encounter with old affects as if they

17 Sealing the wound by not dwelling within the tragedy—but instead understanding the concept without reading—these are the strategies of the media's narration that leads to cliché, as well as the response of pure conceptualism.

were new, or whether it produces its own affective state of "open feeling" approximate to witnessing disasters, it is clear that contrary to Bedient's claims, conceptual writing not only engages with affect, it has the potential to offer affective experiences that are not representable in traditional forms of lyric poetry. The possibility of affect in conceptual writing is not the end of the discussion, however. Many questions remain: Even if *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* concerns moments that are critical to American politics, does it still lend itself to political action? What are the effects of stuplimity and "open feeling?" How might we be moved to action by an affective state that is described as "strangely neutral?"

Towards an Ethics of Conceptual Writing

These final questions might be rephrased into another question: “If affect can move a reader to action, and there are articulable affects in *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, then what is the æffect of the book?” Despite affect's relationship with effect and motivating the reader, when dealing with affects such as stuplimity, the answer is not straightforward. Sianne Ngai describes her ugly feelings as developing from “a situation of restricted agency” (2), using Herman Melville's Bartleby to describe the affects at hand. Bartleby disrupts his surroundings in the fact of his existence, not through action. His passive nondirective resistance acts as an effective force, as the system cannot assimilate him, nor compensate for the obstacle of his inaction. It would appear then, that the mere existence of stuplimity in *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* functions politically. If, as Charles Bernstein writes, the fact of the poem intrudes on the public sphere, then affect must intrude as well.

The idea that affect effects only in its existence is troublesome, however, as it restricts the reader's agency and culpability. Instead of acting as a call to action, affect instead mandates rupture indiscriminately. Some of the difficulty here comes from Sianne Ngai's explicit attempts to sever the connection between her ugly feelings and ethics. “The feelings I examine here are explicitly amoral and noncathartic, offering no satisfactions of virtue” (Ngai, 6). Even if there is no ethical satisfaction in the existence of an affect such as stuplimity, there still must be some kind of ethical engagement.

On July 23, 2013, one day before the publication of Calvin Bedient's essay, Kenneth Goldsmith appeared on the Colbert Report, becoming only the third poet to be

interviewed on the program.[18] In their exchange, Stephen Colbert poses a particularly salient question to Goldsmith:

> When I read this, I feel like I'm some sort of time traveling aesthete, who is coming in to sample other people's shock and tragedy. I am tasting their disbelief and the way it's changing them forever. I am tasting it while I read it, and it feels vampiric...Are you giving us a feast of other people's blood?

For Colbert, the danger is not that affect is absent from the text—the opposite is true. Instead, Colbert expresses anxiety that Goldsmith's project is a kind of affect-voyeurism. In the re-encounter with tragedy, the sprouting of cliché's affect-seed, and the production of stuplimity's open feeling, the refusal of action in a Bartlebyean sense results in something that resembles *schadenfreude*—self-involved, internal, and "vampiric." This is an hedonistic experience of affect at the expense of others that only coincidentally disrupts political efficacy.

Thus the issue at hand in conceptual writing is not a matter of affect. Discussion cannot continue along the lines of what makes poetry poetry, and scholarship has been on the wrong side of æffect. Instead of advocating for affect, critical conversation *must* turn to developing an ethics of conceptual writing—examining the ends to which material is appropriated. We must turn to effect.

18 Based on a tag search of the word "poetry" on the *Colbert Nation* website. The first poet to be interviewed on the program was Elizabeth Alexander on January 22, 2009, followed by Paul Muldoon on June 18, 2009. Billy Collins became the fourth poet interviewed in the first eight years of *The Colbert Report* on October 30, 2013.

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