To Sit is a Verb:

Incoherence and Contemporary Conceptual Writing

By

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Contents

Abstract

This thesis reconceives the productive possibilities of incoherence in four works of contemporary conceptual writing. Despite a pervasive 'recognition' of incoherence in literary criticism, we find little formal theorisation of its structure. Against existing evaluative and mystifying impressions of incoherence in literary analysis, I propose a revised concept of incoherence. This is equivalent to the existence of a contradiction (A *and* not-A) in a work that problematises the work's identity. I test this concept in four recent works of conceptual writing: *Expeditions of a Chimæra* by Oana Avasilichioaei and Erín Moure (with interruptions by Elisa Sampedrín); *An Arranged Affair* by Sally Alatalo; *The Happy End / All Welcome* by Mónica de la Torre; and Hu Fang's *Garden of Mirrored Flowers*, translated by Melissa Lim. Each of these works extends the illogical permissibility of early conceptual thought, re-shaped by contemporary concerns. As a result, these works explore alternative representational possibilities inaccessible to the coherent arrangement. The work of these texts is self-reflexive—in respect to their own identity within a context. Consequently, we observe the ways in which incoherent texts map misalignments and contradictions in the literary system itself; drawing attention to associative constellations misconceived as causal and the uncertain divide of representation and real.

Preface

If all the parts of the work are badly suited to one another, the work is incoherent.

— Meir Sternberg, "Mimesis and Motivation"

Coherence seems to be a need imposed on us whether we seek it or not. Things need to make sense.

— David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*

Textual coherence in literature is often posed as an assumed underlying, 'zero', state. From Aristotle's *Poetics* through to Meir Sternberg's recent critical assumptions, incoherence is attached to negative evaluations of literary construction. As I explore in Chapter One, a central unease towards incoherence is to do with its relations to representation and reality, and an imagined logical continuity between these divided realms. Instead, this thesis intends to observe the actual shape of incoherence and explore the alternative productive spaces it might offer.

As a frequently-invoked term, coherence has received surprisingly little focused consideration. What the opposite term, incoherence, reveals is a breadth of divided concepts and usages—an incoherence in its own right. Imprecise application of the terms, coherence and incoherence, frequently allow broad-reaching, mystical claims across separate fields, all tending towards an unspoken ideal about the shape of 'good' literature. As such, this project intends to revel in the 'bad'—exploring what logically constitutes incoherence and what a sound concept of incoherence can contribute to literary criticism theoretically and practically. While a starting point in failure might seem a contradictory place to begin, it can also serve as a reassuring backdrop to the texts that will be encountered. As two of the poets examined quote, *"Not solve it but be in it" G. Stein"* (Avasilichioaei and Moure 79) is our intended framework.

The term incoherence itself presents confusions of form and application across distinct fields. Incoherence might equally be deployed in structural, theoretical, or logical considerations, as well as figurative, emotional, and associative perceptions. In this way its analysis is messy. It requires first an extensive demystification in terms of definition in a literary context. This forms the first half of Chapter One, and through it, I consider a concept

of incoherence that is consistent with the logical underpinnings of the term. This is essentially the existence of a contradiction in a textual system (e.g. contained book format) which compromises the identity of that work. I also consider how the terms coherence and incoherence are applied in different ways to narrative and poetic forms respectively, and how an updated concept of incoherence might allow a more consistent application of these terms across forms.

From here, the idea of incoherence goes about a degree of re-mystification in respect to contemporary works of conceptual writing. Conceptualism has represented a convoluted space of analysis since the early conceptual art of the 1960s. Despite being subject to certain rationalising formulations in the evolution of the field of conceptual writing in the early 2000s,[1] I argue here that particular contemporary conceptual writing practices re-emphasise the 'illogic' of initial conceptual thought. This is specifically enacted through the interdependent exchanges of idea and written forms. In this, conceptual writing shares in the concerns of literary theory, whilst enacting an inclusive blurring of boundaries. Any text that acts in this way, regardless of lineage, is considered conceptual writing. As such, the spaces of permissibility between traditions and logic that conceptual writing encompasses allow us to examine the productive potentials of the incoherent text.

"Chapter Two: Parasitic Horizons" explores incoherence in relation to existing literary concepts. The incoherent configuration is dependent on this preceding system—a basis to be deviated from. But, incoherence itself is also revealing of impossibilities and misalignments within the literary system already. The work of reframed literary processes—translation and appropriation—upset the usual evaluative and ethical conceptions of incoherence. This is explored in two contrasting forms: a collection of collaborative poetic translations by Oana Avasilichioaei and Erín Moure (with interruptions by Elisa Sampedrín), titled *Expeditions of a Chimæra*; and an appropriative romance novel by Sally Alatalo, *An Arranged Affair*. For each work, literary precedents represent a horizon, inescapable, but ultimately tenuous and dependent.

Against these contained studies of incoherence in contemporary conceptual texts, "Chapter Three: Mirror Ends" opens out to incoherence in contemporary practices in unclear exchange between real and constructed worlds. The artificial borders of the texts in this chapter serve as an impetus, or model, for interrogating the materiality of incoherence around us. I will again look first at a collection of poetry, *The Happy End / All Welcome* by Mónica

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[1] See Dworkin's definitive writings on *UbuWeb*.

de la Torre, and then at a more explicitly 'narrative' text, Hu Fang's *Garden of Mirrored Flowers* translated by Melissa Lim. Each of these works involves appropriation and translation between material and textual forms. Each is highly intertextual, as well as hypertextual. The course and reliability of each voice leads us on an experience with something that feels uncomfortably close to a contemporary reality, consciously conflated into textual limits or imaginatively projected.

On the whole, my process in this thesis is not to 'fix' the incoherence of the works explored. Instead, I observe how incoherence arises and what it delineates about the systems in which a work is operating. By not 'fixing' incoherence, I also suggest the unresolved nature of my analyses. This is necessarily indicative of personal subjective limitation in instances of incoherence (contradiction—impossibility) but maps onto a continual situation in contemporary analysis. The conceptual work of the texts is a self-reflection on this state but also exposes new representational possibilities in textual form. Through a re-evaluation of the productive potentials extending from these occurrences, I ultimately explore what a changed concept of incoherence in literary analysis can offer.
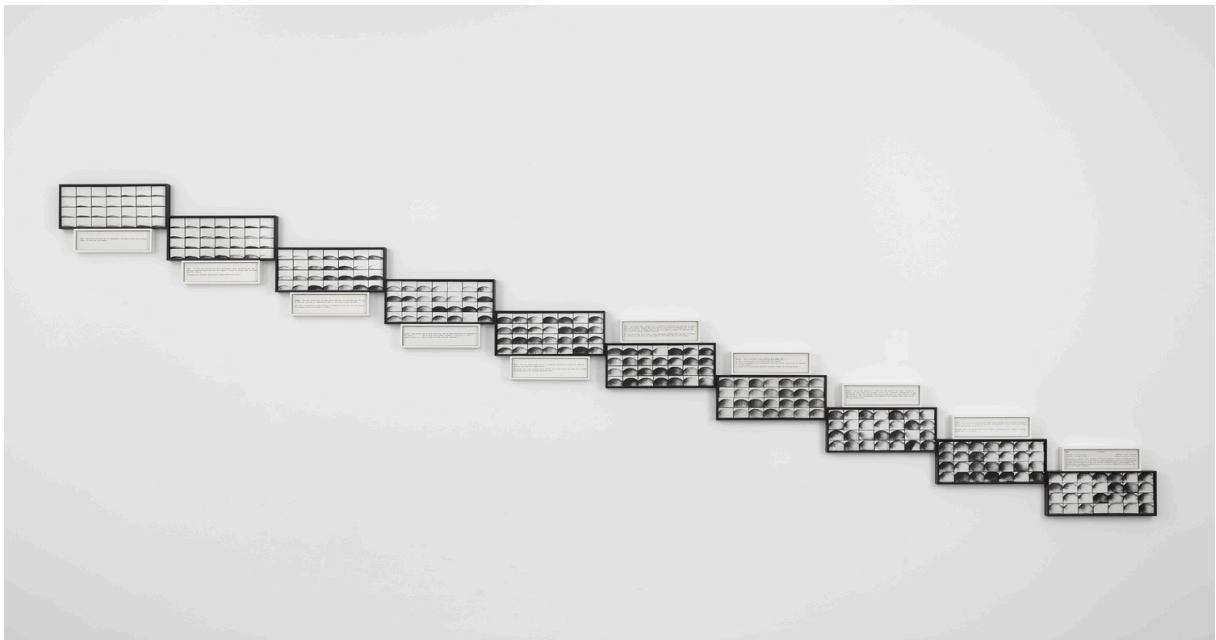
Fig. 1. Susan Hiller, *Ten Months*, 1977–79.

TEN/   10 Months

"seeing" (& depicting). . . . . natural 'fact' (photos)
"feeling" (& describing) . . . . cultural artifact (texts)

She needs to resolve these feelings of stress caused by having internalised two
or more ways of knowing, believing, and understanding practically everything.She
affirms her discovery of a way out through "truth-telling": acknowledging con-
tradictions, expressing inconsistencies, doubletalk, ambiguity. She writes that
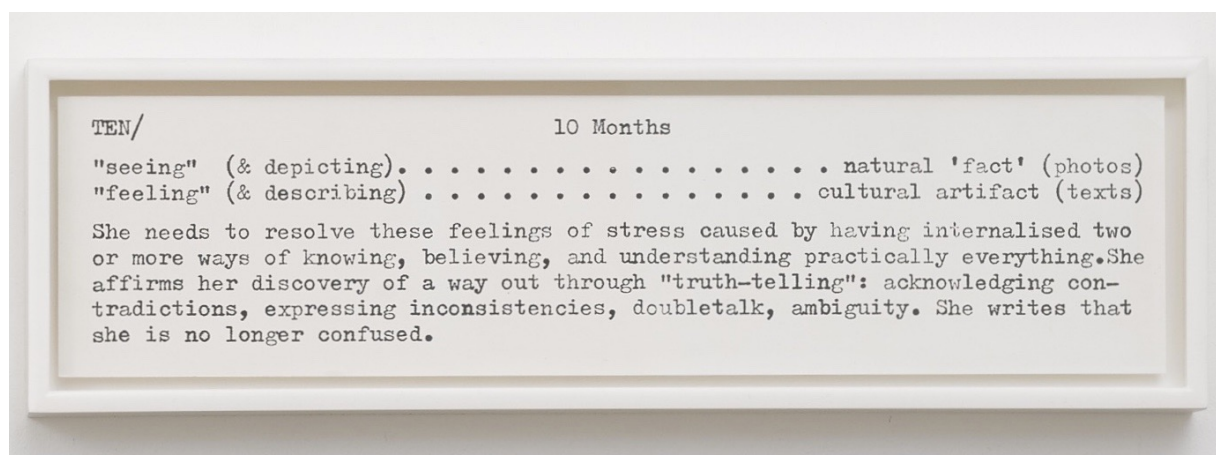she is no longer confused.

Fig. 2. Susan Hiller, detail of *Ten Months*, 1977–79.

1. Incoherence and Conceptualism

This chapter seeks to specifically set up what I am talking about when I refer to incoherence and conceptualism. To begin, I explore why coherence has traditionally been imposed as a need in literature. Necessary to this picture is the way representation and reality are called upon to describe coherence, but without explaining the nature of the connection between them. In relation to incoherence, these realms are infrequently raised—and incoherence appears to be considered on predominantly evaluative and superficial terms. By exploring what in fact constitutes incoherence, I propose the incoherent as a productive means of examining the separations and conflations of representation and reality within textual form. To do this, I suggest a clarified definition of textual incoherence, combining the concept's use in philosophical and narratological frames, but in connection to writing of any form. In this definition, narrative concepts are useful for thinking about coherence due to narrative's perceived organising and communicative functions, but I will not exclude poetry from consideration, or the alternative possibilities it offers.

In light of these accounts of incoherence, I then turn to the particular use and problems of conceptualism. As Boris Groys writes in *In the Flow*, "conceptual art taught us to see form as a poetic instrument of communication rather than an object of contemplation" (130). In this assessment we see a paring apart of meaning and form and a possible conjunction of poetic and communicative (or narrative) functions. Importantly, we see that the work itself can be delocalised or dispersed, and meaning can persist or evolve from this spread. As such, conceptualism plays on the divide between representation and reality, forcing us to see explicit exchanges between separate sites. This, I will argue, positions incoherence in conceptual writing as a productive frame for examining embedded assumptions in literary theory, while maintaining the usefulness of literary concepts to the analysis of these works.

1.1 Incoherence

In *Structuralist Poetics*, Jonathan Culler offers an initial impression of coherence. Referencing Sartre's *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, he describes an image of nineteenth-century fiction, "told from the viewpoint of experience and wisdom and listened to from the viewpoint of order": "The narrator evokes the spectacle of a past disorder, but it cannot cause uneasiness because he has understood it and will bring his audience to understand also" (235). Within this image we see how two distinct perspectives ("experience" and "order") meet in

the 'coherent' representation. The reference of this shared understanding, however, is more complicated. As Culler observes, "Sartre's paradigm is the narrator seated of an evening midst friends, in surroundings which affirm the presence and reality of the social order, and recounting the vicissitudes of his own or another's past" (235). The narrator's surroundings are indicative of the 'real', or 'life'. They are also the source of the contents of the re-telling—past "vicissitudes". And yet, the form of this telling "has an order; its essence has been distilled" (195). This order is different to the real experience. But the imposed order is still taken to be real in a way that extends beyond the unique re-telling. Through the ordering function of representation, the "narrator has mastered the world" (195). In this, we see the obscure and reflective pathways of the need for order (unease), its constructed origin (representation), and its extended effect (understanding—of what?). Or, in line with Tzvetan Todorov's observation, "the *vraisemblable* is the mask which conceals the text's own laws and which we are supposed to take for a relation with reality" (2-3), we might recognise coherence as the assumed basis of this relation.

It is at the borders of representation and real that the examples in this thesis interfere. Literary form assumes a clear separation of these realms, and yet, analyses struggle to explain the unified application of coherence across them. For instance, Meir Sternberg presents, and perhaps enacts, this confusion in his description:

> Fiction finds itself caught between the contending demands of what is traditionally (though not always unambiguously) designated as life and art. From one it derives its very capability of representation, from the other its distinctive logic and internal coherence; one provides the basis, and the other the terms, of reference. (330)

Like in Culler's "vicissitudes", life is a fluid component of the contents of fiction. And yet, art itself provides fiction's "distinctive logic and internal coherence", the 'terms of reference'. Fiction is recognisable through this logic, and so is its basis in life. But the logic does not appear to extend between 'terms' and 'basis'. Coherence is not inherent to life, it is simply apparent in representation. A complicating dimension in this, as Sternberg also recognises, is that the demands of art and life are frequently confused. We might follow these confused demands through to their effect in reading—a (mis-)understanding. Across this formulation we see that the origins of logic and coherence remain unfixed in respect to two distinct spheres. Coherence is expected in literature in a different form to its perceived basis in reality.

In respect to the incoherent work, however, there is an entirely different set of associations. As Culler observes, any narrative, "however fragmented or incoherent, any details, however odd they may seem, can be recuperated, justified and given a meaning by the hypothesis that the text is a product of a narrator who is demented, schizophrenic, hallucinatory, or a congenital liar" (235). Thus, we see two levels of extrapolation in relation to order. Where order is upheld, understanding of the 'the world' supposedly (or by conflation) follows; where disorder predominates, it is explained in relation to the aberrant individual. This thesis examines incoherence without deferring to a position of psychological diagnosis. I will attempt to combine the work attributed to these two paradigms—the possibility of structures that refute conventional order and meaning, and the function of larger systems in relation to which understanding is generated. Taking what might be objectively distilled from each, I will piece together a theory for intentional incoherence that does not implicitly refute literary features or alternative modes of meaning.

As I will explore in this chapter, a great deal of work has been done in formulating models of coherence as a pre-existing requirement in literature. What coherence, and as such, incoherence, actually look like, and why they are so centrally conceived, have received little formal attention.[2] As such, I propose a definition of coherence that unifies its meaning with the term's wider concept and definition across fields. Incoherence in this sense is most simply defined as being synonymous with a contradiction, and contradiction can be summarised by the logical axiom 'a thing cannot be and not be at the same time'. Beginning with this relation, I will examine the possibility of incoherence existing in contemporary conceptual writing. I argue that conceptual writing provides a particular problem for the perception of a work's borders—the lines separating representation and reality—but this incoherence can play a vital role in the work's meaning. Incoherence will be examined within the frame of a text's own limits in Chapter Two, and then in respect to a text's existence in a broader context in Chapter Three. As such, I hope to extricate incoherence from pure evaluative dismissal and propose the use of the concept in observing the misalignment between systems as meaningful work.

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[2] See section 1.3 of this chapter for expansion, pp. 45–57. One exception to this is the artist, Susan Hiller's, phrase 'a fruitful incoherence', as briefly framed in *A Fruitful Incoherence: Dialogues with Artists on Internationalism*, 1998. This text, discovered late in my project, sets up a 'a fruitful incoherence' as a way of exploring the "productively ambiguous space between the artwork and its audience, between the intention of the artist and the interpretation of the viewer" (Tawadros 8). While this text does not unpack these terms in depth, Hiller's concept of incoherence is something I seek to understand better.

1.1.a Defining Incoherence

So, let us set up a broad view of what textual incoherence might mean. Because 'incoherence' is essentially defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the "want of coherence" ("Incoherence, n."), we have to understand 'coherence' first. To 'cohere' is to "cleave or stick together", to be "congruous" or "consistent" ("Cohere, v."). Accordingly, 'coherence' is defined as follows:

> 1. a. *literal*. The action or fact of cleaving or sticking together; cohesion.
>
> b. *concrete*. Anything that coheres; a cohering object: an adjunct.
>
> c. *Physics*. The property of being coherent.
>
> 2. *transferred* and *figurative* of association other than material.
>
> 3. Logical connection or relation; congruity, consistency.
>
> 4. 'Consistency in reasoning, or relating, so that one part of the discourse does not destroy or contradict the rest' (Johnson); harmonious connection of the several parts, so that the whole 'hangs together'.
>
> 5. *concrete*. Context: the immediately connected parts of a discourse. *Obsolete*.

From the breadth of these definitions, we get a sense of the scope coherence might cover—from literal, in-tact concepts of coherence, to non-literal and immaterial possibilities. We see close ties to the traditions of formal logic as well as looser senses of 'harmony' in discourse. And, of later interest to my discussion, a now obsolete term for an 'immediately connected' context. 'Incoherence' must, therefore, refer to situations in which these various connections are absent, drawing forth a huge range of possible alternative states of arrangement.

In explicit relation to texts, the *Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar* states that 'coherence' is the "set of relationships within a text that link sentences by meaning" and the "term contrasts with cohesion", where 'cohesion' is the "set of relationships within a text that link sentences through grammar or lexis" (Aarts). Thus, cohesion refers to the syntactic or semantic linking of different parts of a text on a surface-structure level, while coherence refers to the "functional connectedness or identity" of a text (Crystal). This notion of identity through connection is important to my thesis as it both informs and defines the parameters of my focus. Coherence being a unifying force that draws parts into a singular identity, incoherence could refer to a plurality of disparate text fragments. Instead, I will limit my range of texts to those that set forth an initial premise of coherence due to their physical

presentation in book format. The incoherence I look at will be manifestations and manipulations proceeding from this initial physical ordering.

As gestured at initially, in formal logic 'coherence' and 'consistency' are used synonymously to name "the absence of contradictions in a group of sentences, propositions, or beliefs, where a contradiction is the conjunction of a proposition and its negation" (Livingstone and Hogan). Important to note, logical coherence is not the same as logical validity, in which a conclusion follows from a set of premises in a relation that maintains the truth-value between statements (i.e. if the premises are true, the conclusion will also be true, and the converse if the premises are false). As such, coherence is a looser condition based purely on the absence of contradiction. Coherence, nevertheless, is still an important relation in certain theories of justification, knowledge, and truth. In epistemology, 'Coherentism' is a theory that "associates truth with the structure of knowledge or justified beliefs and holds that truth is a property of those beliefs that are justified in virtue of their relations to other beliefs, specifically in virtue of their belonging to a coherent – i.e. free from contradictions – system of beliefs" (Iannone). Accordingly, the relations between parts are of vital importance to broader systems by virtue of their very structure. Incoherence, on the other hand, might fracture such systems of understanding by the unique instantiation of contradiction.

This also marks the difference of incoherence from terms such as 'nonsense', as explored by Susan Stewart in *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*. Where incoherence requires only the existence of one contradiction to undermine 'sense' or meaning, nonsense is the antithesis or total absence of sense. According to the *OED,* it is "[t]hat which is not sense; absurd or meaningless words or ideas" ("Nonsense, n. and Adj."). Despite the difference of her terms, Stewart's work sets a significant precedent for my project. Posed in juxtaposition to common sense, Stewart explores the role of nonsense as a necessary counterpoint in the process of sense-making (a state of "nothing" (13) against which sense might be discerned). Stewart locates "the beginning of nonsense" in decontextualisation—or, "language lifted out of context, language turning on itself, language as infinite regression, language made hermetic, opaque in an envelope of language" (3). While incoherence might resemble this state, its effects are quite different. As Stewart writes, "[n]onsense stands in contrast to the reasonable, positive, contextualised, and "natural" world of sense as the arbitrary, the random, the inconsequential, the merely cultural" (4). Nonsense materialises on a surface-level, culturally familiar, but not perceived to penetrate beyond the artificial into the 'natural' world of order. Incoherence, on the other hand, interrupts the linearity of these

assumptions. For instance, Stewart describes the function of nonsense as "a place to store any mysterious gaps in our systems of order" (5). Incoherence might be viewed as the forces repelling those sections of order apart. The contradiction, instead of being devoid of sense, reveals the distance between systems, cultural or 'natural'.

And so, I define incoherence in the frame of this thesis as the existence of at least one contradiction in a textual work that problematises the identity of the work as a 'whole'. Alternately, coherence is the absence of contradiction.

1.1.b Narrative, Incoherence (and Poetry)

In a literary context, coherence and narrative are frequently perceived together, synonymous or ingrained in narrative's effects: organisation and communication.[3] Most openly defined, narrative is "the representation of an event or sequence of events" (Genette *Figures* 127). The association between narrative and coherence can be seen even in Aristotle's *Poetics*: a narrative text "should have for its subject a single action, whole and complete, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It will thus resemble a single coherent picture of a living being, and produce the pleasure proper to it" (89). Or, as articulated more recently by H. Porter Abbott in *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, judgement of the "cumulative effect of narrative" is frequently located in the perception of "*narrative continuity or coherence*" (14). And yet, the way these effects are expected is fundamentally at odds with the basis of narrative's construction. As David Herman explains, the function of narrative is both institutionalised as "a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change" and recognised as "a strategy that contrasts with […] "scientific" modes of explanation" (3). Narrative is, therefore, a process connected to understanding but disconnected from processes that validate its supposed grounds. This is implicit in views of its structure. As Gerald Prince terms it, narrative is an "autonomous" structure: "a whole … conveying, in some way, the impression that it is closed" (27). And so, we see that coherence is perceived in relation to narrative in contained and self-fulfilling forms.

While my study will not be limited to narrative texts, narrative dynamics can be significant in thinking about encounters with textual form, regardless of rigid classification. As Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan explains, the temporal logic of a written text is frequently uncoupled from another order of time. The written form necessitates a "linear figuration of

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[3] See Culler, pp. 134-136 .

signs and hence a linear presentation of information about things" so that it "imposes upon the reader a successive perception of bits of information even when these are meant to be understood as simultaneous in the story" (120-121). Even in respect to a clearly narrative text, this structure is not straightforward. The progression of the text is not always linear in respect to the contents of the story. Or, the "difference between events and their representation is the difference between *story* (the event or sequence of events) and *narrative discourse* (how the story is conveyed)" (Abbott 15). These levels represent spaces of potential manipulation and experimentation in respect to logical possibility, regardless of whether or not a work is explicitly narrative.

We can see the divergence of the requirements for narrative and coherence when viewed against the logical identity of a textual work. As suggested earlier, time and narrative are implicitly intertwined, but narrative also "requires the unfolding of an action, change, difference" (Todorov 28). While change implies temporal duration, it also necessitates continuity of identity, such that the relation is causal. As Todorov describes, the relation between story and narrative discourse informs a "way of looking at narrative as the chronological and sometimes causal linkage of discontinuous units" (28). And these relations are recognised in practice according to "certain patterns" that would "intuitively and generally be recognized as a story" (15). That is to say, 'chronological' and 'causal' relations in narrative are not actual, but recognisable (constructed), patterns. And yet, these narrative relations have been connected directly to coherence. Abbott describes narrative coherence as "a common *entity* or set of entities and a recoverable chronological order of connected events" (31-32). How these factors interrelate—commonality, chronology, and 'connectedness'—is not explained. As a result, the contradiction is not specifically excluded. We see this also in the inverse classification: as Prince observes, "a group of content units selected at random and arranged in a random fashion does not necessarily constitute a story" (14). But it is not necessarily incoherent either. In respect to a work's unified identity, we see that 'recognisable' relations (chronology and causality) are different to logical ones, and coherence and narrative are not dependent terms.

This same logical definition of incoherence can be applied across literary forms, for instance, to a work of poetry. Poetry is seldom considered in relation to coherence, it is not considered communicative in function and is instead frequently coupled with the incoherent. We see this, for example, in Todorov, observing Suzanne Bernard's thesis: "the poetic is sometimes conveyed by repetitions, and sometimes by verbal incoherence" (62). But if we

consider what the definition of incoherence in fact depends on, this assessment is more complex. Part of the perceived difference between narrative and poetry can be located in the relations constituting a work's structure. Where the relations between events, or parts, deviate from 'recognisable' patterns, the discourse is said to be descriptive rather than narrative. As Gérard Genette elaborates, the aim of "purely descriptive texts" is "to represent objects simply and solely in their spatial existence, outside any event and even outside any temporal dimension" (*Figures* 133). These "spatial" relations ("the conjunctive term used is *and* rather than *then* or *as a result*" and so on) are often applied to "pure poetic discourse" (Prince 26). The spatial arrangement is frequently equated with illogic, without recognising the associative basis of narrative's 'causal' composition. We see this in Todorov's concept of poetry's spatial configuration: the problem of poetry is that it "recounts nothing, designates no event" (4). But as we have just observed in regard to narrative and coherence, it is in the logical relation between events, or parts, that a contradiction might be perceived. What is more, if poetry "recounts nothing", there is no thing for a contradiction to be assessed in, and the work cannot be incoherent. My point here is that despite narrative and coherence's perceived affinities of concept, their actual bases of perception remain distinct. As such, the assessment of coherence in poetry is equally possible but must occur on terms separate to previous conflations of narrative and coherence.

One further point to note is that narrative and poetry are not necessarily exclusive forms. As Brian McHale writes, "far from being distinct, the two categories actually cut across each other: many poems are narratives, after all, and many narratives are poems" (12). We can read this through Rachel Blau DuPlessis's notion of segmentivity in poetry: "meanings are created by occurring in bounded units precisely chosen, units operating in relation to chosen pause or silence" (51). Meanings are constructed through these units, and the larger "force" of the poem comes from "the intricate interplay amongst the "scales" (of size or kind of unit) or comes in "chords" of these multiple possibilities for creating segments" (51). This state of arrangement therefore constitutes an identity in relation to which coherence might be assessed. An identity, moreover, that does not preclude narrative, or narrative-like, effects. And this is equivalent to the ways in which we might recognise the effects of segmentivity, or other poetic qualities, within narrative. So, we see that narrative and poetry are not formal poles relative to the concept of coherence and incoherence. But their different formal compositions demand altered applications of the term in line with

coherence's own concept. And this needs to occur away from the evaluative associations surrounding narrative and poetry in regard to their supposed logical underpinnings.

1.1.c Naturalisation

How exactly coherence has been discerned, or judged, in textual forms previously is through correspondence to models such as those discussed by Culler, Rimmon-Kenan, and more recently modified by James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz. Culler unifies earlier structuralist strategies to present a general image: "To assimilate or interpret something is to bring it within the modes of order which culture makes available, and this is usually done by talking about it in a mode of discourse which a culture takes as natural" (137). Here, the "natural" is taken in terms of "naturalizing"—a process of "restoring literature to a communicative function" (134). Culler identifies five levels in relation to which this might operate: the 'real', cultural vraisemblance, models of a genre, the conventionally natural, and parody or irony. To naturalise the text on these levels is "to make the text intelligible" through correspondence to these "various models of coherence" (159).[4] As such, we see that the process of naturalisation is associative in basis, but it illuminates possible sites at which coherence might be tested.

We see the insufficiency of models of naturalisation in explaining coherence (as opposed to describing it) even in recent formulations. For example, Phelan and Rabinowitz's model has a different structure to Culler's. Their concept of narrative coherence is statically located in relation to a reader's temporal encounter with the text. They write, "coherence refers to the authorial audience's final and retrospective sense of the shape and purposes of the narrative as a whole, which may or may not require a significant reconsideration of earlier hypotheses about configuration" (61). Phelan and Rabinowitz's limitation of narrative coherence to a purely "retrospective" view is a by-product of their concept of narrative "progression" in place of plot (58). While their theory attempts to allow for the integration of textual and readerly dynamics, its structure imposes a hierarchical concept of understanding. They are proposing that the temporal dynamics of text and reading are significant, but only as final "consequences" of concrete understanding (58). Phelan and Rabinowitz's theory of coherence is thus, again, dependent on the visibility of the "overall shape of narrative" (58).

Instead, Rimmon-Kenan recognises that the "reader, we have seen, does not wait until the end to understand the text" (122). Although there is an ingrained linearity in the reader's

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[4] I refer to these as 'models of naturalisation', as opposed to 'models of coherence' in the source texts, in order to make clear my different definition of coherence, as explored previously.

encounter with a text, the reader's understanding (and the relationship between narrative discourse and story) does not necessarily correspond to it. Rimmon-Kenan allows more flux into her model of naturalisation: "Making sense of a text requires an integration of its elements with each other, an integration which involves an appeal to various familiar models" (124). In reading, hypotheses are constructed through appeal to cultural codes or frames, while at the same time, reading sees "the construction of frames, their transformation, and their dismantling" (124). Specifically, Rimmon-Kenan clarifies two types of model by which naturalisation occurs: those deriving from reality (naturalist models) and those from literature (constructionist models). Reality models are based on concepts that shape our "perception of the world" (125). These concepts include: chronology, causation, and contiguity in space. Concepts based on socially-constructed generalisations might also be applied to a reality model, which introduces another order of complexity. Literature models, meanwhile, are derived from "literary exigencies or institutions", such as genre (125).

Todorov presents a useful portrait of the effect of genre: "In a given society, the recurrence of certain discursive properties is institutionalized, and individual texts are produced and perceived in relation to the norm constituted by that codification. A genre, whether literary or not, is nothing other than the codification of discursive properties" (17-18). Nevertheless, genres function as "'horizons of expectation' for readers and as 'models of writing' for authors" (18). The resulting effect of genre appears vague, a construct perpetuated by a sociality, but giving rise to coherence and thus intelligibility. Culler takes this framework a step further, drawing on the work of Julia Kristeva, to claim that a work can only be read intertextually. He states, "A work can only be read in connection with or against other texts, which provide a grid through which it is read and structured by establishing expectations", and our shared understanding of these structures—our "intersubjectivity"—is ultimately "a function of these texts" (139).

Across both literary and natural models we see a problem in the terms of naturalisation's definition: that which is 'natural', or perceived to be so, in an uncomplicated state. As Culler articulates, "whatever meanings a sentence liberates, it always seems as though it ought to be telling us something simple, coherent and true, and this initial presumption forms the basis of reading as a process of naturalization" (141). What happens when the 'natural' or expected shifts is unclear.

For instance, developments in literature, particularly post-modernism, have built into the intertextual grid new assumptions. As Marie-Laure Ryan and Alice Bell propose,

"postmodernist fictions contravene logic by playing with or violating the boundaries between worlds" (25). Where "worlds" can refer to "various fields of reference or universes of discourse" (2), they propose 'possible worlds' theory to address the issues of truth and reference raised by such texts. Specifically, they are responding to "texts that subvert the possibilities of logic in the actual world to undermine the world building property of literary texts" (25). The reference of such texts shifts from the actual world to "the world created by the text" (9). What is important to draw out, however, is the distinction between physical and logical possibility. Possible worlds theory might account for physical impossibilities within a world (as this can be explained by generating new physical laws in a possible world), but the world on the whole cannot be logically impossible. They connect the logically 'impossible' with contradiction and thus incoherence, for example, "collections of mutually incompatible world fragments" (5). On the whole, "If we deny incoherent collections of propositions the status of world, and if we associate "possibility" with logical coherence, then all entities that are "worlds" are logically coherent and therefore possible worlds" (5). As a result, "'logically impossible worlds' is an oxymoron if worldness is associated with logical coherence" (6). So, while possible worlds theory is able to account for certain post-modern experiments with physical impossibility, it does not extend to instantiations of logical impossibility of a conceptual kind.

A recent response to these kinds of situations is to alter the locus of naturalisation in certain (clearly signalled) cases. This is known as antimimetic, antirealist, or unnatural narrative theory. Brian Richardson explains unnatural narratives as explorations of "physically or logically impossible scenarios or events" ("Introduction" 21). Beyond this, Richardson identifies a certain tone that accompanies these representations: "antimimetic or antirealist modes of narrative representation play with, exaggerate, or parody the conventions of mimetic representation; often, they foreground narrative elements and events that are wildly implausible or palpably impossible in the real world" (20). Despite the possibilities unnatural narratology opens up, the basis of narrative classification is consistent with mimetic narrative definitions. That is to say, "a narrative is a representation of a causally connected series of events of some magnitude" ("Unnatural" 18). For example, Richardson claims that David Shield's "Life Stories" is not narrative: "The subject seems too scattered, too contradictory; the narrative too unconnected, often because it is too specific in identifying antithetical predilections and its incompatible target audiences" (18). An "internally consistent" story must be upheld, but the narrative can be unnatural in that "the reader is

allowed to determine the course of events from those possibilities preselected by the author", thus violating "the conventional retrospective nature of narration" (28). And so, we see that unnatural narrative theory sets up a narrow frame in which the 'impossible' is allowed, while maintaining the perceived co-dependency of narrative and coherence.

I am less interested in re-performing rigid categorisations of narrative and non-narrative than in how transparently texts are conveyed and received. For instance, Richardson states, "All works of literature have mimetic and artificial aspects; literary realism attempts to hide its artifices; antimimetic texts flaunt them" ("Unnatural" 28). But as indicated in Richardson's formulation, the perception of this antimimetic intention is dependent on recognisable elements that would initially suggest a mimetic reading, even if they are subverted in a particular way. But what happens when textual incoherence interferes with the discernment of these intents? When transparency itself becomes a locus of incoherence? This is where we see the significance of conceptual traditions in exploring the performativity of literary framing.

1.2 Conceptualism

Conceptualism represents a unique frame for reconsidering literary assumptions connected to incoherence. As I explain in the first part of this section (1.2.a), the idea is the most important aspect of the conceptual work and is not dependent on a specific or contained form. What this distils to is: the conceptual work's form of presentation is detached from evaluative association with coherence. Instead, incoherence in the process of representation can be a vital component of a conceptual work's meaning. This permissibility remains integral for contemporary works of conceptual writing. For these works, experiments with incoherence can render new representational possibilities, as well as revealing contradictions existing in the literary system already.

The potential stemming from conceptual writing differs from other modes of experimental writing in the form of allowance it introduces. Beyond physical impossibility, or multiple possibilities, conceptualism in literature allows for the consideration of logical contradiction—or, impossibility. Eve Kalyva envisions conceptual texts as "prostheses rather than freestanding works, which attempt to launch readers into a type of thinking that likewise augments or conflicts with the instrumental logic of common sense or a naïvely realist understanding of the world" (161). By "prostheses", we understand that conceptual modes of writing are dependent on something other than their isolatable material forms. Their function is a construct in relation to a larger system. But there is something in this term, prosthetic, set in productive tension with the "naïvely realist", which captures a particular mode of existence. The 'prosthetic' existence gives rise to effects that might be described as incoherent. The part is not a natural constituent of a larger whole, and similarly its reality might be misleading. And this is dependent on preceding structures in order for the confusion to be enacted.

Defining conceptual writing first requires an awareness of earlier conceptual traditions. Part of the importance of this awareness lies in the self-effacement of definitions of conceptual writing as its own school to begin with. As Andrea Andersson discusses in *Postscript. Writing after Conceptual Art*, it appears that "the categorical limits of Conceptual writing have been intentionally obscured since the term's debut on the *UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing* in 2003" (6).[5] But there is an advantage in this openness: "it is not a word

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[5] The evolution and definitions of conceptual writing have been addressed in depth in recent publications and anthologies, such as *Against Expression*, *I'll Drown My Book* and *Notes on Conceptualisms*. I will not devote

that can belong to a select few, or be defined too narrowly" (Browne 15). As a result, the definition of conceptual writing allows for the linking of practices that are seldom brought together. These works explore varied connections to the extant traditions of conceptualism and literature, while setting themselves in aware relation to (and against) their formal and theoretical predecessors.

1.2.a Conceptual Art

To understand the role of incoherence in a conceptual tradition, it is important to turn to the statements of conceptual writers working in the 1960s. Where conceptualism is understood as art in which "the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work" (LeWitt 80), Sol LeWitt writes in 1967, as the first of his "Sentences on Conceptual Art": "1. Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach" (83). This separation of possibility from logic sets up an openness towards incoherence. The contradiction appears as a central pivot to the conceptual process. The invocation of mysticism does not, however, imply a lack of seriousness. As LeWitt goes on to say, "Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically" (83). By attempting to trace incoherence's actual form, we see an alternative to its straight evaluative dismissal. Instead, the incoherent can be viewed as a conscious tool of the conceptual artist: "The logic of a piece or series of pieces is a device that is used at times, only to be ruined. Logic may be used to camouflage the real intent of the artist, to lull the viewer into the belief that he understands the work, or to infer a paradoxical situation (such as logic vs. illogic)" (80). Logic itself is taken up as a conceptual activity and consciously undermined to set up alternative modes of questioning.

Many of the strategies of conceptual art extend from an inherent contradiction in the art's form. That is, the conceptual nature of the art is at odds with the material necessities of its encounter. As Lucy Lippard writes, conceptual artists "invented ways for art to act as an invisible frame for seeing and thinking rather than as an object of delectation or connoisseurship" (xii). Material form is no longer necessary, the concept "may never reach the viewer, or may never leave the artist's mind" (LeWitt 83). And yet, in order to engage other minds, a minimal material form is required. LeWitt describes the material form of the work as "a conductor from the artist's mind to the viewer's" of the concept (81). What the

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much space to this in favour of relating the field of conceptual writing directly to the concept of incoherence introduced in section 1.1.

conductor looks like does not matter; nevertheless, the art work "has to look like something if it has physical form" (82). The aim is for execution to proceed in a way that "eliminates the arbitrary, the capricious, and the subjective as much as possible" (82). Language was alighted on to this end as a way for conceptual artists to "disentangle" their work from the object-bound art system (Bonin 40).

An example of the use of language in conceptual art is the 1969 exhibition at Seth Siegelaub's gallery in New York. The show consisted of a printed document, presenting (and constituting) the work of Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, and Lawrence Weiner. The printed document, titled *January 5 – 31, 1969*, was the exhibition and its documentation. As Huebler writes within the publication, "Because the work is beyond direct perceptual experience, awareness of the work depends on a system of documentation" (14). The type of language employed to this end was "descriptive" (14), as demonstrated in Kosuth's work statement and accompanying photo documentation from the publication (15-16), reproduced on the following pages. The photo on page 16 of the publication represents catalogue number 22 in Kosuth's list, *VI. Time (Art as Idea as Idea)*, 1968 (15). The work exists as an idea suspended across its textual expression in the list; the newspapers from 27 December 1968, collected and modified by Kosuth; the photographic document of these pieces; to the real objects of media circulation in their unaltered forms. How the concept travels through these various 'conductors' is important, not for its accuracy of transmission, but for the causation of further conceptual activity. As LeWitt expresses this crux: the viewer may "misperceive (understand it differently from the artist) a work of art but still be set off in his own chain of thought by that misconstrual" (83). As such, different kinds of 'understanding' are allowed.

Joseph Kosuth

17. Four titles, 1966, glass, 4 glass sheets at 3'x3'. Collection: Mr. and Mrs. Robert M. Topol, Mamaroneck, N.Y.

18. Art idea made with white words on nine gray painted square canvases, 1966, liquitex on canvas, 9 panels each 2 1/2' x 2 1/2'. Collection: Private, N.Y.

19. Titled (Art as Idea as Idea), 1967, photographic process, 4' x 4'. Collection: Mr. and Mrs. Roy Lichtenstein, N.Y.

20. Insurance (Art as Idea as Idea), 1968, insurance form and cancelled airplane tickets. Collection: Miss Christine Kozlov, N.Y.

21. I. Existence (Art as Idea as Idea), 1968, (published in:) New York Times (January 5, 1969); Museum News (January 1, 1969); Artforum (January 1969); The Nation (December 23, 1968). Collection: Mr. and Mrs. Eugene M. Schwartz, N.Y.

22. VI. Time (Art as Idea as Idea), 1968, (published in:) the London Times; the Daily Telegraph (London); the Financial Times (London); the Daily Express (London); the Observer (London)- all in the December 27, 1968 issue. Collection: Mr. Seth Siegelaub, N.Y.

23. IV. Order (Art as Idea as Idea), 1968, (Published in:) Village Voice (January 1, 1969); the Partisan Review (January 15, 1969); the New York Post (January 4/5, 1969); Variety (February 3, 1969); Art International (February 1969). Collection: Mr. David Greer, N.Y.

24. V. Number (Art as Idea as Idea), 1968, (published in:) Art News (February 1969); New York Review of books (February 1, 1969); Women's Wear Daily (February 1, 1969). Collection: Mr. Arthur R. Rose, N.Y.

Note: The art is formless and sizeless; however the presentation has specific characteristics.

Facing page: **Photograph of mock-up for Catalog number 22.**
Following page: Photograph of Catalog number 19.
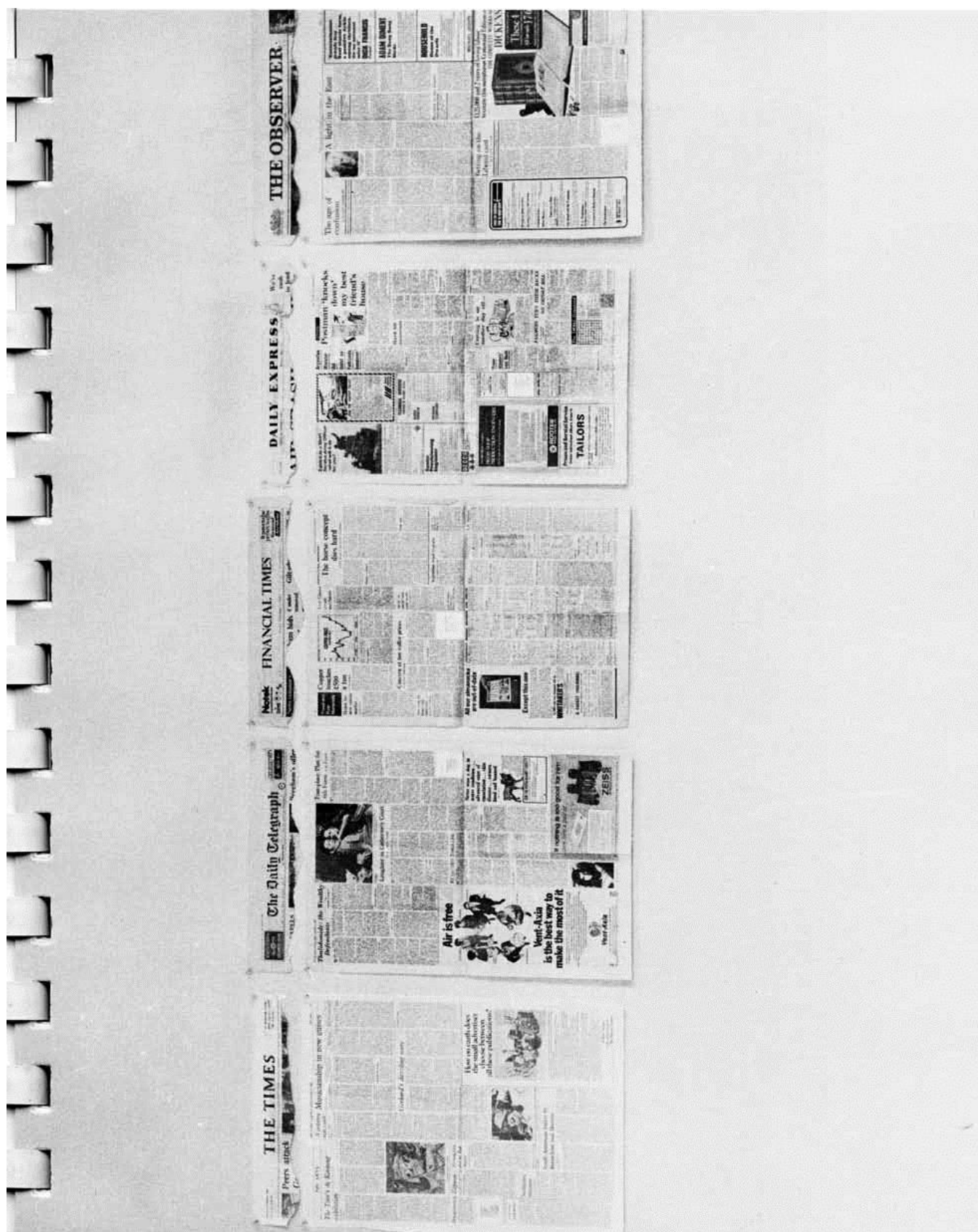
Fig. 3. *January 5 – 31 1969*, p. 15.

Fig. 4. Ibid, p. 16.

As gestured at in the attribution of a purely "descriptive" function to language, these works involving text were not seen as significant in relation to any preceding textual or literary traditions. If anything, these conceptual artists sought to negate such connections. As LeWitt expresses in "Sentences on Conceptual Art":

15. Since no form is intrinsically superior to another, the artist may use any form, from an expression of words (written or spoken) to physical reality, equally.

16. If words are used, and they proceed from ideas about art, then they are art and not literature; numbers are not mathematics. (83)

The separation of a unique instance from a wider system might be possible in theory, but it has interesting effects when located in particular kinds of practices. Take Martha Wilson's 1971 work from *Chauvinist Pieces*:

Unknown Piece

A woman under ether has a child in a large hospital.
When she comes to, she is permitted to select the
child she thinks is hers from among the babies in
the nursery. (In Morris and Bonin 230)

Wilson's series of conceptual scenes, or thought experiments, present many possible sides of her title intent. Despite not being framed in a literary light, previous textual encounters inform our reading, as described by Culler's model of naturalisation. The pieces consist of an event, or series of events, distilled into a kind of skeletal narrative form. They are not presented as real and might, instead, be considered representational. This method of presenting a minimal representation depends on a reader's familiarity with literary forms in order to conceive the piece as a delocalised conceptual possibility. In cases such as these, we might be able to say that it is impossible to separate the conceptual artist's use of textual form from interconnected reading lineages.

Regardless of whether or not text is used in conscious relation to a literary tradition, conceptual art brought text into different contexts. The pre-existing structures of the art world, its means of presentation and distribution, inevitably require a material aspect. In lieu of the art object, the material iterations of text lent a new way of perceiving text, across disparate modes of presentation, as a material entity. As a result, it has been said that the

dematerialisation of the art object brought language into a different kind of material consideration.[6]

1.2.b Conceptual Writing

The treatment of text as material in turn influenced the origins of conceptual writing. While other movements in literature explored textual materiality formally—such as Concrete Poetry in the 1950s and 60s, and the $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ poets of the 1960s and 70s—conceptual writing was the first to enact this concern self-reflexively in a way that was congruent with the concerns of conceptual art. As Craig Dworkin explains on the *UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, in conceptual writing, text is seen to be "more graphic than semantic, more a physically material event than a disembodied or transparent medium for referential communication" ("Conceptual Writing"). That is to say, in parallel to conceptual art, the concept or idea is prioritised over the form. This shared emphasis is evident in Lori Emerson's definition in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*: "Works are called *conceptual* when they embody a concept that is more important to their purpose than the actual lang. and ideas they express—the poetic qualities, or even the oddities, of everyday lang., for instance, or the materiality of the signifier or the banality of interpretation" (292). The concept of the work might be concerned with textual materiality, but the material form of the work itself acts in service to this conceptual aim.

Like conceptual art, conceptual writing is consciously responding to preceding traditions. We see this first in the term conceptual 'writing', as opposed to literature, which might be read as an indication of a wider frame and a concern with questioning such distinctions. The openness of the classification is compounded by Dworkin's elaboration that conceptual writing is used "both to signal literary writing that could function comfortably as conceptual art and to indicate the use of text in conceptual art practices" ("Fate" xxiii). The confusion of origin and definition of movements enacted by this inclusion perpetuates Andersson's described definitional 'effacement' of conceptual writing. The processes and traditions of writing across both literature and art, therefore, inform conceptual writing's origins. As Dworkin reframes somewhat circularly on *UbuWeb*, conceptual writing is most importantly "not so much writing in which the idea is more important than anything else as a writing in which the idea cannot be separated from the writing itself: in which the instance of writing is inextricably intertwined with the idea of Writing" ("Conceptual Writing").

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[6] See, for example, Dworkin, "Fate", p. xxxvi.

This idea of writing is also intertwined with the digital nature of its current spread and encounter, and the role of the individual in relation to it. As Christian Bök writes:

> Modern, social trends in computing (as seen, for example, in digitized sampling and networked exchange) have so thoroughly ensconced piracy and parody as sovereign, aesthetic values that not only do the economic edifices of copyright seem ready to collapse, but so also do the Romantic bastions of both sublime creativity and eminent authorship. (290)

As emerges from Bök's assertion, notions of creativity and ownership have been reinterpreted via access to vast quantities of textual material. While conceptual art was, and is, similarly involved in undermining the notion of individual control over the creative process—"The idea becomes a machine that makes the art" (LeWitt 79)—new technologies situate this as a given. The tools at our disposal for mass generation and perusal of text inform the ways in which this new writing is generated.

Dworkin asserts this state more emphatically in his essay, "The Fate of Echo", to claim that conceptual writing is "fundamentally opposed to ideologies of expression" (xliii). In Dworkin's framing of "ideologies of expression", as well as the wider work in which his piece is published—*Against Expression*—we see that the idea of 'expression' is connected in a very specific sense to the subjective and the emotional in line with a notion of Romantic poetics (or, even, some evaluative notions of incoherence). While the interrogation of 'expression' is not a new idea, as we might observe in the manifestos of conceptual artists, it incorporates certain associations that need addressing. Although I do not think working 'against' expression in a subjective or emotional sense is necessary to the definition of conceptual writing (although it might be a trend or tendency), the idea of working 'against' the assumptions of straightforward expression, in any sense, seems central to the conceptual nature of this writing.

This leads me to a divide between understandings of conceptual writing and perceptions of its posture towards incoherence. The first, of which Dworkin and Goldsmith are key proponents, is the minimisation of subjectivity. This, again, is enmeshed with the nature of digital technologies, resulting in an attitude towards conceptual writing as the rejection of incoherent organisation or sentiment. As Robert Cottrell and Goldsmith observe in their introduction to *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*: "How I make my way through this thicket of information—how I manage it, how I parse it, how I organize and distribute it—is what distinguishes my writing from yours" (1). The

ameliorative assumptions of verbs such as 'manage' or 'organize' suggest an inverse original state. The logical implication would be that to organise would be to create coherence in the system. Goldsmith, in a separate essay, "Flarf Is Dionysus. Conceptual Writing Is Apollo.", connects this to the ease of digital technologies and tools—copy and paste—in the composition or reconstitution of texts of sizeable mass: "The fragment, which ruled poetry for the past one hundred years, has left the building. Start making sense. Disjunction is dead" (par. 1). The implicit connection here is between size and sense. 'The fragment' and 'disjunction' are connected with a particular type of poetry and pre-digital collage modes of appropriation necessitated by the labour involved. The shift from partial copy to "whole" (Goldsmith and Cottrell 6) is accompanied by the assumption that the 'sense' of the original text is carried through to the appropriated version.

On a formal level at least, aided by the ease of copy and paste, this 'sense' might be practicable. But this refers to a very specific kind of sense—a normative syntax facilitating surface-level cohesion. The coherence of the work as a whole, and the causal strands leading into and away from the textual whole, appears to repel such understanding. This becomes apparent when considering the alignment or misalignment of intention and expression in a more open sense. As Bök writes, "let us consider that conceptual literature might strive to accent the disjunction between intentionality (what we mean to mean) and expressiveness (what we seem to mean)" (292). If we take expressiveness, in the sense of representation or manifestation, as the "action of expressing or representing (a meaning, thought, state of things) in words or symbols" (*OED*), we see that organisation cannot resolve this barrier between meaning and 'words'. Against Goldsmith's notion, Bök resolves: "If the lyric voice, for the sake of an authentic sincerity, yearns to repair this breach between what we intend to say and what we appear to say – then conceptual literature, by contrast, accentuates this discrepancy" (292). Conceptual writing does not implicitly negate the expressive function of text, nor inadvertently heighten the consideration of intentionality, it simply points to the separation between these levels. This, I propose, in connection to the lineage of conceptual art, is a product of the mediation of the concept: an intentional form of incoherence achieved through the separation of systems—textual, intentional, real, or otherwise—in certain texts.

Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman present a useful way of conceiving conceptual work in relation to this incoherence. The first of their *Notes on Conceptualisms* reads, "1. Conceptual writing is allegorical writing" (15). For Place and Fitterman, "Allegorical writing is a writing of its time, saying slant what cannot be said directly" (15). It seems significant

that they attach allegorical writing first to "its time" and from here to the possibility (or permissibility) of expression. Beyond the limitations of language explored previously, it would seem that context interferes with the process of expression to create an area of "what cannot be said directly". This factor recombines with the material premise of conceptual writing: "Allegorical writing (particularly in the form of appropriated conceptual writing) does not aim to critique the culture industry from afar, but to mirror it directly. To do so, it uses the materials of the culture industry directly" (22). This blurring of production, reproduction, and representation creates an open space for incoherence in the allegorical model: "Allegorical writing is necessarily inconsistent, containing elaborations, recursions, sub-metaphors, fictive conceits, projections, and guisings that combine and recombine both to create the allegorical whole, and to discursively threaten this wholeness" (17). Thus, allegorical writing (as allegory for conceptual writing) recognises the artificiality of the work's limits in its context—a performance of identity—and sets these questions in play as a mode of productive work.

One brief note to make here is the extension of the field of conceptualism as I write. This can be observed in the emergence of the term post-conceptualism, particularly in an art context. As Peter Osborne writes in *The Postconceptual Condition* (2018): "Today, 'contemporary art', critically understood, is a postconceptual art" (20). Continuing the lag between conceptual art and conceptual writing, the term 'post-conceptual writing' is not yet widely employed. Regardless, post-conceptualism generationally follows on from conceptualism and is in dialogue with its concerns in a way that allows us to talk across both categorisations.[7] The difference between the conceptual and post-conceptual rests in the fidelity or transparency of a work's execution. As Place and Fitterman describe: "in post-conceptual work, there is no distinction between manipulation and production, object and sign, contemplation and consumption" (20). These manipulations extend conceptualism's premises, rather than react against them, and can consequently be discussed in a continuous frame. As such, this thesis will not aim to definitively set out the boundaries of alternate conceptualisms but recognises ideological gradations within the field and allows for them within an analysis of a shifting ground—the contemporary, and any contemporary.

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[7] See F. Bernstein, pp. 21–27.

1.3 Incoherence and Contemporary Conceptual Writing

In this section I explore how a concept of incoherence can be applied to an analysis of contemporary conceptual texts. By looking at contemporary examples, I hope to set an open field for the consideration of incoherence in line with my usage of the term. The way these texts exist at the fringes of multiple discourses means they have received minimal critical attention. As such, there are few factors mediating my own encounter with the works, and this situation is more accurately reflective of the concerns of the texts themselves: representing unfixity from within a contemporary moment.

As observed in section 1.1.a of this chapter, I define incoherence as the presence of a contradiction in the logic of a text, complicating the work's singular identity and approaches to its analysis. At present, there are no specific, in-depth studies on working with incoherence in literature, let alone within the narrow frame of contemporary conceptual writing.[8] Certain works, such as Stewart's *Nonsense* (referred to earlier) and Roger Caillois' *Man, Play, and Games*, serve as useful theoretical precedents, despite pertaining to different notions. I will outline some of the influences of preceding schools, and the divergence of my particular topic, before presenting some examples of incoherence.

A main point distinguishing different types of textual experimentation with logic is the frame of containment they are observed within. For instance, in post-modernism, the frame of containment is the possible world constructed by the text. In Stewart's articulation of five nonsense operations, there is also a clear separation from reality: "Reversals and Inversions"; "Play with Boundaries"; "Play with Infinity"; "Uses of Simultaneity"; and "Arrangement and Rearrangement within a Closed Field" (v-vi). The closed parameters of her framework allow for a persistence of 'singular' meaning: "meaning is assembled from a set of common elements and then disassembled and reassembled" (51). We understand the implications of a closed field of 'play' more fully in light of Caillois' "The Definition of Play": "play is essentially a separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life" (6). Play within the "restricted, closed, protected universe" (7) of the game is defined by Caillois as: necessarily free, separate, uncertain, *unproductive*, governed by rules, and make-believe (9-10). Play cannot interfere with 'real'-world logical discernments, in the same way that it cannot be viewed to seriously explore them. Within this closed system, it is not the "cheat" that destroys

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[8] Some works, while featuring the term 'incoherence' prominently, such as Michael Boardman's *Narrative Innovation and Incoherence: Ideology in Defoe, Goldsmith, Austen, Eliot, and Hemingway*, do not specifically explore the textual manifestations of incoherence.

the game, for if he "violates the rules, he at least pretends to respect them"—the "game is ruined by the nihilist who denounces the rules as absurd and conventional" (7). While the singular objective form of the works I examine might initially appear to present a closed field of play, the reality of these limits is constantly questioned, and abidance by the rules is contradicted from the outset.

In terms of alternate frames for viewing the contradiction, we have already encountered the systems associated with Rimmon-Kenan's two models of naturalisation: literature (construction) and reality (natural). Each model carries with it a set of rules corresponding to one side of containment, within or outside the text. Accordingly, these models represent an initial start point for observing how the contradiction might be enacted and, despite their permeability, inform my division of Chapters Two and Three. As explored previously, the contradiction must work against some 'thing' in order to pan out. We might view this as a process of mediation in line with Place and Fitterman's description: "The work of the work is to create a narrative mediation between image or 'figure' and meaning" (16). It is in this extension, or space between two alternatives (A *and* not-A), that a contradiction can emerge.

Two processes already perform this mediating function within a literary frame: translation and appropriation. Viewed in terms of a literary model of naturalisation, we see a range of established assumptions and expectations attached to each process. The nature of these associations, and a consequent (or intrinsic) connection between translation and appropriation, are explored in more depth in Chapter Two. Here, I set up how these processes might be modified to create incoherence—a delimiting of the systems they are being examined in relation to. Translation and appropriation also map onto the early concerns of conceptual art, in which translation between material and textual forms and the reframed use of existing materials were asserted as new modes of production. Although methods of structuring incoherence are not limited to translation and appropriation, these processes serve as a useful starting point for perceiving other modes of incoherence in conceptual writing.

1.3.a Translation

The process of translation already exists in literature as a contradictory undertaking. Jacques Derrida describes translation in "Des Tours de Babel" as a "necessary and impossible task" and "its necessity *as* impossibility" (197). Translation is both necessary in order for an 'original' text to be understood by non-speakers, but impossible in terms of conveying the

exact same meaning. The need to understand a text that is incomprehensible in its original language only serves to heighten the impossibility of understanding it in this form. While the incoherence of this situation is inherent to all processes of translation, recent works by conceptual writers reconfigure the processes and assessment of translation directly. As translator and conceptual writer Mónica de la Torre frames this interrogation of translation, these writers are challenging "the superstitious and quasi-religious belief that translations, being imperfect copies, are necessarily inferior to originals" and the "common expectation that, above all, they be transparent, definitive, and faithful to their source" ("Valencia" 310). This second distinction is of particular importance to the work of specific contemporary conceptual writers, as opposed to the work of all translators across time.

De la Torre, for instance, is interested in how translations might be intentionally incorrect, and the politics and publicness of these decisions. In her poetry collection, *Public Domain*, de la Torre presents a framing for how to approach her work, titled "5. Target Language (A Collaboration with Sujin Lee)":

> *To be performed live by two readers who can translate the text read aloud by the other reader on the spot, into any language other than English. [...] Translating into any two languages other than Korean and Spanish, as well as improvising content in the target language instead of translating literally, are encouraged. Performers should read simultaneously whenever desired.* (37)

The source text is a transcript of a conversation in English between two non-native English speakers: "All of a sudden, all she was doing in English /and,/ and,/ and/ seeing speaking/ in a way that we didn't recognize" (39). The work itself cannot exist solely on the page, it is both A *and* not-A. Similarly, any performance of this work will continue to be different.

The texts of the two source speakers already seem to overlap, as though they are two conversations carried out in parallel. They are talking about the same subject, the difficulties of understanding and being understood. And most importantly, the less tangible dimensions of these processes in their context come through: "people have expectations / when they are talking to someone bilingual like that/" (40). The conversation, as a result, progresses tangentially, continuing the same subject but at constantly new angles. Throughout our reading, an awareness of a potential live performance remains, most likely in languages the individual reader or listener would not understand. On one level, we wonder if this simultaneous live translation might perform a representation closer to the subject of the source text. But also, how these other languages might suit the content and sense of the

transcript, or how the translators might approach the task to improvise as requested. And whether the audience (or individual within the audience) would even know. Ultimately, the potential meaning of the work here exists between the transcript and its imagined possible performance(s) in ways that confront the conventions and expectations of translation more broadly. The conceptual action of the work emerges in the idea of potential translation, against not knowing, to enact incoherence through the work's divided identity.

As in de la Torre's impetus for improvised content, subjectivity in translation is a force that is not typically pointed out. And when it is, this is often perceived in a critical light—something gone wrong. Yet these subjective interferences might be reconceived, or rendered meaningful, through the conceptual process. This is explored by poets and translators Oana Avasilichioaei and Erín Moure in their collaborative work *Expeditions of a Chimœra* (with interferences by Elisa Sampedrín). An extended analysis of this collection makes up the first half of Chapter Two, but it is useful to first set out how its processes construct incoherence and what this incoherence does. Avasilichioaei works in Romanian and English, Moure in English and Galician. Avasilichioaei does not know Galician and Moure does not know Romanian. In a statement in *I'll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing by Women*, they write: "each subjectivity—both of our two writing subjects and the multiple subjectivities that emerge in the text—is dented and moved by what is proximate to it" (35). As a result, incoherence functions between levels of understanding and the multiplicity of authorship—there is no singular, binding intent: "*Meaning happens without understanding*" and "*Understanding happens without 'meaning'*" (35).

Take the series, "C.'s Garden", in *Expeditions of a Chimœra*. The sequence begins with a poem in Romanian by the poet Paul Celan, titled "Fără title, fragment dintr-un poem neterminat" (40). The first translation is by Sampedrín (it is unclear from what source language) and reads:

Untitled fragment of an indeterminate poem

Your eyes in the grass, bitter grass.
The flute winds past, windlass of wax.

Apt are your eyes, apt and uncertain. (41)

The next iteration is Avasilichioaei's translation from Celan's Romanian:

Untitled, fragment from an unfinished poem

Your eyes, grasses, bitter grass.

Wind tremors above, the wax eyelid.

Your eyes, waters, forgiven water. (41)

We see differences between the two versions: "wind" in place of "flute", and an "eyelid" in place of a "windlass". Connections might still be seen between these objects or forces: the passage of air, and the circular shape of the inner eye or windlass's winch. But the final lines present a vast departure—"apt" against "waters", and "uncertain" against "forgiven". The context of the windlass of Sampedrín's translation seems to come through in the "waters" of Avasilichioaei's, and the place of 'eyes' extends across lines. We wonder if it might not be a line-by-line translation, open instead to subjective displacement or reordering. But the element that remains unfixed is the contrast between "uncertain" and "forgiven"—either a choice or an impossibility of language. We wonder how the two translations arrived at the disparate adjectives. Which one is 'right'. Or, how the original might be both. Uncertain and not uncertain, forgiven. The unfixity of the closure of these two poems produces a suspension of sense that continues across the translated versions that follow and is expanded through interventions, such as the 'transleap', to test further impossible effects.

The way the poet-translators' frame their own competence, and license, in performing these translations is a question throughout. For instance, Avasilichioaei and Moure translate each other's translations to English, but they do not understand the other's Romanian or Galician. In claiming this, we still see resonances between poem versions—a matter of process or influenced by something else, we cannot be sure. Take these lines from Avasilichioaei's first translation, re-translated from Moure's Galician: "Bone your eyes' herbs, herbs sea-bitter / Bone your eyes, an aquarium, an aquarium lost" (46). Avasilichioaei translates from Moure's Galician again, but whether it is the same source translation or a variation on her first attempt at translation is unclear. The same two lines instead read: "Since that first earthquake / Luminous pupils lost, lost in an aqueduct" (49). Connections remain between these second-level translations and the more proximate versions: "water", "bitter", "pupils", and so on. But new material has been inserted from outside these previously self-enclosed systems, brought about by mixed levels of understanding and multiple subjectivities. Where an "earthquake" or an "aqueduct" comes from is unclear. The process is inaccessible behind unarticulated mediations. The connections that are rendered across them, however, create a multiplicity of possible and un-hierarchical meanings, dispersed between original and translations—against the very idea of what a translation is or should do.

<u>1.3.b Appropriation</u>

This same manipulation of contained textual identity is performed through the process of appropriation. A text, or a section of it, might be manipulated internally or by framing so as to constitute something different. The uncertainty of the text's assertion, such that it appears to be both (A *and* not-A), constitutes its incoherence. While the practice of utilising culture's pre-existing materials in "fictive conceits" (Place and Fitterman 17) is not a new act in itself—as particularly evident in the appropriation art of the 1970s and 80s—there are a different set of possibilities in the use of text. Annette Gilbert, in her introduction to *Reprint: Appropriation (&) Literature*, sets up the ways appropriative texts are "strongly attached to the materiality and mediality of the original texts and books that they draw from" (55). This can range from "pure linguistic material", "the concrete form of a text", "paratexts", to "design and characteristics of a specific edition, or of a specific book" (55). The materiality of the original, therefore, becomes a constraint or framework against which the appropriation operates. This relation generally depends on producing something "unforeseen" from a "limited set of possibilities"—which would appear to place a limit on expressive potential (62).

And yet, the way in which an appropriation is framed becomes a clear site for exposing new possibilities suspended between the associations of the source material and a new imposed intentionality of the appropriative author. This intentionality need not be transparently prescribed but can be assumed to lie behind the text's ends. As Caroline Bergvall writes, this appears as a "willingness to constantly, relentlessly examine the means of one's own intentionality, positioning, assumptions, expectations" (21). When texts explore these questions, a separation occurs between the reception of the appropriative attempt and the ordinary reception of literature: "It is dead serious playfulness, interdependence, networked provocation, and conscious games" (21). It is a use of the game's "elements" (Stewart 51) but a lack of engagement with the rules—opposed to ideals of autonomous, creative, and original production.

This approach to appropriation by contemporary artists and writers recalls the work and strategies of the Situationists working between the late 1950s and early 70s. Specifically, the framing of appropriation corresponds to the Situationist strategy of détournement, used to 'creatively disfigure' an existing artwork (Buchanan "détournement"). Détournement is explained and performed by conceptual writer and critic, Vanessa Place, in her "Afterword" to the anthology, *I'll Drown My Book*. Place lists various sites and people discussing

détournement, and each other, alongside one another in her text. She places a Wikipedia entry at the top of her descriptive hierarchy: "Détournement, according to Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, refers to "a variation on a previous media work, in which the newly created one has a meaning that is antagonistic or antithetical to the original" (446). From here she cites Guy Debord's understanding of détournement as "the flexible language of anti-ideology", a "language that cannot and need not be confirmed by any previous or supracritical reference" (446). Place then turns to Patrick Greaney's sense of détournement as "a many-gendered thing" (446). She sums this up by quoting Greaney, quoting Debord, "misquoting" Baudelaire: *Je voulais parler la belle langue de mon siècle* ("I wanted to speak the beautiful language of my century") in place of him who wrote *si je voulais parler la belle langue de mon siècle* ("if I wanted to speak the beautiful language of my century")" (446).

Place builds out of this critical knot a destabilised and multiple concept of an existing term. Her non-complicit tone is perhaps set by her Wikipedia reference, a site that is open to any editing and reframing. The context of this afterword in a school-defining anthology (of which she is a co-editor) contradicts the laxity of her methodology. But this is part of the point. For instance, within her reframing, Place describes Debord's omission of "si" / "if" as a 'misquotation'—with the evaluative connotations of the prefix "mis-".[9] Reframing the two previous texts in relation to each other, and subtly altering their relationship, Place inserts a mistake in her framework for discussing inaccurate representation, destabilising previous intentionality.[10] Place is creating a new context for détournement and perpetuating unfaithful reproduction in unclear bounds. It is also difficult to discern if her quotation of the *Wikipedia* entry is inaccurate. This might be a result of imprecise transcription, intentional editing, or an outcome of the open structure of the website and its cumulative edits since Place was writing (circa 2011–2012).[11] Place is allowing the ultimate détourner, any internet user with any agenda, undermine her authority across time—subject to unlimited variations. As she writes, conceptualism is "writing in which the context is the primary locus of meaning-making": the "surface significance (or content) is deployed against or within an extra-textual narrative (or contextual content) that is the work's larger (and infinitely mutable) meaning" (446). Thus, we see the origins of what contemporary conceptual writers might be doing as subsequent détourners, and with new methodologies and discursivities of cultural mediation.

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[9] *OED*: 'badly', 'wrongly', 'perversely', 'mistakenly', 'amiss' ("Mis-, Prefix1").

[10] Greaney refers to "Baudelaire's transformation of quotation into a kind of protodétournement" in his prose poem "Solitude", which in itself contains a misquotation of Edgar Allen Poe's "Man of the Crowd" (81).

[11] *Wikipedia*: "a variation on previous work […]" ("Détournement", last edited 31 March 2019).

These multifarious borders of appropriative production are foregrounded in Ara Shirinyan's collection of poems, *Your Country is Great*. Shirinyan's technique points to how a context of digital materiality might be utilised and reconsidered. The poems are made up of text appropriated from Google search results. Each poem title, "[insert country] is Great", refers to the search terms entered. Sections of the original search results are arranged into stanzas separated by source, but cut and arranged by the poet, including his line breaks. The contradiction exists between the text's original context, and Shirinyan's reframing as poetry. Across the poems, we observe similarities in the self-constructed ideologies of separate countries and expansive differences in their expressive effects. The poems are often characterised by their original source. We observe a predictable cycling of types of content— travel reviews, advertisements, comments section posts, and so on, reconfigured to poetic effect. Often, we read an emptiness, or interchangeability of expression, vastly spread: "Aruba is great / its beaches are beautiful / and the people are great" (15). Occasionally, the dislocation of these statements from their original contexts renders a bizarre specificity: "Taking the sales force to the Bahamas / is great for team morale" (22). This isolated excerpt inadvertently implies some intrinsic causality between the Bahamas and "team morale", as if it were a known fact or unsolicited expression of feeling. Nevertheless, the commercial angle of such statements returns us to a pervading banality of affect, which only serves to highlight sameness across national, or poetic, borders.

Against the sales pitches and non-specific exclamations of nationalism, vast disparities occur precisely in the use of the same language. For example, within the same poem we read two identical utterances—"Guatemala is great"—conjoined across stanzas:

> The number of children needing homes
> and the level of poverty in Guatemala
> is great
>
> Guatemala is great –
> not quite as cheap as Thailand,
> but laid back. (121)

The first stanza is a specific and concerning expression. The next stanza is from the angle of an outsider, broadly comparative, a tourist's individual perspective. But the two articulations are interconnected, the second is financially constitutive of the "need" and "poverty" in the first. Where "laid back" is seen as positive from the vacationer's angle, it represents a component of the issues above. The effects of each stanza are so entirely at odds, and yet,

unified verbally and by placement, we see a causal underpinning unrecognisable in their individual presentations.

While the majority of the assertions in the poems remain categorizable—even in cases of disparity—the strangest formulations occur when the composition approaches, or matches, our poetic expectations. The congruence of expression and poetic form within the appropriation simultaneously renders its placement in the real world unimaginable. We read this in the following stanza:

> She teaches us that Ethiopia is great
>
> and she wishes Pugs and Kelly would talk about
>
> the nice parts.
>
> Pugs reminds her that Ethiopia is
>
> the arm pit of the
>
> of the world. (92)

Who "She" is, capitalised in relation to "us", appears figuratively potent. Against these pronouns, the specificity and strangeness of the names, "Pugs" (unusual) and "Kelly" (generic), are hard to place. The way Pugs operates in the sentence can be read in alternate ways, such as how "Pugs reminds her", which might refer to Pugs speaking, or Pugs as a representation of something larger. Similarly, the perhaps accidental repetition of "of the" might read as intentional in its reconfiguration—an ominous echo of individual place in relation to "the world"—"Ethiopia is / the arm pit of the / of the world". The lingering feeling of this stanza forces us to question the line separating poetry in the world and incidental text in the world reframed as poetry. The incoherence of this section, and Shirinyan's project as a whole, is a product of the dissonance between sources and tone, and unexpected patterns that emerge in their combination. These effects are inherent to something existing independently in the world—an array of autonomous internet users probabilistically converging and diverging across the poetic work—against the narratives we construct about their real sources.

As observed in these examples attached to the processes of translation and appropriation, we see that incoherent conceptual writing works with what is already there, not progressing understanding, but revealing convoluted structures embedded in the systems of literary production to begin with. Not progress but productive, sitting as a verb.

2. Parasitic Horizons: Incoherence within the Conceptual Text

This chapter expands on the incoherent processes of translation and appropriation identified in Chapter One. As existing practices with extensive consideration in a literary frame, translation and appropriation correspond to a literary, or constructionist, model of naturalisation as articulated by Rimmon-Kenan. This model indicates the focus of this chapter, and incoherence is explored within the contained limits of two contemporary conceptual texts. These are: *Expeditions of a Chimæra*, a collaborative work of poetic translation by Oana Avasilichioaei and Erín Moure (with interruptions by Elisa Sampedrín); and *An Arranged Affair*, an appropriative romance novel by Sally Alatalo.

As set up previously, the mediating processes of translation and appropriation problematise literary expectations and ideals in terms of authorship, identity, and transparency. Because the translation or appropriation exists as an alternate version in relation to an original, it represents a convoluted object of analysis, bearing multiple originary traces within its singular form. Instead of attempting to minimise contradictions arising from this state, the authors of the works in this chapter compound them. Incoherence in each of *Expeditions of a Chimæra* and *An Arranged Affair* works to different effects. Incoherence in translation is used to reveal a multiplicity of possible meanings inherent to a single text, while the incoherence of appropriation is used to show eerie convergence across texts in a genre. The result of each process, however, is a work that asserts a singular, contained identity and produces its effects in productive relation to this containment. As a result, both *Expeditions of a Chimæra* and *An Arranged Affair* play on the evaluative associations of incoherence to examine the relation between singular form and informing system, and the possibility of extricating one from the other.

In this chapter, and extending into Chapter Three, I observe the ways in which translation and appropriation are intertwined as processes. We see an initial closeness in Kate Briggs's meditation on the desire to write or translate in *This Little Art*: "Translation as a responsive an appropriative *practising* of an extant work at the level of the sentence, working it out: a *workout* on the basis of the desired work whose energy source is the inclusion of the new and different vitality that comes with and from me" (119). Translation in this sense is first a working out of the text practically and is contained within the individual's field of interpretation. This initial approach is then coupled with the idea of the potential 'work' of the translation as a product of that figuring out, and the effects and implicit difference it will set

in play. In this way, the translator's translation is *their* work, an ownership of the text in the same sense that appropriation explicitly asserts this transferral of possession.[12] Where these assertions are not transparent, in either process, incoherence is introduced, impelling a conceptual mode of questioning.

The way a work is framed is conventionally viewed as a central factor dividing translation and appropriation, and their ethical or evaluative assessments. For example, if a translation is clearly asserted and competently performed, its ethical status in relation to the original is supposedly unproblematic. Its existence, as Emily Apter describes, is that of "art as authorized plagiarism or legal appropriationism" (93). A translation is allowed to 'use' the original because "it implicitly claims to be *of* the original, that is to say, possessed of no autonomous textual identity" (93). Appropriation, on the other hand, is viewed as the opposite, an "ostensible perversion of authenticity" (102). The existence of the appropriative work is defined negatively through this perversion and then re-asserts itself autonomously. Translation, meanwhile, exists in deference to its original as an interpretive object laid open to evaluative scrutiny. As Apter points out, translation, as with "plagiarism", "marshals a theft-narrative to sustain the illusion that literary property is ownable in the first place" (97).

Within a conceptual frame, the evaluative consideration of a work has been flipped in favour of ethical disruption. As Goldsmith argues in his essay, "Displacement is the New Translation": "Borrowing is translation. Polite and neighborly, it involves exchange and social discourse, agreed upon terms and conditions. […] Appropriation, on the other hand, is effortless and brutal, dumbly picking things up whole and dropping them whole into new situations" (par. 17). In this piece, Goldsmith associates 'dumb' displacement with a positive assessment of conceptual capacity. The 'dumbness', or silence, of re-framing is an open site for reconsidering whole chunks of displaced text. The text itself supposedly makes sense, but the text's physical displacement reconfigures the earlier work's sense to create a new meaning. Goldsmith's straightforward perception of the 'politeness' of translation, against the rudeness of displacement, suggests a similar assumptive basis to preceding negative perceptions of appropriation. And yet, we realise that translation is a more complicated process. The "agreed upon terms and conditions" are in fact frequently unacknowledged and subjective. In Goldsmith's first recognition of the closeness of the two processes, we see a dual potential for opaque conceptual work that is obscured on both sides by ethical or evaluative preconceptions.

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[12] See Attridge, p. 73.

Unlike Goldsmith's idea of the 'brutality' of conceptual work, I explore the ways in which conceptual texts quietly, yet fundamentally, disrupt literary notions by their very processes and performance of identity in a literary context. This incoherence signals the power and precarity of these assertions and traces back to underexamined grounds of reading. For example, as Briggs writes, we rely on "the performative power of the speech act that declares *this is a translation*", for up until this point, a translation is "merely another text" (45). How we read or misread such texts becomes a process of observing our own evaluative pathways, set in disarray by the disjunction of a singular work. At a remove from the ethical and evaluative frames outlined, and their obscuring effects, this chapter necessitates an examination of the processes themselves. The breadth of possibility stemming from this pursuit is gestured at by the collaborative, Antena, in their manifesto on translation:

> Moments of untranslatability lead directly to untranslation, undertranslation, overtranslation, an excess, extranslation, a lack, a limit, an excrescence, an impropriety, distranslation, retranslation, multitranslation, a mistake, a conflict, dystranslation. An understanding of the potential in not understanding. (126)

Significance rests in a different—conceptual—order of understanding: "understanding the potential in not understanding". The new shape of our reading dwells in these spaces of misalignment, unravelling a systemic confusion productively reconceived in the texts examined. A dependence on other bodies, a blurry horizon.

2.1 *Expeditions of a Chimæra* – Oana Avasilichioaei and Erín Moure

Russian poet, Anna Akhmatova, wrote, "For a poet, translating is like devouring one's own brains" (qtd. in Bassnett and Bush 217). The specific difficulty of translating poetry has been alighted upon and explored across time, drawing up a range of theories for its appropriate practice.[13] And yet, there appears to be something particularly strange in the merging of the roles of translator and poet. There is an awareness that the poetic work cannot be transformed and maintain a consistent meaning. The evaluative scope of poetic translation also appears broader. Polizzotti captures this in his description of the fear that "some clunky wordsmith will either run roughshod over [the poet's] meter and rhyme or else adhere to them so doggedly that the airborne original becomes a leaden, earthbound thing" (111). By deferring to metaphor, we observe the difficulty of explaining why or how this shift, and its evaluative consequences, occurs. Working against various forces of compromise—felicity or fidelity— the translator's task cannot have a 'right' outcome. As Briggs writes, "as a labour of changing words, and changing the order of words, [literary translation] is always and from the outset wrong: its wrongness is a way of indirectly stressing and restressing the rightness of the original words in their right and original order" (42). How this wrongness might be used to do something else, apart from the evaluative, is my focus in relation to the poetry explored here.

As introduced in Chapter One, poets and translators, Oana Avasilichioaei and Erín Moure, explore possibilities extending from wrongness in their collaborative work, *Expeditions of a Chimæra* (2009). Although a collection of poem-translations with multiple poet-translators might already appear incoherent, the shared concerns and responsive processes of the work suggest the work's singular identity. The relations between parts are structured through the process of translation itself, for instance, sequences of translations back and forth between languages, and extensions (called the 'transleap'), in which the authors directly take up each other's material. Against these evidently convoluted threads, the figure of Elisa Sampedrín represents a further order of confusion. The incongruence of her role is initially suggested in the positioning of her contribution in the inner title page, bracketed from the two authors—"(with interferences by Elisa Sampedrín)". Unlike the authors, she is presented with a biography within the text, and it is her initial work that impels the collection's point of origin. Seemingly internal to the textual construct, and simultaneously shaping it, she is an impossibility that is never resolved by the text. Thus, against the text's

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[13] See Polizzotti, pp. 111–128.

counterintuitive—yet singular—form, incoherence exists in a possible merging of content and construction.

In the beginning, the text unfolds mostly with clear demarcations of who is translating, from what language, and from whose 'original'. These attributions are complicated by footnoted utterances disputing origins and intents. These statements are positioned as secondary to the authority of the texts themselves—source or translation. Divided by a line and smaller font, and with no indication in the text to what the footnote exactly refers, they appear to reference more than the text they appear directly below. The way in which footnotes are ordered across the work as a whole, guiding and revoking understanding, operates in a way uncommon to their usual subsidiary function. Genette discusses how this kind of information is usually received, the "pragmatic status of a paratextual element is defined by the characteristics of its situation of communication: the nature of the sender and addressee, the sender's degree of authority and responsibility, the illocutionary force of the sender's message" (*Paratexts* 8). The unpredictable ways in which footnotes accrue, and complicate onwards reading, constantly shifts our perceptions of authority in the text. As such, the footnote as a source of clarification, or lucid elaboration, instead works to produce the opposite effect in *Expeditions of a Chimæra*.

Sampedrín's linguistic authority within the text is framed in one such footnote, near the beginning of the work, but subsequent to her first translation of a work by Romanian poet Nichita Stănescu. The footnote reads: "It appears that in the 1990s Elisa Sampedrín spent time in Romania, where she fell in love with the poems of Nichita Stănescu and attempted, with no knowledge of Romanian, to translate them into English, which she was also unfamiliar with" (12). Thus, the translated work we have just read shifts in our perception. Sampedrín, or E.S. as she is referred to, translates Stănescu's "The Roost", as follows:

1

I was out in the field.

My pen stopped working.

I had to write with straw.

2

Where they'd torn up the rails

behind the sewing factory, I found a field.

In the field, when wind rises,

the grass clangs.

3

I sat down on a concrete boulder in the field.

A mouse treads to the lip of its tunnel

and pushes my boot.

And the sky is a roost

for birds. (11)

After this poem and note, we read a poem titled, "Prajina/Coteţul, *restored to the Romanian by O.A., from the English of E.S.*" (13). And from a footnote below it, we discover that the original of Sampedrín's previous translation "had not been written in the first place" (13). Avasilichioaei, or O.A., is forced to translate backwards to "create the original Stănescu poem" (13). Within this assertion, we see a playful reconfiguration of translation, such that it might (preposterously) be a determinate process joining a stable antecedent and product. What Sampedrín's first poem-translation is based on is a mystery. It becomes Avasilichioaei who contradictorily writes the 'original' Nichita Stănescu poem through translation:

1

Eram pe teren.

Stiloul n-a mai vrut să scrie.

Am fost silită să scriu cu un pai.

2

Unde au smuls şinele

în spate le fabrica de tricotaje, am găsit un câmp.

Pe câmp, când vântul se înteţeşte,

iarba dangănă.

3

M-am aşezat pe un bolovan de beton în câmp.

Un şoarece păşeşete până la buza tunelului său

şi-mi impinge cisma.

Şi cerul e un coteţ de vrăbii. (13)

The relation to Stănescu in this process is unclear. If there is no source poem to Sampedrín's translation, we wonder how it might be called a translation at all, or what the attribution to another poet, Stănescu, might perform. This is a contradiction in origins that the reader is unable to singly resolve. How to proceed from this state of not knowing is the concern of the authors, and my own, in the pages that follow.

The title of this series of poems, "Prank!" (11-20), also shapes our reading. We do not know on which level this prank is playing out—the footnote, or the texts themselves. The series of nine poems are all supposedly connected to the 'original' Stănescu poem, or Sampedrín's 'original' translation. We might observe some superficial similarities between the works on the page, at least at first. Most of the poems occupy the same structure: three stanzas, numbered as such, and a final line (although broken in Sampedrín's first translation). There are also resonances in sound between lines or words. While not close enough to appear homophonic,[14] certain cadences create a sense of mirroring, for example: "Where they'd torn up the rails" and "Unde au smuls şinele"; or, "the grass clangs", "iarba dangănă". And yet the titles, at least in English (the only language here that I can read), display a drift in sense across versions: "The Roost" (11), "Prajina/Coteţul" (13), "Coatful" (14), "Prank/1:45" (15), and so on. The relations between the poems are played on—variously asserted to be a product of derivation (attempted translation), or coincidence. We see this in, "Prank/1:45, *by E.M.*" (15). Written by Erín Moure (E.M.), and asserted to be an original poem without any resemblance to Stănescu's work, the footnote does allow "for the possibility of coincidence between her original poem and Avasilichioaei's translation of the translation of Stănescu's poem" (15). The first stanza reads,

> Put your best foot forward.
> Stilettos in the hand are a kind of saw.
> False stilettos, scraping the planks. (15)

Thus, in my own reading—not knowing Romanian, but also encouraged by the footnote—I rely on connecting this work back to Sampedrín's English translation of Stănescu's original. On a loose level, there is a resonance between the types of actions represented in each line. Considering the first stanza for instance: "out in the field" (11) and "best foot forward" (15) both concern going outwards. In the second line: a "pen" (11) and "Stilettos in the hand" as a "saw" (15) are each tools. And then, "I had to write with straw" (11) and "scraping the

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[14] See C. Bernstein: homophonic translation involves "translating the sound […] over and above the lexical meaning" (64).

planks" (15) both explicitly refer to a kind of mark making that is undermined, "false" (15). Rhymes also appear across the two versions: "saw" and "straw" in Sampedrín's translation (although reordered), and perhaps "planks" and the series and poem titles, "Prank!". In Moure's image, the resonance of "saw" and 'sore' emerges against the figure's feet rendered as "False stilettos". Instead of the "saw", these fake replacements—the individual's actual feet—are the things "scraping the planks". The inversion of real and placeholder across these texts mirrors the effects of the translation as original version and attempts at rendering a meeting point between source and iteration, or coincidental alignment.

Parallels in the content and form of "The Roost" (E.S.) and "Prank/1:45" (E.M.) are complicated by their subsequent footnote. Within it, we learn that "Avasilichioaei, for her part, asserts this to be an accurate translation into English of Stănescu's Romanian, and not an original poem as Moure claims" (15). Although Avasilichioaei does not clarify which Stănescu poem this refers to, it appears to be the same source text as Sampedrín's 'original' translation. Both are connected to the idea of Stănescu's original source text, yet the reality of this text's existence is obscured. We are forced to rely on the paratexts and translations regardless. Deferring to the connections we might perceive in the English, we have noted the rhymed resonance in the first stanzas of Sampedrín's translation, "The Roost" (11), and Moure's original poem, "Prank/1:45" (15). There are further semblances as the poems progress. In the second stanza we have references to "the sewing factory" (E.S. 11) and "a textile factory" (E.M. 15). In the third, we have "my boot" (E.S. 11), a "tunnel" in both, and finally: "And the sky is a roost / for birds" (E.S. 11), "And the sky – a car crash" (E.M. 15). Avasilichioaei notes that "a car crash means a roost for birds" (15). This footnote does not clarify whether this is a function of the Romanian language and its multiple meanings or some extra-logical English sense.

Additional versions and transformations proceed in the sequence, "Prank!", but underneath the final poem we read a footnoted utterance: the "sole poem worth reading in the original appears to be this one, a gaming lesson, by Oana Avasilichioaei" (20). The poem itself has no title, none of the usual indicators we have come to expect. It opens with "I inverted it", and "The crashing sky my roost" (20). The second stanza is numbered three, true to the inversion articulated. It reads: "Language of translation / roots in the factory textiling text" (20). Resonances back to the 'original' begin to take on a higher order significance— "textiling text" as raw material, or innate textual function, is questioned. What might it mean to use 'textile' as a verb? The definition of textile is: "That has been or may be woven. Also,

of or pertaining to a man-made fibre or filament, not necessarily woven" ("Textile, Adj. and n." *OED*). It is to do with weaving but not limited to it, a "man-made fibre or filament". The notion of intersecting filaments is perhaps a useful image in considering the textual surface, touching against languages we cannot understand. How these connections are structured and attenuated across the work as a whole illuminates the conceptual work of the contradiction— that which is defined by its weavable nature but is not necessarily woven.

The poem closes on the note: 1 "Are we game?" (20), a subtle shift in font size. This opening series is working itself out, forcing the reader into a "workout" as Briggs put it, of the question of the distinction and possibilities of the 'original'. Avasilichioaei's final 'original' is framed as the poem "worth" reading. Who voices this, we do not know. The malleable and subjective seeps into the framing and project of the book. We have encountered that Avasilichioaei "admits, when pressed, that a translation is an original" (16). In this instant we see the rules of the game we thought we were playing change, rejected or reconfigured— and the new rules are not clearly laid out.

An unknown force in the game is the translator with no linguistic knowledge, figured by Sampedrín. The rules by which the translation is generated, and by which we might read the singular poem-part in relation to the collection as a whole, are constantly reconceived. The next sequence we encounter is titled, "Broken Leg: A Reader / *Attempts at translating the act of translation*" (21). To translate the act of translation suggests a process of a different order, a translation not about the specifics of an embedded instance, but the extrication of that process from those specifics. This would appear to be independent of linguistic knowledge. How such a process might be practically performed, however, is more complicated. A possible methodology is exposed, or presented to us, in the form of a list of attempts, beginning with: "*Attempt 1* / create a hinge" (23). It is important that these lines are designated only as attempts, with no suggestion as to their success or failure. On a surface level we observe the hinge operating via visual, linguistic, and sonic resonances between words, in conjunction with a translator's subjective knowledge basis. De la Torre outlines similar methodologies in her essay, "Like in Valencia: On Translating Equivalence", listing: cognates, correctly recognised terms, shared phonetic sequence, loosely homophonic terms, and false friends as possible ways of attempting to translate the unfamiliar (312).

We observe this hinge operating on a surface level in Stănescu's "Spargere" (24), read against Sampedrín's translation on the next page, "With a Broken Leg" (25). The first two lines of each read as follows,

Înlăuntrul, meu coajă de var de ou,

stăteam pe întuneric (N.S. 24)

Indefatiguable, my courage to see from wherever,

the state of my foot impecunious (E.S. 25)

Without knowing the language (and perhaps because of this ignorance we are able to look at the surface features in this way), we observe and hear word-for-word resemblances across the lines: such as, "Înlăuntrul" and "Indefatiguable", "meu coajă" and "my courage", my cognate of the French "ou" and "wherever". The content of the poem reads like an authorial intent: "to see from wherever". Meanwhile, the strange sense of an 'impecunious foot' suggests a false friend in relation to "întuneric". The role of this reappearing foot is uncertain. The tightness of a near word-for-word translation seems to decompress and take on its own shape as the work progresses. For instance, the final lines read: "decât cerul albastru" (N.S. 24); and "chalk fallen from the serious cast of plaster" (E.S. 25). There are evident word-associations— "albastru", or 'alabaster', to "chalk" and "plaster". The two words, "decât cerul", gives a sense of falling from something—'descend', perhaps via my own associations with the French 'ciel' or Latin 'caerulum'—and there is a semi-homophonic resonance between "cerul" and "serious", rushed together like a child's half-pronunciation. And yet, extra words gather in Sampedrín's version that appear to have no correspondent. Occasionally, these are transparent insertions of unknown origin, "(i need it)" and "(i become)" (25). If we were to believe the poem to be a linguistically knowledgeable translation (i.e. that Sampedrín understands the source language and is making a faithful attempt at translating it) we might consider a difference between the languages themselves—a natural compression in the Romanian that takes more English to capture. Without this premise, or with the direct evidence of Sampedrín's unfamiliarity with the source language, it is unclear where this additional language comes from. We might read translational drifts or additions as indicative of a separate subjective handling, traces of the process of translation itself. How we read unfamiliar surfaces, on their own terms, might proceed in the same way with what knowledge we do have.

These attempts to create 'hinges' between languages, independent of understanding, are explicitly connected to the authors' attempts to not overwrite the source languages. As

Susan Sontag states in her St. Jerome Lecture on Literary Translation: "Choices that might be thought of as merely linguistic always imply ethical standards as well" ("The World as India"). Polizzotti elaborates on this in a way that specifically connects translation and its negative capacities for appropriation: "Translation becomes both the bridge linking civilizations and a measure—even an aggravator—of the gulf separating them" (57).

> *Attempt 5*
> enter foreign and indigenous
> exit indigenous and foreign (23)

From "Attempt 5" we see the translation of translation emerge as an inversion, or re-ordering, but we still do not have access to the content. This is intentional. The recognition of not understanding, and not accommodating that, seems vital to the work's ethical impetus.

The inversion of "Attempt 5" appears as a way of exploring a relation, independent of its parts, but recombining them to build further difference. In the poem, "Deluge" (30), in the same series, the sense of sound itself is captured and recapitulated. Avasilichioaei is "transleaping from the English of O.A. with the soldier of N.S." (30). The 'transleap', in Avasilichioaei and Moure's use of it, recognises some form of translation occurring, but places a distance between itself and the source. The starting point is Avasilichioaei's English (an individual poem is not specified) and the outcome is also in English. "Deluge" is written "with the soldier of N.S." and might be read depending on how we interpreted him in "Spargere" (24). Our understanding of this figure is already mediated by Sampedrín's 'translation', "With a Broken Leg" (25). This poem, and the figure within it, have been connected to the role of the translator. The way in which we read the poem, therefore, responds to that initial translation and is about it. "Deluge" opens as follows,

> The ohs of the country, natively seized,
> were bottled, paraded,
> then given the boot. (30)

But also, "Soldiers witnessed, were *oh*ed", they are "gathering in the middle of the square" (30). There is something exposing about this last line in the stanza. Language is weaponised, what was taken is sent back, mangled and terrifying. The final lines read,

> OIL THE HINGES!!!!
> REVOLVER THE BARRICADES!!!!
> REVOLVER THE BARRICADES!!!! (30)

The incoherent phrasing and urgency of visual expression rattle the reader. Thinking about the 'hinge' as the locus of incoherence against which our reading falters and finds new routes to meaning, we see the exacerbation of its slipperiness as intentional within *Expeditions*. The 'revolver' as a weapon, defamiliarised in conjunction with a moveable object (perhaps, 'that which revolves'), is brought up against a protective impediment, the 'barricade', twice. The barricade as an object behind which we cannot see, through the revolution or rotation of familiarity, introduces an explicit mechanism for concealment.

From this section onwards, the designations of translator, original, and translation slowly slip away. For instance, in the section titled "Anatomy of Temperature" (55-62), the line beneath the poem, "Diving into Life" (58), in which the author and translator were usually clarified, reads, "(trans. from __'s Română by __)". Although these designations were never perhaps reliable, the transparent censoring of this information feels different. Below each poem, in the space the footnote used to occupy, we encounter a series of postscripts. The one beneath "Diving into Life" reads,

> PS (inconsistency)
>
> The season's denouement unwittingly made her entrance as my enemy. I battled the clocks with disheveled hair, infuriated by the steady constancy of the act, present in every act, of translation. To take a bodily feeling, a sensation of aliveness, a quickness in the air, the noise of a smell, and set it down in words is to translate. From being to words. No equivalency.
>
> (In copying the above paragraph you will mistranslate what I mean to say.) (58)

The unknown author(s) of this postscript is directly taking up the discrepant objects of the "airborne original" and "earthbound thing" (Polizzotti 111). The resulting inconsistency is a product of a second-order process, an interpretation of an original, and a translation of its effects "in a language and culture not the author's own" (Polizzotti 53). These distances reflect the different subjectivities behind them, like in the final parenthesis "In copying the above paragraph"—as I have done here—"you will mistranslate what I mean to say". But copying is not translating (we wonder). Against a premise of failure or impossibility, we see a reconfiguration of the rules governing translation. Other subjectivities are welcomed in, and in knowing it will be 'wrong' regardless, the idea of it being anything else is uncoupled from the process.

The last section of the work is titled, "Solvitur Ambulando / *Not solve it but be in it"* *G. Stein*" (79). The Latin title—which is concerned with something undesignated: "it is

solved" (-tur being passive) and the gerundive, "by walking"—contradicts Stein's quotation, to 'not solve it'. The pronoun, 'it', is never designated. Both processes of solving or not solving are rendered passive in these formulations: 'being in it', or 'being solved by walking'. This poem, on a long paper foldout in the book, has a different form to the others. Not clearly a translation, or limited to a single author, a range of possible translations and appropriations accrue, modified and uncertain ("From Italian (or was it Latin?)" (81)). The function of this undesignated, but ceaseless, 'it', figures across the poem: "The pacing? Pronoun who? 'The Latin conscience is complicit. Messenger. Fantasy. / Derision. Ache and symptom. What can be healed out of this adversity?'" (81). The shifts implicit in the process of translation are recognised and pinned down momentarily in the phrase "Vagrancy of translation" (81). Resolution is not attempted in *Expeditions*, 'healing' does not happen in relation to 'adversity' but outside of it. And yet the question of originality out of nothing is questioned. Within unattributed quotation marks in the text, we read: "The gypsy-singer boils cud, lang-weeds and snow, dislodges origin's status as mythic privation" (81). Like "lang-weeds and snow", the materials for transformation, language itself, might be anything.

Writing and reading as accumulative processes—writing the original out of nothing, or reading and attaining its meaning—are undermined across the work. Instead, the relations between variable kinds of origins are recognised: "Who can account for such growth? Words lead to other words. This is / beautiful or parasitic" (81). This revolves back to Sampedrín's position in the text. Early on, we read that Erín Moure "has examined these translations in light of Sampedrín's known history, and insists it is impossible that they be hers" (12). There is a double meaning here. Either, Moure denies that they are Sampedrín's words; or, Moure denies that Sampedrín's words are her, Moure's, own. The parasitism of origins and iterations resolves as the subject, a configuration that does not rely on logical possibility, but gives the subjective inconsistency space to grow.

2.2 *An Arranged Affair* – Sally Alatalo

soft as a kitten but as clinging as a vine (Alatalo 35)

Against the parasitism and subjective growth in Avasilichioaei and Moure's work, we observe a separate order of composition in Sally Alatalo's *An Arranged Affair* (2017). This work is a piecemeal, appropriated romance novel, indistinctly composed of separate sources. Through re-presentation in a singular form, Alatalo is able to map and reconfigure the convergences of a formulaic genre. As Todorov writes in *Genres in Discourse*, "It is because genres exist as an institution that they function as "horizons of expectation" for readers and as "models of writing" for authors" (18). The notion of genre as a "horizon" is a useful, non-finite image. It points to the effects of reading within the genre. As Genette describes, "readers read in function of the generic system", with which they are familiar through various means—the book distribution system, criticism, discourse, and so on—but, readers "do not need to be conscious of this system" (*Figures* 19). How the individual reader inhabits a singular work might mirror this situation of the genre more widely, where reading depends on a familiarity with certain structures, conventions, or clichés, but at a semi-remove from their direct observance.

In relation to the romance genre specifically, this plays out in contradictory ways. Lynne Pearce, in her Chapter "Popular Romance and Its Readers", writes, "what is most degenerate is also most *defining*" (521). There is an interdependent relationship here where what renders a genre recognisable—creates it—also undermines its value over time. It is through these defining features, or "deep structures" as Pearce calls them, that a genre as a whole persists and permutates, enabling its "endless reproduction" (522). The essential plot of the romance novel is roughly: "a chance/fateful meeting between two lovers, a series of obstacles (husband/geographical separation), and reunion" (523-4). Against this structure, the defining and degenerate characteristics include, for instance, "exotic locations (sixteenth-century Holland, Paris, Naples, London); [a] focus on the physical appearance of the heroine (in particular her ''simple'' but ''expensive'' clothing…)" (524). The unique reading demands recognition of the conventional deep structure, but is impelled forward by a shifting material surface of difference. This separation of action from scene enacts a contradictory demand: the reader must read each feature of a singular text as "extraordinary and unique despite the fact it is also (necessarily) 'typical'" (524).

It is from this premise of degeneracy, but implicit structural congruence, that Alatalo's project evolves. An artist, writer, and publisher (Sara Ranchouse Publishing), Alatalo has a particular leaning towards pulp genres. Her interest here, however, is conceptual. Alatalo frames her practice as a form of "recycling": "There is a lot of language out there that it is not terribly interesting, but it can be used to generate different ideas" (Bodman et al. 63). This is like an echo of Huebler's 1969 statement, "the world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more" (Barry et al. 15). As such, Alatalo is working with the genre at a remove. This apartness might be suggested by her title. While *An Arranged Affair* presents as a unified, singular object, more so perhaps than the internal multiplicity of *Expeditions of a Chimæra*, the title suggests a vital incoherence in relation to the genre. The conventionally romantic 'affair' is already 'arranged', undermining the assumption of its spontaneous and illicit nature, or unfixed course. Alternately, the title might represent a confusing counterpoint to the nature and expectations of a culturally arranged marriage. The result seems to produce a merging of the two states—a culturally encoded, unspontaneous structure that is expected to be received as singular.

Content unavailable. See source, https://i.gr-assets.com/images/S/compressed.photo.goodreads.com/books/1328512856l/3215030.jpg.

Fig. 5. Book jacket, *The Only One* by Penny Jordan, 1985.
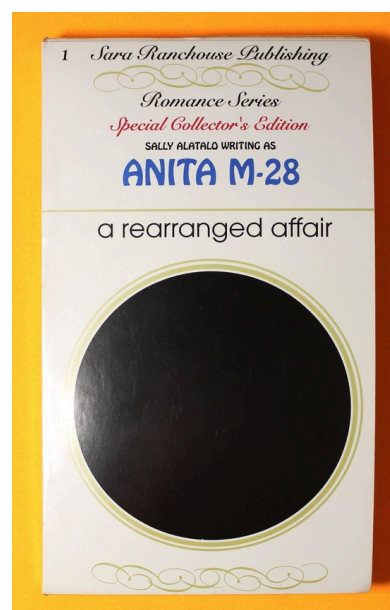

Fig. 6

An Arranged Affair is a response to a project Alatalo began in 1996 titled, *A Rearranged Affair,* and published by Sara Ranchouse Publishing under the pseudonym Anita M-28. For this earlier work, she took 188 paperback romance novels, all of approximately the same length (188 pages) and physical dimensions, took them apart, and then reassembled them with a leaf (two pages recto/verso) from each book, maintaining a linear page order. This resulted in an edition of different texts, connected by source, and presented under a singular title—*A Rearranged Affair*. As Alatalo observes in an interview, "They're actually

quite coherent, despite the fact that the characters change" (Bodman et al. 63). Each work in the edition maintained the material, graphic, and paratextual differences of its original sources, rebound in a uniform jacket (fig. 7). Only the slightly roughed and discordantly coloured paper edges gave an indication of their various composition from the outside. As to the text within, the recombinations were not performed with attention to sense. As Hannah B. Higgins writes, "These composite objects were assembled without regard to whether the fit worked perfectly as a sentence-by-sentence narrative, the point being that the generalizable content inherent in the genre would tend toward a certain comprehensibility" (x). Thus, the works pose a strange connection to each other—made up of the same sources, differently assembled, they map various possibilities of generic reconfiguration from a fixed set of materials.
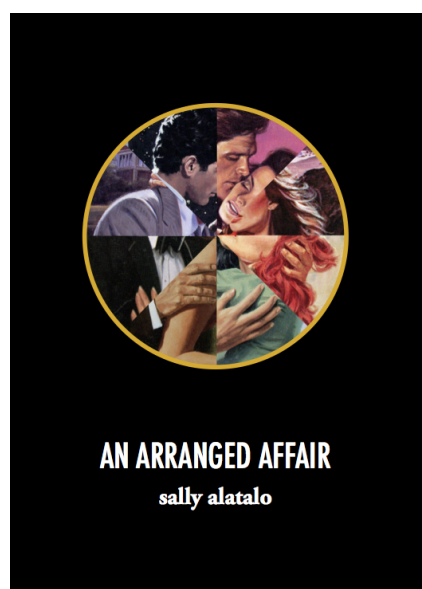
Fig. 7

In 2017, Alatalo reworked this model to create *An Arranged Affair*. Starting with a similar process, Alatalo instead selected one single-sided page from 188 source novels, again maintaining their original page order, and retyped them. The different physical formatting and dimensions of *An Arranged Affair* means that the pages of the original texts do not align with Alatalo's new pagination. As Higgins observes, "The voice changes more quickly than in the first collated version, even as the pattern of sameness across multiple volumes allows for, say, a party scene to be stretched across several pages" (xi). This faster pace is a result of the shift from two pages in *A Rearranged Affair* to one in *An Arranged Affair* and, along with the selection process and reformatting, creates ambiguity in the transition between sources. As Alatalo wrote via email, "I was very strict about my constraint to use one page exactly from each of the original books, and to keep seeking the right page to make the narrative

reasonably coherent" ("Re: Arranged"). Thus, while the linguistic surface aims towards coherence, the causal flow of the work as a whole is unclear. We are forced to sit with uncertainty, and often, this is a state that cannot be definitively resolved via the text alone. The process of reading becomes increasingly fixated on paring apart original, or 'real', sections of text, from Alatalo's interventions. As a result, our perceptions of authenticity become skewed. When Higgins states that "[t]he selection process deepens a sense of pattern within the genre" (xi), it is not clear whether this is the case. Whether these patterns are pre-existing, or fabricated through particular selection, seamlessly but disconcertingly joined together, appears to be the unresolved conceptual point of the work.

Alatalo foregrounds the contradictory situation of singular uniqueness and generic recognisability in her selection of an opening for *An Arranged Affair*. The familiar character stereotype is set against a troubling superfluity. The scene is a costume ball, Paige "frowned behind the anonymity of her delicate silver mask" (1): "There was, indeed, an over-abundance of Romeos, and from this distance they all looked very much alike. Still Alan was special. He was the man she was engaged to marry. She'd be able to pick him out from all the rest" (2). The character cannot in fact spot him. Like Paige, the reader is constantly repositioned according to a repeated assumption that the protagonist is immediately and undoubtedly recognisable. While this section of source text is unaltered, its selection foreshadows following effects. In Alatalo's text, eventual recognitions are not allowed to play out. Instead, we are constantly positioned in ways that assume familiarity, but have no preceding textual basis. As such, we start to read in different ways. Where individual characters used to be the points of focus and threads of continuity through the text, our attention shifts to tracking Alatalo's manipulations.

In this way, incoherence becomes the relation signalling conscious arrangement and alternative effects. Although Alatalo's melding of scenes maintains grammatical cohesion relatively consistently, obviously strange formulations alter our reading. Expressions such as, "But sleep was at a premium lately, juicy pineapple" (177), clearly demarcate divided origins. In another instance, a shift between sources is discernible, but produces an additional effect: "There was no way she was going to let these two jet-setters down into her green eyes and they exchanged an intimate, laughing look" (15). The idea of letting people "down" into a pair of eyes is illogical, but paralleled with a similar expression, a figurative "look", there is a certain mystical logic. Coupled with "laughing", this seems to be the intended effect. In terms of eyes once again, and as our reading becomes more attuned to weird expression, we

encounter another order of incoherence: "For a second he looked into her dark eyes, seeing her resentment and ignoring it, threat at the back of his gaze and then he turned away impatiently" (27). In this phrase, we might interpret a disjunction between sources at the point before "threat at the back of his gaze"—the shift in pace and the idea of such an emotion not only being visible within a look, but specifically situated within it, seems unnatural. But then there is the possibility that this is simply clunky writing and we are reading into something that is not there.

A lot of the time, there is no clear grammatical indication of these transitions. Instead, names and pronouns become entities of recognition and confusion. Names represent surety in our judgements of re-combination, but the spacing of pronouns within the texts, or Alatalo's composition of them, allows for gaps of uncertainty to ensue. As a result, our conventional reading habits lead us to assume sameness beyond its actual bounds. Disconcerting encounters seem to occur between characters of the same and separate texts. We see this effect in a section that continues from the work's opening scene. An aunt Jane is introduced, suspended between separate scenes: "His back was to her now, but Paige was the reason Jane had never married, although Jane assured her it wasn't" (2). Jane is asked if she has a date, "Her aunt shrugged. 'Robin said he might call round. …'", then "Lauri heaved an inward sigh of relief" at the prospect of having to "keep Robin Harley entertained while they waited for Jane to come home" (2). Although the shift in the sentence involving Paige and Jane is almost imperceptible, the strange change of subject away from the obvious point of focus—'*his* back'—signals that something is not quite right. Lauri's appearance after Jane, and then subsequent to a reference to Jane, confirms the shift in source. The encounter between Paige and Jane occurs only at the seams of separate texts, and Lauri has been the invisible protagonist for longer than we realised.

Where names are omitted and pronouns are mysterious, the physical appearance of characters becomes another register for observing the transition between between sources. The genre's preoccupation with dress is materially re-enacted by Alatalo such that similarities and discrepancies confuse our perceptions of continuous identity. Described textures are often indicative of mood. Shifting melancholy scenes are united, and betrayed, by subtle differences in dress: "silver chiffon swooped modestly low" (84), and the "soft muslin skirt at her hip" (85). Both gently tip towards revelation, while the conjoining of scenes creates a murkiness of perception to the same effect. The "smoke gray" (84) of one set of eyes, against the warm "violet eyes" (85) of the other, definitively lay this imaginative merging to rest. Clothes

become points of focus, deflecting thought from the unspeakable and irreconcilable. For Glenna, "Makeup and a floral, silk shirtwaist bolstered her spirits" (19). But over the page, Alison "sulkily" admits that her clothes are the cause of her upset: "'What's wrong with your dress?' It seems to me like any other dress" (20). To which Alison responds, "Well, no one else seems to think so. They think it's like a—a nightdress'" (20). The inverse perceptions, "like any other dress" and "no one else seems to think so", reflect two distinct, non-unifiable perspectives. Within a simple detail, we might observe gulfs dividing gender or class. In this way, the clothed surface that is significant to the source texts becomes important in our reading too, as a means of identifying the continuity of identities in the first place.

As the narrative progresses, these clothed façades become less composed. Whether these situations are conventional to the denouement of plot, or more noticeable in Alatalo's repositioning, is unclear. And yet, there is an especially precarious feeling in Alatalo's version. This is perhaps because our reading has come to rely on the elucidation offered by superficial detail. Clothing used as a locating device and tonal indicator is subtly unhinged, as is the connection between reality and subjective perception: "now they looked at her with a kind of curious fascination, making Romily feel as if her mascara was smudged or her dress was falling off or something" (138). We do not have access to what change has taken place— whether it is in the other characters or Romily herself. Uncertainty is displaced onto the visual, a tangible object of excuse—the female appearance (falling apart). Where this confusion would likely have been resolved in the source story, its dislocation from context heightens the instability of perception here. At times it feels like the characters too have forgotten who they are in the midst of all the costume changes: "Her image in the bedroom mirror startled her as she went in to pick up her wrap" (151-152). Nothing is recognisably amiss in her dress, but the character's recognition of self also appears to falter in Alatalo's altered prose.

A separation of represented surface from causal structure is similarly observable through setting. On an initial level, this is performed by the source authors whose use of exotic locations is a long-established romantic cliché. As Pearce describes, "'foreign lands' are one of the strategic means by which the subject thinks or wills herself into an alternative future" (531), and at the same time, it is this difference in location that "is often the *only* significant variable in the texts concerned" (531). In Alatalo's composition, the generic arbitrariness of backdrop is exaggerated through multiplication—arranging many distant settings in a quick succession of pages. The romance settings of France, Venice and Spain, in

particular, are repeatedly invoked. "She took a deep, satisfying breath, savouring the clear air and what it was about France that appealed to her so" (7). But, over the page, a "young *sirvienta* looked at her gravely and told her that her presence was requested in the *sala*" (8). The effect is comical but constructed in a way that feels almost accidental. The idea of compositional mistake, however, is negated by eerie parallels between the scenes. In France, they stand on "the famous curved horseshoe staircase" (7), and in the Spanish setting, she pauses "to glance over the ornate balustrade and experience appreciation of the superb sweep down to the great gilded and frescoed hall below" (9). A sense of perceptual déjà-vu occurs. The motion just gone is re-enacted, like a glitch in narrative linearity.

These superficial discontinuities take on another dimension when viewed in light of Alatalo's mode of intervention. A strange lack of integration is already observable in the source material. This performs an effect in line with Ernst Bloch's observation of the tourist: "Because the wishful image remains uneducated, it does not penetrate properly into what soberly exists" (371). The possibility that this "uneducated" perspective might be represented in self-aware ways in the source texts is brought into a confused relation with Alatalo's re-representation. For instance,

> […] they chose to be transported into Disneyworld by the monorail instead of the paddlesteamer. The monorail went straight through the middle of a hotel, through the dining-room in fact, something Vicki found highly amusing. It was rather strange to be going through a room that contained people eating a meal, although the diners seemed to take the appearance of the monorail for granted. (103)

Where we have come to read strangeness like this as an indication of manipulation, this intact scene disrupts these new expectations. On an initial level, we see a parodic re-enactment of the genre's use of setting, the meeting point of the conventional and the exotic, and the lack of self-awareness (real or pretended) that accompanies the disjunction. But coupled with the idea of Alatalo's process, mirroring the interjecting monorail, this scene takes on another aspect. Alatalo's methodology extra-logically merges with the original content. If we look on at this scene from a distance, we see that it parallels the relation between the reader within the genre and the reader outside of it. As readers of Alatalo's work, we are mere tourists, looking for strangeness as an indication of process, we instead observe the 'authentic' content as something "highly amusing". To the reader within the genre, engaging with its dynamics directly, the strangeness of this scene does not signal anything beyond it, the scene is 'taken

for granted'. The locus of conceptual work is suspended between the possibility of the original author's generic knowingness or Alatalo's reframed manufacture of it.

Where scenes like this blur authenticity and reconstruction, our readings attain a paranoid aspect. This is particularly apparent in relation to descriptive excesses. Where disjunction in the text is supposed to allow a clear separation of scenes, at times their textures extend incoherence beyond this explicit break point. For example: "'Fair enough,' Bruce said, and Linda gave in gracefully and smiled meltingly at Bart, floating in the alabaster bowl of the fountain that filled the air with its cool water music. Clumps of flowers mingled their scents, and the white kitten with the black tail dashed back and forth across the tiles in pursuit of the green lizards" (113). It seems relatively clear that there is disjunction at the comma in "Bart, floating", but rather than the sense reverting from this bizarre conjoined image to something more natural, the detail only becomes more ridiculous. The flowers and their scents pervading the scene are traversed by an implausibly coloured kitten, introduced as "the", as though it plays a larger role in the narrative. The female character is encoded by this setting to an absurd degree: "'I was born here and I am so accustomed to the place that I don't truly notice how unusual and picturesque the casa must seem to a stranger—one who takes the trouble to notice the house as a classic example of Latin-Moresque architecture…'" (113-114). The explicit naivety of her words seems to mirror an awareness of the genre's clichéd construction. As a character, she is unimaginable outside the genre's aesthetic boundaries. The effect of the discourse, however, feels complicit with the design of the narrative. The subtleties of mirroring between character and setting, part and whole, approach almost a parodic register. How this is read, authentically or in light of Alatalo's project, is left open. It suggests a potential knowingness latent in generic production but also tips towards a potential disorder that cannot be allowed to play out in full while remaining within the genre's own bounds.

Alatalo's reconfiguration of existing material allows their intrinsic dynamics to be set in productive exchange. In contrast to the cues offered by exposed material transitions in *A Rearranged Affair*, represented materiality in *An Arranged Affair* becomes a means of exploring these issues conceptually. This occurs specifically via recourse to aspects of the genre's degeneracy: particularly, in terms of appearance and setting. The effect en masse of Alatalo's material arrangement of scenes might be conceived as a tapestry—its potential is connected to a realm of female material work, reconsidered:

Cavan poured himself a whisky and sat beside her, watching her matching colours and discarding patterns.

'That's nice,' he remarked absently, reaching out for Bethany's favourite material. It was Venetian and cost a small fortune a metre, but she was determined to have it for the main bedroom suite, and would economise elsewhere.

She slapped his hand away. 'Don't move it,' she said curtly. 'I'm trying to see if the blue goes with it.' (122-123)

The seriousness of the task is undermined by this male figure's disinterest and curtailed by the economics of the situation. In fact, we might picture Alatalo at work, piecing her segments together "matching colours and discarding patterns" until something quite right is reached. How these tones and textures work in relation to each other is of conscious composition, the trivial rendered a crucial register for its discernment.

Alatalo's decisions of where to cut and suture and what to leave intact have surprising power. There are moments when perspectives are asserted aggressively and deflatingly in their original forms, and clothes serve as significant proxies for gendered criticism: "Alex could see nothing feminine in her appearance at all, or in the girl dressed in white who accompanied her. Her white clown's face did not amuse him, and his expression tightened as he intercepted an admiring glance cast in his own direction" (53). The open misogyny of this scene is seemingly provoked by a woman's attire, the "clown's face did not amuse him". Humour is inverted against the character's anger. This is not a conjunction of sources, for the same character name continues down the page. And as a result, there is no morphing transition to subdue the objectionable depiction. In contrast, Alatalo comes to the rescue of female heroines, "Bethany blushed", her dialogue is stammering, but then there is a shift made explicit through grammatical incoherence, "she named her towards him" (58). From here, the blush is transformed: "confident that she looked feminine yet businesslike in a green and gold Max Liberati wool suit" (58). Alatalo has the ability to unwind demeaning encounters like loose threads and transfigure something new: "'Er—your—your coffee's ready,' she stammered, half gold, and deftly swept it up into a chignon on top of her proud head" (66). The power imbalance is unwritten, her stammering turned into loose threads, "half gold", to be swept back from her face.

The process of second-order composition is capable of effects inaccessible to conventional modes. Against the material surface of setting, characters are able to unpeel and

act autonomously—or so it seems. "The taxi drew up outside her apartment and she paid the couple of bottles of wine, opened them and walked back into the main lounge, filling up people's glasses as he went" (137). Alcohol comically becomes an interchangeable currency connecting the two scenes. The transition is fluid, as though it might be perfectly natural to pay a taxi driver the expected "couple of bottles of wine". The gender shift is almost imperceptible, carried along in the momentum of the single sentence. The conjunction of scenes strangely brings these recurrent details, money and alcohol, into a logically confused, but evocative, relation. Other times, these transitions indirectly structure metaphysical effects. From the "archway" of an interior we read, "In the next instant he propelled himself forward, a few lithe strides bringing him face to face with the painting. He shook his head as if in disbelief, then after several moments he opened, merely gave her a derisive look and strapped himself into his seat again" (13). The scene is that of an aeroplane, "Storm hadn't even realised that Taruna had come into sight […]. A lush green island of forest and palm trees, …" (13). The painting in question is titled "*Lost Dreams*", a portal from the "house that tractors built" (11) to a distant, dream-like exoticism.

Our awareness of Alatalo's process behind these transitions moves us outside of the romance genre's limits and into an experience of unfixed possibilities, or impossibility. The mode of transition is able to extend the content it represents towards self-reflection. But this reflection is always deferred in respect to a different source author behind it. As such, the effects of Alatalo's text remain hard to pin down. We see this in an interrupted visual representation that is then deconstructed by the machinery of its own production: "Stacey enjoyed the closeness of the demanding landscape. Gone was the overcrowdedness, the smog, and the endless, the serial. The heroine's down with jaundice so we've had to write her out of the script and bring in a cousin from Australia! ...'" (136). The speaker elaborates, "That action will lead to all sorts of complications. I needn't tell you what—they're easy enough to guess!" (136). The contrasting emotions connected to landscape, and tellingly, "the serial", is juxtaposed with the scriptwriter's dialogue. In fact, the two—Stacey's thoughts and Pat's speech—are merged in the un-opened quotation marks of the scriptwriter's discourse. The thoughts of landscape are seemingly absorbed into the pitch, part of a story trajectory that is "easy enough to guess". These kinds of transitions are extensions of the escapist idealism of the romance genre, perpetuated within the text's singular form. The assertion of predictability pinpoints Alatalo's difference in working with the genre: her work is the very opposite of predictable—it complicates the reception of the defining and degenerate.

An Arranged Affair allows room for the inversion of what is considered 'bad' in relation to the genre, and we begin to realise the significance of such work in opposition to perceptions of romance's 'lightness'. One particularly charged dimension is the depiction of gender imbalances and, in particular, the surprising amount of violence towards women in the text. These reframed depictions extend the work of the text beyond mere puzzle to an ethical re-writing of the genre's problematics. Alatalo is able to alter the outcome of certain events, and yet, the question of how they originally existed lingers. For example, "Kerry was backing away apologetically when a long muscular arm shot out and steely fingers gripped her wrist. She was jerked into the room and the door was closed behind her in a simultaneous action …" (100). Inverse movements create a resolute closing of this scene. In contrast to the passive shifting of the female heroine—and her visible reaction: "Kerry paled visibly" (101)—the scene is closed actively: "Karen paused by the door. 'What else?' she asked, and going out she drew the door to behind her" (101). Similarly, separated across a couple of pages, we read as though a continuous storyline and justifiable logic: "He reached out and caught a wrist, captured the other and forced them behind her, putting them both into one of his hand. He pulled her" (164). And then, "His fingers were digging into her wrist. She said tightly, 'If I pushed you into the sea, do you think they'd call it justifiable homicide?'" (168). Recontextualised without causal explanation, the seemingly connected violence is disconcerting. And yet, what might be justified or explained away in its source context is allowed to plainly stand out in dislocation.

One way these gender imbalances are reworked directly, and meta-textually, is through frequent reference to writer and reader figures. These references become a route of either drawing out or constructing generic self-awareness and shifting autonomy. A scene near the beginning of the work pans out as follows:

'I have a confession to make—I have only read a few of your books.'

'Murder stories and political thrillers aren't everyone's idea of an entertaining read.'

'Oh, I did enjoy them,' Cathy told him sincerely. 'It's just that I don't get much time for reading, so I tend to choose light novels.'

'Let me guess … romance?'

She shrugged. 'Yes, I like romantic fiction. *Pride and Prejudice* is one of my favourite books.' (38-39)

While the gendering of the assumption is clear, its implications are dissonant. First, Cathy admits that she tends to "choose light novels", and this is assumed by the writer, Pearce, to mean romance. But the assumption is complicated by Cathy's response—her shrug conveys a nonchalance that could communicate antipathy to the assumption, while affirming it, or admits only that "romantic fiction" is one of many genres that she perceives as light. These perceptions are then inverted entirely by Cathy's reference to *Pride and Prejudice*, a canonical and complex work by a female author, as one of her "favourite books". Whether this example corresponds to the romance genre as a 'light novel' or excludes it from the necessity of this relationship remains unclear. Intertextual references, moreover, reveal that the content of female readerly interest is anything but light. In a later passage, an unattributable heroine—a Lara or a Rachael, seemingly between two scenes unceremoniously compounded—observes her own position: "She felt like a character in Shakespearian tragedy, where everything marched on until the plot culminated in mayhem" (153). The reference is pertinent to Alatalo's work. We are in a tragedy not a romance, numerous characters are evoked and then discarded like a final bloodbath—and its structural reckoning, "mayhem".

In sharp contrast to generic expectation, the male writer figure, accorded with much seriousness in the beginning, is slowly demeaned in his mediated representation. The author is set up as a creative genius, outside the norms of everyday life: "Dare she go and disturb him? He might be working. Writers weren't like ordinary people; they worked at odd times of the day and night" (52). Significantly, Alatalo's abrupt transitions between texts draw attention to a different dimension of the writer's representation. The house in which the author is working is just previously described as "not a particularly large dwelling by any standards and there was a neglected look about it" (52). But as the sentence above continues, we read, "they worked at odd times of the day and night, enormous foyer, shedding their coats in the downstairs cloakroom, and mounting the shallow carpeted staircase to the first floor" (52). Both scenes are concerned with entrances. The difference between exterior and interior views is conjoined, suggesting some insecurity in the author's position. It is as though the female onlooker is projecting a preferred alternative view to the exterior before her. Dissatisfaction with the figure of the male writer becomes explicit a few pages later: "he began to talk, and it was all about his work, Adrienne tried to introduce other subjects, but he plainly was not interested" (54). His disinterest is subtly modified in the following lines: "his writing was all-

important, and he was not only unwilling but apparently unable to talk about anything else"
(55). The author's preoccupation with his own writing is displaced by Adrienne's perception
that he is "unable" to talk about other things—an emptiness resting behind a superior self-
regard.

Soon after, we realise it is the female who is in a position of authority: "She tried, in
her unskilled, innocent way to help him show his feelings for her" (55). This unexpected
inarticulateness is later developed in an eerily similar, yet separate, scene: "What is it, Devan,
have you come to see your writing as the equivalent of your own worth? Sure, you're good,
you're possibly great. Who cares?" (123). There are no clues to discern a transition either
before or following this statement, and so we do not know if it is original or constructed.
What is clear, however, is Alatalo's displacement of these utterances from their source texts
allows them to be read outside the genre's usual limits—in relation to predictable structures,
but against the necessary linearity of their rules. The passage continues over the page, "So
what if Hotel Lancier was in Rue Lepic—a quiet backwater flanked by imposing buildings of
light greyish stone. Its broad, flagged pavements and cobble-stoned square were shaded by
dusty lime trees" (124). Introduced with 'so what', the statement appears to continue the
preceding line of questioning. But as we slip away from meaning, the forceful irreverence
loses power. Disagreement is displaced by an empty scene, subjectively representing an
alternative resolution.

These spaces of unexpected between-ness—or incoherence—allow a new register of
symbolism to be generated. Like the transition from an argument to a cobble-stoned square,
we see that incoherence can structure its own representational logic. We observe this
alternative logic in one of the most discordant images of *An Arranged Affair*: "She looked up
at the massive chandelier where hundreds of crystal prisms surrounded a gold pineapple, the
symbol of hospitality, and said thoughtfully, heart was in her mouth" (12). It is not exactly
clear where the textual join takes place. The nature of the prisms surrounding a "gold
pineapple", and its symbolism, would be the most likely place of disjunction. But the
disjunction seems multiple—a chandelier with a pineapple at its centre, or a pineapple as a
symbol of hospitality. What is most disconcerting is these sections are grammatical. Instead,
the point, "and said thoughtfully, heart was in her mouth", surprises us with its clear
disjunction. While at least the bizarre relations between objects and symbols work
syntactically, the truncated "heart was in her mouth" seems evidently compounded. The

ellipsis of whose "heart" is in "her mouth" becomes foreboding—a visceral image of something lurking beneath the surface.

The potential of these reconstructions is ultimately significant considering the ending of the romance novel. We observe a sense of anxiety towards the close of Alatalo's text, a rush of explanations proceed, filling in the gaps heretofore left gaping. The content revolves around rings, "that sparkler" (182), but specifically in this collated view, the ring that is taken off—"Wrenching the ring off her finger, she flung it" (184). As Pearce describes in her conclusion, "even in the most conventional and uncritical popular romantic fiction there is no attempt to disguise the fact that the resolution of the story in terms of its deep structures is also part of a socio-economic contract with quite other fulfillments – and demands" (534). Alatalo seems to evade this fulfilment to the greatest extent possible with her selective foregrounding of female resistance to conventional closure. Above all, in the midst of confused strings of revelation, strangeness of construction is foregrounded:

> 'To think her image better. And when I had to invent a reason, off the top of my head, for my need for the engagement fiction to continue, I came up with the idea of a persistently clinging female I wanted rid of and, pushed into a corner, came up with the only "unused" name I could think of on the spur of the moment—Sandy. And the reason her childhood name presented itself must have stemmed from the fact that I've been having trouble with her for the past twelve months.' (185)

The "clinging female" is reimagined as something creepy, incoherent, but with agency. She sets the closing decidedly askew in relation to an alternate individual, or perhaps authorial, concern.

Overall, textual incoherence serves as a means of examining the ephemeral forces of genre from within—rendering something unusual out of the most conventional, degenerate materials. An ultimate incoherence persists in the unknown intentionality of original authors against Alatalo's selective montage of their work. How we read, and misread, does not follow a predictable course, instead, we are forced to sit with the experience of contradictory possibilities. Mirroring a thought, and its self-denying structure, of a character from the text: "Reality and illusion were blurred in her mind now. She could not sort truth from fact" (179).

3. Mirror Ends: Incoherence outside the Conceptual Text

While the texts in Chapter Two engage with literary precedents and the reconfiguring potential of conceptual practice within a contained form, this chapter examines two conceptual texts whose work complicates these limits. The texts are Mónica de la Torre's *The Happy End / All Welcome* and Hu Fang's *Garden of Mirrored Flowers*, translated by Melissa Lim. In each, we encounter unfixed appropriative merging, translation within and across forms (textual and material), and inter-/hypertextual references that redirect our reading away from the texts themselves. As a result, the 'real' in Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's reality model of naturalisation is brought directly up against the text, contradicting its very function as a model.

The 'end'—both as larger aim and outermost part of a work or conclusion—is examined directly in these texts. *The Happy End / All Welcome* is about unfinished endings and closes by pointing to de la Torre's next project: "The next one up is in made-up tongues" (114). *Garden of Mirrored Flowers* conceptually and linguistically maps onto a physical project outside of it, called "Mirrored Gardens". We read incoherence in this contradiction of containment, such as when Prince writes, "one of the characteristics of any story is that it must be a whole, an autonomous structure conveying, in some way, the impression that it is closed" (27). Against the imperceptible limits of each text, our perceptions of what is inside (constructed) or outside (real) become confused.

Presented with this uncertainty, we remain continually aware of our own (limited) potential to resolve or clarify the texts' parts. The means we have out our disposal—Google searches, dispersed (real) ephemera, textual references, etc.—invite our engagement, but at the same time, reveal a plurality of routes the individual must decide between. The unfixed course that results stands in opposition to ideals of linear reading and progressive understanding. What is harder is to allow unfixity to become part of our interpretations. By reorganising the separations and distance between sources, de la Torre and Hu force us to read differently. New relations emerge across divided spaces and systems—past, present, or potential—to structure new representational possibilities. And although these texts are not closed or autonomous, they suggest the use of incoherence in understanding what contemporary analysis can do—its necessarily open and reflective ends.

Fig. 8. Martin Kippenberger, *The Happy End of Franz Kafka's 'Amerika'*, 1994.

3.1 *The Happy End / All Welcome* – Mónica de la Torre

> but really it wasn't out of the question that he might be chosen for actual office work and might one day sit as an office worker at his desk and look out his open window with no worries for a while
>
> — Franz Kafka, *Amerika*

Like Karl Rossman's provisional concept of happy office work in Kafka's *Amerika*, Mónica de la Torre's collection of poems, *The Happy End / All Welcome* (2017), explores contradiction through unfixed perspectives. The work firstly occupies a convoluted position in relation to other objects. It is a response to an installation by German conceptual artist, Martin Kippenberger, titled *The Happy End of Franz Kafka's 'Amerika'* (fig. 8). Kippenberger's work is a response to a text, Kafka's unfinished *Der Verschollene* (published posthumously as *Amerika* in 1927)—a highly contested object of revision and translation.[15] These references are not the extent of de la Torre's chain of deferral, she appropriates from a range of sources, evoking, but not specifically clarifying, their appearances. The structure of the poems in *The Happy End / All Welcome* range from tables and interview transcripts, to 'ad copy' and partial inventories. As discrete poems, they do not always appear poetic, or self-contained. They offer up narrative units, sometimes linked between sections. But more than this, the poems' narrative-like aspect—the sense of causal connection between events—occurs across textual and real worlds. As suggested by title and form, the euphemistic 'Happy End' is de la Torre's subject, but it also opens out to a range of alternatives that do not coalesce into coherent final arrangement.

The unfixity of reference points within de la Torre's process begins with the nature of Kippenberger's work. First presented at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam in 1994, the work situates ~fifty arrangements of tables and chairs together on a green turf. The idiosyncratic pairings of objects suggest strange situations of encounter, most often two chairs facing one another, divided and slightly deflected by the placement of a table in between. Above all, the arrangements resemble job interview settings. The installation, as suggested in

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[15] Max Brod significantly edited the unfinished manuscript in 1927 prior to its publication that year as *Amerika* (Hofmann vii). Recent translations by Michael Hofmann (*Amerika: The Man Who Disappeared*, 1996) and Mark Harman (*Amerika: The Missing Person*, 2008) have attempted to restore the work to a closer representation of the unfinished manuscript, including in its title (Polizzotti 85).

its title, is concerned with the ending of Kafka's *Amerika*. Significantly, Kippenberger himself admits that he did not read the work in its entirety:

> In all honesty, one didn't finish reading the book Franz Kafka's *Amerika*, but there was in our circle of acquaintance one who did read it and informed me of the fact that for the first time, in a work by Franz Kafka, albeit unfinished, there was a Happy End in sight. (qtd. in Krystof 26).

Already a contested work—singular or whole—Kafka's *Amerika* is further mediated in the artist's view by someone else's reading and relaying of it.

Despite this gap in direct encounter, Kippenberger's installation deals with precisely *Amerika's* 'Happy End'. In this unfinished ending, Kafka's protagonist, Karl Rossmann, arrives at the 'Theatre of Oklahoma', a strange, open-air job fair, at which it is emphatically stated, "All welcome!" (trans. Hofmann 202). The purpose of the mass recruitment drive is never articulated, but a breadth of possible roles is suggested by the sheer magnitude of the operation. A sense of this scale is explored in Kippenberger's installation, expanded on by the diversity of material objects. The objects themselves are of disparate sources and design eras, or as Doris Krystof describes, "Kippenberger resorted to a tactic, well known to him and so aptly described by Derrida as 'thieving by the wayside'" (27). The work includes "items from the repository of the museum's applied arts department" (27), as well as components from previous works by Kippenberger, such as *Peter* (1987).[16]

Fig. 9. Detail from Kippenberger's exhibition publication, *The Happy End of Franz Kafka's 'Amerika'*, p. 78.

De la Torre's response derives from this point of material interpretation, or translation, of Kafka's work by Kippenberger, and re-performs it. As she explains in an interview with

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[16] The *Peter* installation comprised works predominantly made by his friend and assistant, and artist in his own right, Michael Krebber, further complicating the work's origins and attribution (Krystof 29).

Peter Mishler, it was on seeing the installation and imagining the dialogues that might occur in each interview scenario that she came to write her text (par. 4). Interestingly, this premise was something she later discovered Kippenberger had commissioned in an accompanying chapbook from various "writer friends and associates" (par. 6). De la Torre nevertheless claims, "I figured it was fair game not to read these chapbooks (in part, because I don't know German), since Kippenberger never read *Amerika*" (par. 6). In many ways the chance of this repetition, or alignment, points to the effective transmission of idea through the conceptual work. Whether this occurs in the same, or similar, form is irrelevant. Text forms a vital connection for each work, but it is the concept that is primary and consciously unbound from previous textual manifestations.

We see this instrumentalised function of text in de la Torre's approach to composition, appropriating language from a wide range of sources, but not specifically demarcating these appropriations in her work as they occur. In a sense, de la Torre's poems parallel Alatalo's undesignated appropriations in *An Arranged Affair*, but lacking the unity of a defined genre, and conflated with her own voice, the effects are more diffuse. We are aware of some of de la Torre's sources. In her "Acknowledgements", she recognises lifting text from a range of places, including translations by Michael Hofmann, *Amerika: The Man Who Disappeared*; and Mark Harman, *Amerika: The Missing Person*. Other source materials include, "but are not limited to":

> interviews and writings by Martin Kippenberger, Mechanical Turk, typing manuals, Bruno Munari's *Seeking comfort in an uncomfortable chair*, Herman Miller promotional material, Donald Judd's essay "It's Hard to Find a Good Lamp", *Aldo Rossi's the Architecture of the City*, ghostwritten texts, and blurbs for the books of fellow poets.

Appropriations appear in the text as if from nowhere, at times unregistered by the reader, and alternately, they seem to pervade it—familiar, yet strangely hard to locate.

Grappling with the point of this incoherence becomes part of the work of the text. As de la Torre recognises in Kippenberger's work, the "installation appears random and chaotic; there's no apparent logic to the wild pairings of chairs and tables" (Mishler and de la Torre par. 5). Illogic becomes a start point for our reading, a concurrent strand that traces back to the initial textual object—Kafka's unfinished *Amerika*. The artist and poet's readings of *Amerika* extend this: Kippenberger's partial reading in the German, perhaps of Brod's highly edited version, and de la Torre's reading across two English translations, closer to Kafka's

original manuscript but still distanced by translation and language difference. Each project reflects the impossibility of its own task, true to Kafka's original manuscript, and our own readings extend these effects to configure new relations across them.

The Happy End / All Welcome opens with a poem titled "Positions Available" (9). It unfolds as a list attributed to 'The Company', an entity never clarified upon, similar to the nature of Sampedrín's role in *Expeditions of a Chimæra*. The poem reads as an accumulation of conventional statements drawn from job advertisements, slightly altered, and opening with de la Torre's title impetus—"All are welcome!" (9).

POSITIONS AVAILABLE

All are welcome!

Anyone who wants to be an artist should contact us!

Anyone who wants to be an artist, step forward!

We can make use of everyone, each in their place!

Anyone thinking of their future belongs in our midst!

Anyone thinking of their future, your place is with us!

And we congratulate here and now those who have decided in our favor!

If you decide to join us, we congratulate you here and now!

– THE COMPANY

These lines are each interchangeably drawn from Hofmann and Harman's translations of *Amerika*, beginning with Hofmann's version. The effect is a strange doubling, small distances between versions, repeated. There is an exception near the middle, "We can make use of everyone, each in their place!", which appears to be a conjunction of the two translations, and de la Torre's own decision to use "We" at the start of the line, disrupting a preceding succession of 'A's. It is a strange line—the individual is instrumentalised, inserted into a larger mechanism to be made use of, or rendered productive. To be put "in their place" appears threat-like or indicative of a hierarchy that contradicts the open call for applications.

Like in *Amerika*, the openness of "Positions Available" is significant but wavers between progressive and insidious registers. The types of job position described both contradict conventional roles and parody newer ones: "Anyone who wants to become an artist should contact us!" (9). As Rossmann observes in *Amerika*, these types of exclamations do

not always provoke much enthusiasm: "No one wanted to be an artist, but everyone wanted to be paid for his work" (202). Idealism is replaced by pragmatism in the job market, where lack of specificity is held in suspicion. In de la Torre's poem, no specific 'positions' are laid out. Each line is a re-articulation of the idea of happy employment from a slightly altered perspective. But this optimism is unhinged by the awkwardness of phrasing—the kind an internet user is hyper-aware to detect in unknown email correspondents: "If you decide to join us, we congratulate you here and now!" (9). The skewed grammar of this section in *Amerika* relative to the rest of the text, signals something beyond the distorting effects of translation. Grammar might be used awkwardly to perform something else, in contrast to the very content of expression—'all welcome'. In face of convoluted openness, we must sit with multiple, misleading possibilities. As Rossmann says, "There were so many posters, no one believed posters any more" (202).

Where no specific 'positions' are laid out in the previous poem-poster, the discourse might read as an invitation to occupy the conceptual notion of positions. But even this stripped-back premise is constantly shifting. On one level, the structure of the collection seems to mimic the confusions of contemporary office-bound existence, instigated by, but not limited to, Kippenberger's office situations. De la Torre utilises elevatedly conventional office discourse, but constantly rearranges how we read in relation to it. For instance, in a following poem, whose title is reordered to "Available Positions" (11), the sense of 'positions' is taken literally: "Sitting erect, pelvis curved out, cross-legged or with legs parallel" (11). It is an inventory of a range of possible seated positions, most likely in reference to Bruno Munari's photo essay, "Searching for comfort in an uncomfortable chair", published in *Domus* in 1944 (fig. 10). The sentiment of Munari's essay might be summed up in: "Everyone wants different furniture and so the true function of a chair, for example, comfort, goes to hell" (374). This question of form versus function is a vital one. Despite the simplicity of de la Torre's start point—describing ways of sitting in a chair—the array of lines achieves a compressed rhythm that is both poetic and narrative in arc. Each line starts with the way in which the action is occurring: "Sitting", "Slumping", "Sitting", "Reclining", "Sitting", "Plopped", "Facing backward", "Propped", "Fast asleep", "Propping elbows", "Plunked, head sunk into chest" (11). The slow degradation from upright to sunken reflects an individual's adjustments across a day. It is humorous and it is bored, and it reaches at a range of contemporary work-life experiences the reader might recognise. As a result, we begin to see the variable ways de la Torre is inhabiting her source material—a process of testing positions.

Fig. 10. Munari, "Searching for comfort in an uncomfortable chair", pp. 374–375.

A narrative-like aspect is a useful way of thinking about de la Torre's work despite its highly fragmented internal form and poetic labelling. It is, after all, a mediated response to an original narrative, *Amerika*. De la Torre questions this explicitly in her poem "Questionnaire" (24-26), but does not offer a possible solution. One section of "Questionnaire" has the sub-heading, "*CAN IT BE ARTICULATED AS NARRATIVE?*" (25). Amidst the items that follow this heading is: "As in red, white, and blue" (25). In other places, paratext becomes a space for testing out narrative possibility and the reach of its effects. Unlike in *Expeditions of a Chimæra*, paratextual framing relates to and directly develops the story-world of the text. For instance, in an un-titled section and demarcated by a different font, we are offered additional information: "Each applicant is assigned a color around which to improvise lyrics for jingles" (39). The works that follow "Blue" (40-42), "Red" (43-44), "Yellow" (45-46) and "Orange" (48), would otherwise read transparently as poems. Their framing as composed of text found across the city within a two-hour timeframe creates alternate references for our reading. For example,

Excerpt from "*BLUE*":

> stream change
>
> air services
>
> change stream
>
> service air

82

> stream services
>
> air changes (42)

Excerpt from "*RED*":

> It is a violation
>
> To ride or walk
>
> Help us keep the subway clean &
>
> Get over it! (43)

The relationship between text and colour feels constructed but must be read against the paratext that tells us it is 'found' language. Our reading shifts accordingly and we might reinterpret this appropriateness as a successful interview, pitch or jingle. In the text, this appropriateness would have had to pertain to a corresponding experience of colour in the story world. Our sense of this congruence extends beyond the story world to the real. Thinking about de la Torre's process, we wonder if this is a pure poetic composition or whether she might have enacted the task she describes. Are the words of the poem subjectively associated with colour or actually coloured accordingly in the story or real worlds? This uncertainty maps onto the progression from our initial frame of "red, white, and blue" (25), into "*'YELLOW'*" (45-46), and then "*'ORANGE'*" (48). We do not know where these additions or alterations come from, or what purpose they serve.

Exploring the possibilities of process and its merging with content, we see unfixity in the lack of unifying (or clarifying) perspective across the text. Each poem sequence or individual scene offers something different. This is illustrated by a series of works titled, "View from a [insert various designer-named chairs]", interspersed across the text. The first, and most classical office example, is "View from an Aeron Chair" (14-15), titled after the chair designed in 1994 by Don Chadwick and Bill Stumpf and particularly popular among startups in the 1990s (see fig. 11). The 'view' is "A half-view of greenery, cut off by blinds" (14)—a parallel to Rossman's imagined office experience. Shifts in the sky and daydreams are real counterpoints to: "the ergonomic ease of the seat / first devised for geriatric care, then stripped down" (14). The elevated discourse surrounding 'good' design is undermined by its "geriatric" origins, doubly played against its 'strip down'. The lack of "symbolic logic" to the Aeron chair's view is explicit: "This is the chair's democracy" (15). Its 'view', however, might also be insidious:

Particularly this one, with its form-fitting mesh

forsaking foam and padding,

which cause overheating and cloud

the sitter's judgement. (15)

The Aeron chair is read as a tool for controlling working subjects, invasively regulating their attention away from 'clouds'. The final line is separated from the four main stanzas of the poem: "Still, the office chair's revolution is an oxymoron" (15). The tone of this self-evident assertion permeates the collection of poems as a whole—the oxymoron as a device for representing the absurdities structured into workplace culture.

Content unavailable. See source, https://www.annualreports.com/HostedData/AnnualReportArchive/h/NASDAQ_MLHR_2001.pdf, p.11.

Fig. 11. Aeron chair: Herman Miller, *2001 Report To Shareholders*.

Among various chairs and their views we also encounter a variety of 'tables' at which interview scenarios play out, as suggested by Kippenberger's installation and performed at Kafka's "Nature Theatre". The table as a "schematic arrangement of information" (*OED*) is played against the furniture. In contrast to the logic expected of the informational table, we experience a re-working of the conventional course of the interview at de la Torre's tables. For instance, in the poem, "Table 17" (16-17), counterintuitively the first 'table' in the text, we are presented with two roles: "*Recruiter*" and "*Worker*". The exchange soon revolves around the English of the worker, "My English is no good" (16). Asked to explain further, the

worker presents a series of alternative linguistic arrangements: "My English is not very well" (16), also "My English is no frequently" (16), and finally "My English is no native so apologies for everyone" (17). For the recruiter's part, thinking to herself,

> *She remembers the orientation session in which talent scouts were told to employ, at the drop of a hat, anyone whose use of language might increase activity in audiences' corrugator muscles or do the opposite, prompting zygomatic tension.* (17)

The corrugator supercilia muscle is located on top of the eye and moves the brow, causing facial expressions such as frowning or furrowing (Mai et al., "Superciliary Arch"). On the other hand, "*zygomatic tension*" refers to the zygomatic arch, or cheek bone, connecting the muscles involved in moving the jaw (Mai et al., "Zygomatic Arch"). The jargon of the references perpetuate what they describes—physical manifestations of confusion or annoyance. Within the story-world of the text, however, this is all perfectly clear and according to recruitment protocol. "Congratulations, you're hired" (17). Recognising the value of incoherence and incomprehension, the scenario becomes a re-writing of Human Resources procedure to welcome in the 'other'.

Writing across registers in this way, error is counterintuitively rendered productive. To rewrite the error, the materials of a rigid bureaucratic framework are utilised directly, reconfiguring our associations. The dual use of the 'copy', as an imitative question or as the bureaucratic diction for text more broadly, productively conflates these ideas. We encounter a poem titled "Copy", a section of which reads, "Be accurate. Every conscioys error you make, slows up your mental process and cuts down speed. (95 strokes, 28")" (19). The text seems to be lifted from one of the "typing manuals" referred to in de la Torre's acknowledgements. But the sense of it is strange. We wonder whether the text has been altered or whether it was meant to be an exact 'copy' in the first place. The idea of a conscious, or "conscioys", error is contradictory. If an error is "Something incorrectly done through ignorance or inadvertence" (*OED*), then what does it mean to do so consciously? This distorted sense continues with "slows up your mental process". The mental process affected in this way does not implicitly diminish thinking, it instead necessitates a new approach. Looking for the implied value in contradiction, and with shapeless guidelines to defer to, we must instead mimic the methodology described by de la Torre within the text: "Some groping under the seatback and trial and error is required" (23). And, in the vein of an unattributed quotation that follows, "The best way to explain it is to do it" (23). We are encouraged to explore the multiplicity of

perspectives afforded by incoherence by occupying it, a participatory impetus that starts within the text and, perhaps, extends beyond it.

Incoherence, or contradiction, forms the unfixity that allows such engagement. For instance, we encounter a significant contradiction in the middle of the text in a section of poems, each titled "Yes or No" (52-59). No clear question is articulated. In fact, two opposing situations are presented in each poem, already encompassing both options (yes and no) in their structure. The two opposing states these scenes revolve around are the "dead office" and the "living office" (52). For example, "Individuals in dead offices are workers" and "Individuals in living offices are human performers" (55). We do not know what yes or no are being determined in relation to—whether it is subjective opinion, factual reality, dictionary definition, or so on. As the text progresses, the differences between the 'dead' and 'living' office is harder to gauge. For example,

> When workers have unexpected collisions
>> in hallways or restrooms,
>> they tend to linger and disturb others.
>
> When human performers have unexpected collisions
>> in previously designated areas, they have
>> serendipitous encounters leading to collaborations. (56)

The first stanza represents the entrenched view of the office worker in a rigid workplace, while the second is more like a depiction of a startup mentality. The result has a strange levelling effect. The content of each discussion is irrelevant, such that anything could be viewed in either way, especially the most mundane of interactions. Difference is constructed solely through language, according to a mutual guiding interest: worker productivity. In the first instance, the worker distracts from company production. In the second, the human performer augments it. This divergent mapping, however, results in a level effect: "Overproduction is not productive" (59). Difference exists purely in linguistic tone.

Recursive linguistic structures parallel the function of material forms in these poems. The means of regulating worker productivity is the design of the "open-plan" office 'landscape' (53). The setting is given precedence over the 'worker'/'human performer': "Plants and a few partitions divide personnel / according to genera and work flow" (53). Guiding performance, in a similar sense to the Aeron chair's temperature modulation, takes on a dark overtone. The materials with which this modulation is achieved are significant, but in a flattened-out way. The old and non-'natural' office landscape is unattractive from a

design perspective. For instance, Judd writes in "It's Hard to Find a Good Lamp", the "flat and boring society is a maze of blank walls just above eye level" (par. 6).[17] An arrangement of office cubicles would fulfil such a concept. But, the maintenance of an office environment might interfere with productivity in terms of overheads and caretaking. An absurd regression to the old, or 'unnatural', office design is the only option: "Partitions need less maintenance than plants" (54). As a result, "Plants are replaced by partitions on three sides" (54). Through this superficial alteration we observe the entire office ecology revert: "Action offices become dead offices" (54). The appearance of the natural remains significant only in that: "Plants enliven offices in pictures. / Living offices are safe environments for plants" (54). The true relation between plants and office life is a circularity, not penetrating corporate structure—a self-fulfilling image of its exterior. The value of the worker in this system is unclear.

Plants versus partitions are just surface instances of de la Torre's interest in the distance and melding of real and unreal in *The Happy End / All Welcome*. This is reflected in the process of composition: unclear where her conjoining of sources takes place, the identity or veracity—the reality—of the text's assertions is always in flux. We are being modulated by the author's own partitions. Their surfaces, however, are opaque. Certain scenarios or sections suggest transparent intents, but their overall pattern continually upsets readerly expectation. For instance, in her "Case Study" poems, we encounter various scenes, surrealisms, and conventionalities. In one, we observe:

> At a party in a country clubhouse, all the food and drink is
> placed on tables impossibly tall, way out of reach above
> people's head, so as to keep bugs away. It seems normal to all
> the guests present. (32)

In a surreal "Case Study" following, 'the subject' dreams: "What if they zip up the husband's dead body to contain the mice and then release them out into the woods?" (34). Then, over the page, we read,

> On the first day of a new job, after quitting a highly desirable
> one, the subject experiences genuine befuddlement when asked
> to contribute $20 for a colleague's taxi fare from the airport. (35)

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[17] Judd's article is not about lamps at all.

Ranging from 'a subject' to 'the subject', we are not sure whether it is one in the same subject throughout. The distinct "Case Study" headings would suggest separation. But the sameness of the titles, as with the lack of clarity as to 'the subject', gradually effaces differentiation. Instead, our linear reading of the work allows (perhaps, encourages) this narrative melding. And so, we read with surprise 'the subject's' eventual "befuddlement" in the most conventionally 'real' scene.

These slippages into illogic continually arrive at bureaucratic consideration. Or, bureaucracy appears to represent an innate site of incoherence. We might read this in Karl Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*: "The Corporations are the materialism of the bureaucracy, and the bureaucracy is the spiritualism of the Corporations" (44). The opposition proposed is that between the material, or real, and the spiritual, or unreal. For example, "bureaucracy is the imaginary state alongside the real state" (44). Confusion arises when these immaterial entities are treated as real. For instance, Rossmann's honest belief in an unworried future as an office worker (Kafka trans. Hofmann 183). And in a similar way, de la Torre treats the spirituality of bureaucracy literally. In "Table 7", we encounter a job advertisement for "a potential Spiritualist to conduct regular assessments of The Company's psychic abilities" (63). Some of the abilities listed include:

Automatic writing
Channeling
Dowsing
Precognition
Multilocation (63)

Firstly, framed as "regular assessments", we see that the psychic abilities are attributed to The Company itself. How these abilities might be assessed or quantified, and why, remains unclear. Thinking about the language used to designate these abilities, we observe an overlap with bureaucratic expectations for the individual worker—for example, precognition, "The paranormal ability to foresee events before they happen" (Blackburn); or, automatic writing, "writing produced involuntarily when the subject's attention is ostensibly directed elsewhere" (*Brittanica*). Either of these could conceivably exist within an unspoken contract for a range of job positions. Meanwhile, others, such as dowsing, "To use the divining- or dowsing-rod in search of subterranean supplies of water or mineral veins" (*OED*), appear more obviously absurd.

But perhaps dowsing, in which spirituality is harnessed in the pursuit of hidden "treasure" (*Brittanica*), is not so distant from many corporate directives—those in speculative finance for instance. The bureaucratic, or spiritual, becomes a front for something materially directed. The procedure structured towards material ends becomes 'ossified' in Marx's terms (45). That is to say, the procedures and strictures are at odds with the imaginary idea of the entity—corporation, spiritual realm, poetry. Working within, and against, the procedural discourses of these domains, de la Torre internally reverses our differentiations of real and unreal. For instance, on page 64 we encounter the following paratextual information: "As part of the application process, a potential Spiritualist consults the I Ching as well as Xul Solar's visionary writings and paintings, digging into their sources". A series of poems follow, supposedly products of the ways these sources are channelled, but as part of an interview process.

In this series, a formal difference occurs. The text is rushed together, for example in "*LIMITATIONS AND CONSTRAINT*", there are no spaces between separate words, but a slight (not quite full) extra space between individual letters. This spacing grows and contracts between the poems. Our reading is forcibly slowed down in relation to these blocks of letters. The sense of the text melds between words in a way that is indicative of the content of expression—double registers and beyond sense associations: "w h o p a r t i c i p a t e s i n b u s i n e s s a f t e r e o n s o f m u l t i p l y i n g i n t h e s k i e s" ("The Wanderer" 66).[18] Whether this is a question or a specific assertion is not clear. Through this blurred reading, an unusual reflexive effect emerges between distant realms: "n o c e n t e r n o l u m i n o s i t y o n l y l y i n g s p i r i t s c e l e s t i a l e q u i v a l e n t s a n d n o b o d y s b u s i n e s s" (66).[19] 'Celestial equivalents' are on a par with 'nobody's business', either unimportantly, disembodied, or ultimately impossible, like the business without an owner.

Framed in relation to the paratext, the authenticity of these texts is uncertain, within the story world and outside of it. We wonder in what variations the I-Ching and Xul Solar's sources were utilised or combined, whether these processes were influenced by the material outcome (a job), or whether de la Torre herself performed them in writing. The extent to which these questions are impelled, engages us in a recognisable exercise that occurs around us constantly, especially in terms of how we read and misread across media and sources. The way we digest seemingly contextless content reflects a discordant linearity of production that

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[18] Reads, 'who participates in business after eons of multiplying in the skies'.

[19] 'no center no luminosity only lying spirits celestial equivalents and nobody's business'.

our temporal reading is able to conflate. De la Torre surveys these effects in her exaggerated scenarios and structures at the borderline of authenticity and artifice. In her poem, "Guerrilla Advertiser Position", she outlines a range of duties, including item number four: "Tweet liberation slogans and dumbfounding quotes to The Company's followers—no contextual information or authors' names are to be included in the tweets" (90). A range of examples are included, such as "Never give up before it's too late"; "To sit is a verb"; "Images are the murder of the present"; and "Happiness is not always fun" (90-91). The distorted meaning of these articulations is played against their potentially skimming reading. A reconstructed context overwrites illogic via the near-spiritual belief in corporate endorsement. Causal logic is effaced by association—an incoherence that extends temporally on dissociated platforms.[20]

We realise the impossibility of capturing all of the possibilities of the text as part of its own line of questioning. In two poems, "Furniture Tester" (50) and "Partial Inventory" (107-111), we observe attempts at structuring an overview of an indistinct situation. The possibility of this overview—undermined already by their titles—is refracted elsewhere in the text, like "cataloguing clouds" (105). In "Furniture Tester", third person narration follows an unknown woman: "She goes around the floor jotting notes on the chairs she sits in" (50). "Given the vagueness of her records" (50), we understand her focus is not on the objects themselves, but instead the difference of perspective offered by them. But the "views gleaned from each are not in concert" (50), and we are left to wonder what is causing this internal contradiction. She questions, "has her experience been built into the design? are the stimuli interior or exterior?—she considers tinnitus as metaphor" (50). The structuring of perspective is questioned within the book and its relation to the exterior—its historic precedents in Kafka and Kippenberger, as well as its less discernible sources. The notion of tinnitus, or the unreferenced tweet, capture this, as does the immersive materiality of vaguely familiar forms. The content begins to reflect (or, even, represent) things that are not explicitly asserted, that are outside the text's limits.

We see this performed by the central inconsistency occurring in "Partial Inventory". The first line of which reads, "*Quante poltrone diverse avete visto nella vostra vita?*" (107).[21] The list that follows is alphabetised, beginning with "Afro futurist throne…" (107). There is one exception to the alphabetical ordering: "Pair of chairs, one carefully balanced atop the other, about to fall and precipitate a chemical or physical reaction" (107). The local

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[20] For example, @Erniethegreat25, "Happiness is not always fun", 6 Jun 2019.

[21] From Bruno Munari's "Searching for comfort in an uncomfortable chair", this question translates to: "How many different armchairs have you seen in your life?" (*domus*).

discordance interrupts the system. Most of the objects listed are identifiable from images of Kippenberger's installation. For instance, the unmissable "Pair of astronaut chairs with lighting umbrellas over them circling on carousel surrounding sculpture of fried egg" (110). And yet, this simple, mis-ordered entry is difficult to locate. In images of the installation, we see a metal table with a chair upside down on it, but not two precariously positioned chairs. "Partial Inventory" is representative of the mixing of sources and blurring of views across the work—blending the natural, or expected, with artificial means. Amidst the specific objects of Kippenberger's installation, sourceless items are inserted—those that come from 'real' life.

Where purpose is not directly observable, incoherence has a particular function. We see this captured most incisively in de la Torre's poem, "View from a Monobloc Chair":

> She tries to compute how many times she must have sat in
>
> one, and realizes it's the kind of thing you're bound to ignore
>
> unless it's in the wrong place. Say, indoors. (102-103)

The overview of this gradually accrued idea about the monobloc chair is uncontained. But the disjunction "indoors" captures the fundamental divide in its perception. Natural perception is disconnected from a real basis, the conceived logic peels away from an associative chain. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with a monobloc chair inside, it just feels that way—the familiar recontextualised.

It is through language used in unexpected ways that de la Torre opens out her text to unfixed potential. Overall, she revokes a linear process of meaning through language: "i t i s w r i t t e n s o u n d e r s t a n d i n g f o l l o w s" ("Progress" 66). De la Torre questions her own assertions, especially in the complexity of the overview. How to approach the individual parts of the work is the impossible task of unwinding a multitude of threads, 'textiled' as in Avasilichioaei and Moure's collaboration, naturally and as artifice. What might be attained from the incoherence that results, however, is a question that necessitates forward motion. The potential in not being certain instead instigates a lateral approach: "We arrived here not knowing where we were headed" (114). Just like in Kafka's unfinished novel, and Kippenberger's unread idea of it, we mirror possible and non-finite ends through our own readings.

3.2 *Garden of Mirrored Flowers* – Hu Fang

In the same way that Mónica de la Torre's *The Happy End / All Welcome* conflates the borders of content and process, Hu Fang's *Garden of Mirrored Flowers* (2010)*,* translated into English by Melissa Lim, does not settle into a containable shape. Like the art objects de la Torre imaginatively occupies, or the texts she transposes, *Garden of Mirrored Flowers* begins with reproductions of worldly ephemera.[22] These documents transgress a range of registers and forms, refusing to offer up a coherent logic to their inclusion. The second section of these images introduces a trend towards the schematic, or diagrammatic, but in ways that conflate conventional pathways or pairings. Our reading of the third section, a textual narrative, shifts in amorphous ways against the prior images. The text and images intersect and alter our reading but do not tend towards clarification. As a result, a coherent story-world cannot emerge, multiple worlds exist in exchange, and the limits between outside and interior are unclear.

We first encounter incoherence in the structure of Hu's text. It has three sections, described in the "Contents" as:

From A: Garden of Mirrored Flowers

To B: Geometry

To A': Garden of Mirrored Flowers

The page before this shows the following sketches:

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[22] The author describes them as "contemporary propaganda"—this sets a good tone for their examination ("Re: Garden").
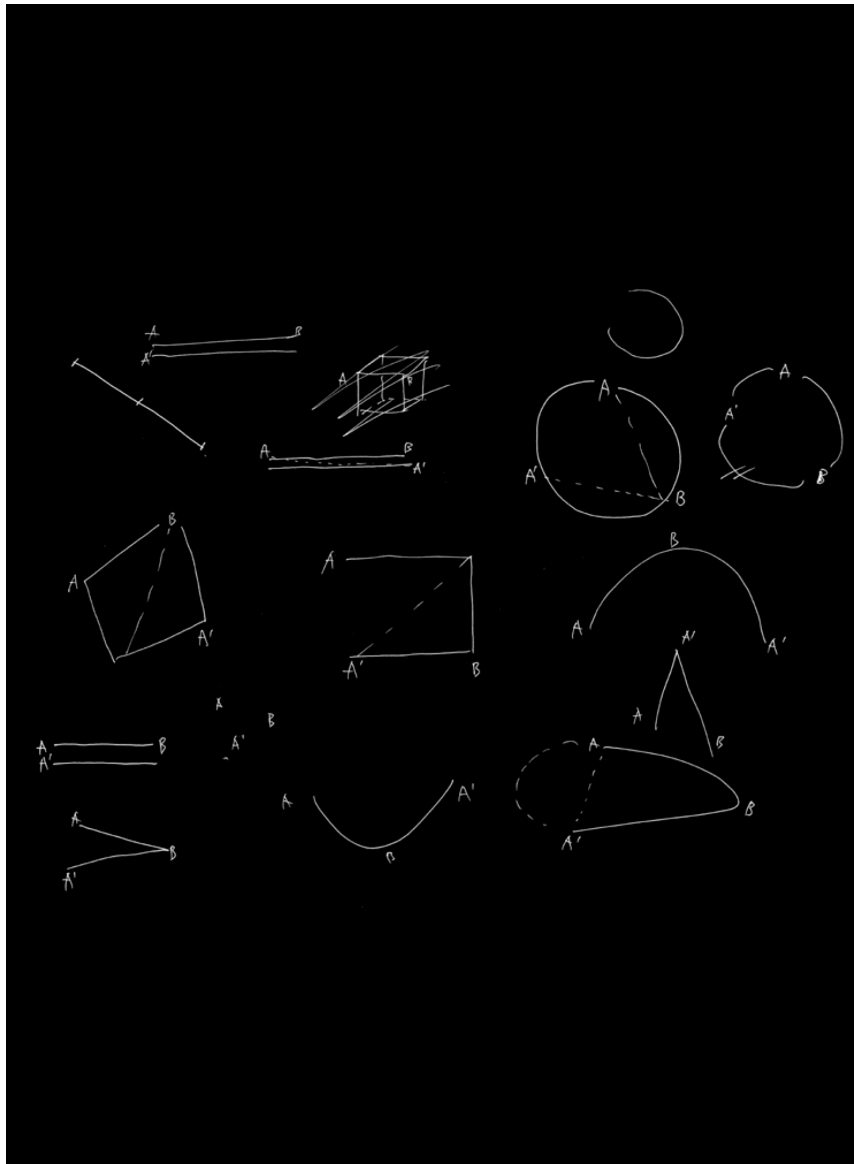
Fig. 12. Hu.

The notation, A and B, suggest a uniform plane of existence (or world). A' appears to be a derivative, a translation into another form or a linear approximation. The derivative will intersect its function (the 'real' variable), but it begins and ends elsewhere. In Hu's diagrams, these separate worlds are artificially conjoined (curve or circle) or separated (parallel lines). The diagrams represent various experiments in illogical formulation, the final arrangement of which, as suggested by their plurality, is unresolved. This geometry is thrown into further uncertainty by the existence of another plane beyond it: Hu's writing reality and future, now our past.

We observe this connected plane in the structure of his creative affiliations, specifically Vitamin Creative Space, founded by Hu Fang and Zhang Wei in 2002. The site they operate from, Mirrored Gardens, a "village-like ensemble" of spaces or experimental "field" ("About, Mirrored"), was designed by Sou Fujimoto Architects and completed in 2014. While the structure of these entities will not be a major focus, it is useful to have a sense of the divided private-public model they propose. As stated on their website, Vitamin Creative Space is "active both as an independent art space and as a 'commercial' gallery" ("About, Vitamin"). As such, the space "actively challenges preconceptions by merging these two traditionally opposed strategies for supporting and presenting contemporary art" ("About, Vitamin"). Mirrored Gardens presents a site at which "contemporary art practice, quotidian life and a kind of farming-oriented life practice, meet and overlap with each other" ("About, Mirrored"). All I want to say here is it is unclear how Mirrored Gardens might be conceived in relation to *Garden of Mirrored Flowers*, whether it aligns with A, A', or something beyond either, A" (both an imagined—at time of writing—and real—temporally extended—alternative).

Awake your five senses to Art

Fig. 13. Hu, pp. 44–45.

A

The first section of the text, "A: Garden of Mirrored Flowers" (11), is a collation of photocopied ephemera and short texts. Often, these are referenced quotations—intertexts—unlike the purposefully undesignated appropriations of Alatalo or de la Torre. But in the same way de la Torre blurs registers, the language in and around Hu's collection of images is not always straightforward. Sometimes images are uncaptioned, occasionally their caption dominates an entire adjacent page as a title-like reflection (as in fig. 13). Frequently, this text is in different languages, inaccessible to an individual reader (i.e. me, here and now). The registers encompassed by the curation of images begin with design and imbue into experience, tourism, social equality and disparity, faith, cosmetics, manmade islands, sex columns, self-help manuals, real islands, and mass media. Each photocopied document—ad, ticket, flyer, magazine cover—seemingly points towards a certain subset of ideas that are themselves difficult to piece together to arrive at a 'meaning'.

And so, in line with Avasilichioaei and Moure, "*Not solve it but be in it*" (*Expeditions* 79), and de la Torre, "The best way to explain it is to do it" (*Happy* 23), we begin, practising techniques of reading in the face of individual limitation, through the incoherence we receive. The first text is framed as "Entrance 1" and centres around a certain person or character, 'He', formulating a name for a design company, "Co-collection. Or co-co-co-collection" (11). Co-collection, a real design collective between 2000–2001, worked as an amalgam between agencies in Germany to create a collection of furniture. Hu presents an image of their former logo beside these ponderings.

Content unavailable. See source, https://www.akademie-gestaltung.de/fileadmin/daten_redaktion/Download-PDFs/nG_screen_mh.pdf, p.34.

Fig. 14. "cocollection.de", 2000.

But the speaker in the text does not seem so concerned with the agency as a real entity; instead, he seems more interested in the idea of its name. The work of the collection—what it says and does, and how it might operate doubly compounded ("co-collection", a collection of collections):

> If we regard this passion in building contemporary collections as a sort of game
> with time—one dealing with legacies of families, cultures, countries, histories,
> the world; in the end, all these must be transformed into legacies of the
> market—then we should hardly be surprised that within this game, the present
> era is often shrouded by a sense of emotional hurt and hysteria. (Hu 11-12)

The "game", as discussed in relation to Caillois, resurfaces—the frame of play as an activity "separate" from everyday life (6). Playing with time occurs outside of actual time, the present, as something too sensitive. The important transformation Hu captures within his design-oriented notion of the 'collection', is a necessary transformation of the specifics of people and cultures embedded in time into a marketable idea that is unfixed from time or emotion.

What is strange about this opening text is the gaps in time that underly it. Hu, writing around 2010, looking back at a collective from ten years prior. Myself, writing about a text (Hu's) also written ten years earlier. Small distances in literary history but vast leaps in technological difference and media aesthetics. These distances also provide a space to perform an attempt at the game of collection. Defying resolution becomes a mode of reading Hu's text. Rather than attempting to formulate a singular, coherent meaning, we must in a sense re-enact the performance of collection, tracing narrative threads across worlds. Our understanding cannot help but catch excess, peripheral colourings—details of Hu's reproductions that are perhaps incidental but which we might misread as significant. In a way, Hu's minimal framing encourages this. Misreading and confusion are part of the universe he is constructing. Like de la Torre's beginning in Kippenberger's installation, Hu's narrative begins in miscellaneous scraps of reality that seem to imply personal connection. Occasionally, these bear traces of real time: a ticket to a performance by Forced Entertainment titled *the World in Pictures*, "3.6.06 20:30UHr" (17); the cover of a religious magazine called *Awake!* from May 2007 (20); the 'Sex Doctor' segment of the *Sunday Mirror* from 20 April 2008 (43). These locations in time "A" serve as a container for reading across disparate sources, but the timestamps do not explain the work's deeper structural logic.

We are offered a second entrance, an alternate option perhaps, directly after. "Entrance 2" unfolds as a list of "Things to do while you're alive" (15), an exact copy of the text in an

advertisement on the page to its left (14). It is a check list with accompanying open boxes for marking, an ad to engage with—to play the game:

- ☐ Go to the NFL Pro Bowl
- ☐ Walk the red carpet at a movie premiere
- ☐ Master Japanese cooking
- ☐ Stomp grapes
- ☐ See the Tony Awards live
- ☐ Ride an elephant
- ☐ Spend Christmas on a tropical island
- ☐ Fly around the world
- ☐ Go camping and live off the land
- ☐ Go on safari
- ☐ Test-drive a supercar
- ☐ See the Terracotta Warriors
- ☐ Drive across the Seven Mile Bridge
- ☐ Get a degree in enology
- ☐ Spend a weekend in Las Vegas like a high roller
- ☐ Go to the Olympic Games
- ☐ Experience the magic of Broadway up close (14/15)

At the bottom you realise it is an advertisement for Visa and their line of "luxury rewards cards" (14). Visa's by-line in the upper right corner is: "Life Takes Visa" (14). The list is indicative of threads in the text that follows. Attached to ideas of real life and digital (imaginary) currency, experiences are mapped as innately quantifiable, or checkable. There is an elitism enmeshed in the particular ad. Attendance at a movie premiere is not open to anyone with money. But at the same time, there are specifics that meld with life in ways that do not seem dependent on rewards membership or money in the first place. 'Stomping grapes', 'living off the land', 'mastering Japanese cooking' all seem possible in a life without "Visa Signature". Why, then, are they here in this list? What idea are they evoking and how does this represent or structure an entwinement with capital and material systems?

«Chaque goutte de temps qui s'écoule me semble aussi précieuse qu'une gorgée de bon vin», écrit Mishima à Kawabata à propos d'Izu

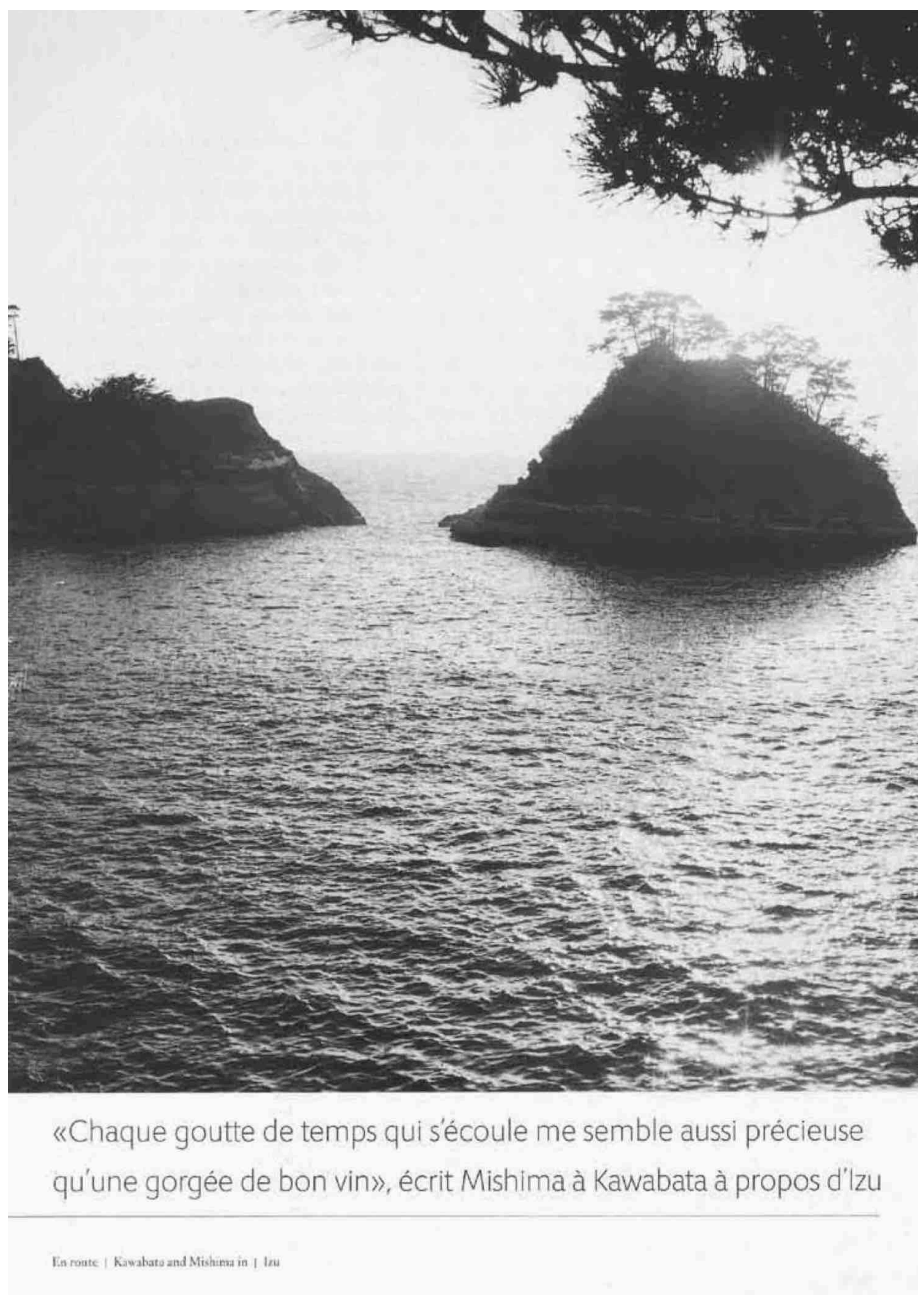En route | Kawabata and Mishima in | Izu

Fig. 15. Hu, p. 57.

We can read natural imagery, like this ad for Japan's Izu Peninsula, against moments such as, "BRITISH MANMADE ISLAND SOLD FOR 400 MILLION BRITISH POUNDS" (Hu 34).

The intersection and conflation of realms—natural and unnatural—are played upon through the re-presentation of these documents. As the initial speaker in Hu's text expresses it, the work is drawing on a "mythology of materialism" to explore how it has "adequately concealed the truth about our lack of a mythology of origins" and "the atrophy of our collective consciousness" (12). Hu uses the detritus of material mythologies, the ad, to present this idea directly and disjunctively. An advertisement for religion, or faith, seems to short-circuit these separations. We can see this in the two following images (fig. 16): a contrast between the intent of the magazine *Awake!* (20) and the luxurious imagery of the brochure for the 'Crystal Cathedral' only "5 minutes from Disneyland!" (21).
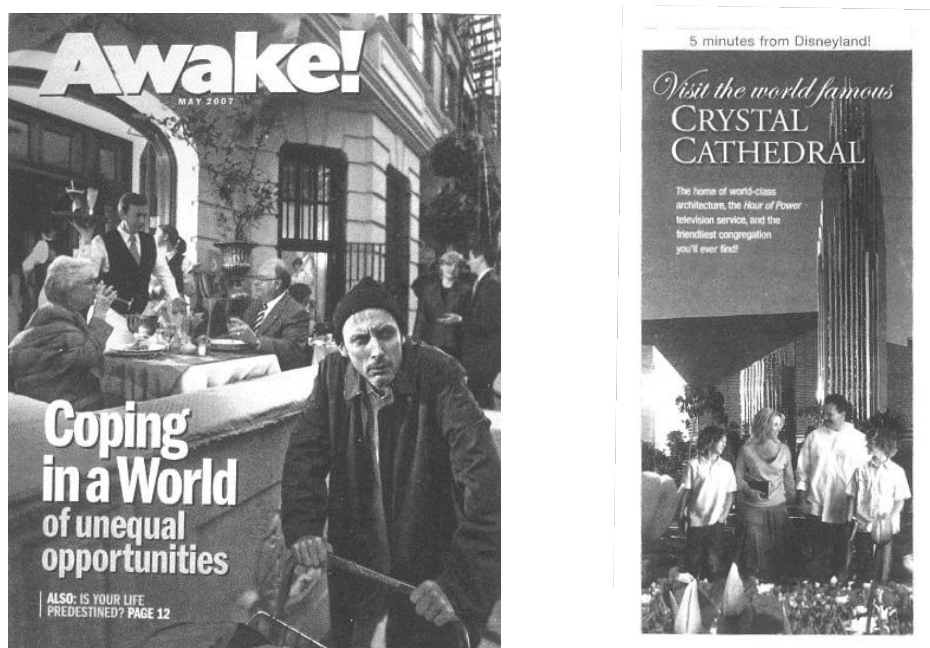
Fig. 16. Hu.

Despite appearing to oppose the make-believe register of the Crystal Cathedral, *Awake!* is bound in a reductive, white, image of the world. Like in Figure 13 at the opening of this section—"Awake your five senses to Art" (44), an advertisement for a hotel or the shower in a hotel—the term 'awake' is not as direct as it might seem. In opposition to sleep, the waking present does not rule out other dream-like obfuscations. We see this on the magazine cover, where inequalities are represented in terms of "opportunity" rather than systemic injustices and failings. "Also: Is your life predestined? Page 12" is just a small aside to the dominant question of material prosperity the cover is fixated on (20). The "world famous" Crystal Cathedral, on the other hand, is more intricately contradictory. A mixed-race nuclear family clutch bibles as they walk knee-deep in photoshopped flowers. They are the overlay to a

"world-class architecture", the jagged reaches of which are the impossible home of "the friendliest congregation you'll ever find!" (21). And importantly, the cathedral is home to "the *Hour of Power* television service" (21) in relation to which we are left wondering where artificial and real might meet.

In both of these religious materials, spirituality is not an end in itself. It is a means to an alternate end couched in prosperity and unreality. The alternative Hu places over the page is an intertextual excerpt from Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism*, in which Lasch traces a shift in the US consciousness post-1960s into "self-obsession" (Hu 22). In the lack of worldly hope, interest shifts to "the perfection of the individual on a psychological and spiritual level" in the following ways:

> they developed an interest in their consciousness and emotions, health food products and produce, learned ballet or belly-dancing, immersed themselves in Eastern philosophies, jogged, took an interest in developing "positive social interactive skills," tried to overcome their "fear of happiness" … (Lasch qtd. in Hu 22)

The text is paired with an advertisement for "Pure Yoga", "Stand Tall / Feel Fab with Yoga", an ad structured around the individual "self-image" (23). The spiritual history of the practice is a gloss to the individually image-driven reality. A mythical "fear of happiness" that a spiritual commercial enterprise can resolve for you.

In relation to the self-image, the digital realm offers unconstrainted potential for its extension. We read this in the pairing of an ad for the computer game Sims 2 Pets and a text (38-39). Reading this text, it is initially hard to figure out the angle or original context. It seems to be trying to sell the game, but at the same time it maps a broader history. Regardless, there is an unnerving implication: "Unlike traditional games, you do not need to move up levels in the Sims, nor do you need to accumulate experience to play it: there is no victory nor defeat; in fact, there isn't even an ending" (38). We read the first half of this text, learning that it seems to be official Sims content: how it is played and its advantages—the sellable angles, including its unending structure. On a broader level, we see that the discourse is directed towards the same individualistic concerns we have observed previously with the addition of a creepy potential built into the design: "The game furnishes a lot of detailed information to assist you in recreating yourself or someone you are interested in as realistically as possible" (38). The second paragraph seems to switch perspective from official ad copy to something else, describing how "thousands" of individuals have written narratives around the lives of

the avatars they have created in the game. This text comments on the relationship between the 'Sims novel' and the lives of the real players: "If you read these novels, you would discover that most mirror the real lives of people. You could even say that these texts collectively depict the contemporary life of humankind" (38). What then is it about this simulatory experience that impels, or allows, these narratives to be written? What is the need for the mirror? Is looking too direct?

B

Thinking about the collection, or co-collection (co-co-collection), and the pathways through which entities arrive within its area, reflectory or broken logic is mapped in the second section of the text, "B: Geometry". Like in section A, we are presented with collected ephemera, opening with a disrupted section of a Biochemical Pathway(s) diagram, "Third Edition", edited by Gerhard Michal (63). Overleaf, we encounter two reproduced diagrams: a clothed, photographed man (64) opposite an underwear-clad sketch of a woman (65). Sections of the man's body are directly labelled, the only portions of which I can read are letters such as "C, B_6" to his hair, "A, B_2" to his eyes, and so on. A fragment of English text at the bottom also reads, "…ping You Beautiful and Healthy" (64). The text of the woman's diagram is inaccessible to me apart from the odd numbers: "6-7.5cm", "45-50kg", "90; 60; 90cm" (65). The ad is for "ShenZhen Sun Hospital". As I learn from the website indicated on the ad, "Http://sun.91.cn", ShenZhen Sun is an "Aesthetic Surgery Hospital" ("深圳阳光整形美容医院").

Although the (unknown) dates of these excerpts are distant from my time of looking at the website, sun.91.cn, on 22 October 2019, it remains a similar host to the disconcerting parallel on Hu's pages. Illustrated sections of the female body (abstracted), interpose photographs of predominantly male surgeons, business suits under white lab coats—the "Experts" (sun.91.cn). In summary, we begin in the metabolic pathways underlying all life. The vitamins produced via such pathways structure the 'health' and 'beauty' of people, as exemplified by the business-suited male. Abstracted from these pathways is the 'beauty' of the female form, artificially sketched and operated upon by people resembling the business-suited male 'expert'. Interconnected ideals of form and function travelling along parallel pathways, causally disconnected, but concurrent across time.

The pairing of images reflects and expands dual processes, the overarching geometry of which remain conceptually interconnected but physically distinct. For example, we see a "Map of Las Vegas, NV and Vicinity" highlighting the airport terminals (66) against a map of "München Airport Shopping", defined as the "Public Area" on Level 3 of Munich's Airport Terminal 2 (67). Beneath the map is an advertisement for Edeka, the German supermarket brand, "Mais & More", accompanied by an aeroplane constructed of fruit and vegetables. We receive an amalgamated representation of multiple Visa offers: 'spending a weekend in Las Vegas like a high roller', 'flying around the world', and 'living off the land' of a weird new

airport ecology (15). Throughout this section objects and advertisements continue to reconfigure a distorted geometry of relations. A rough progression of which might be described as,

> The bars of a (hotel) swipe card (68); a United Colors of Benetton receipt in German "05.08.06 17:50" (69).

> The plan of a small living unit, of which a parked car predominates a quarter of the space (72); stacks of high rise buildings and room prices for APA Hotel Group, "Best for the Guest" (72).

> "The Erotic Review" in the Miami New Times: among the listings we read, "LADY FLOWER / Call For The Flower Of Your Choice! 24/7" (73); a grid of investment fund ads in The Wall Street Journal (74).

> A plastic bag with product outlines "regulations relating to liquid objects carried by passengers" (76); a page of Chinese television listings (Christmas decorations in upper corners) (77).

> A section of a film review and a crossword from the New York Times (78); "Euro Millions", more numbered boxes (79).

> Sheets of portraits of individuals, couples and groups (80-81):

Fig. 17. Hu.

104
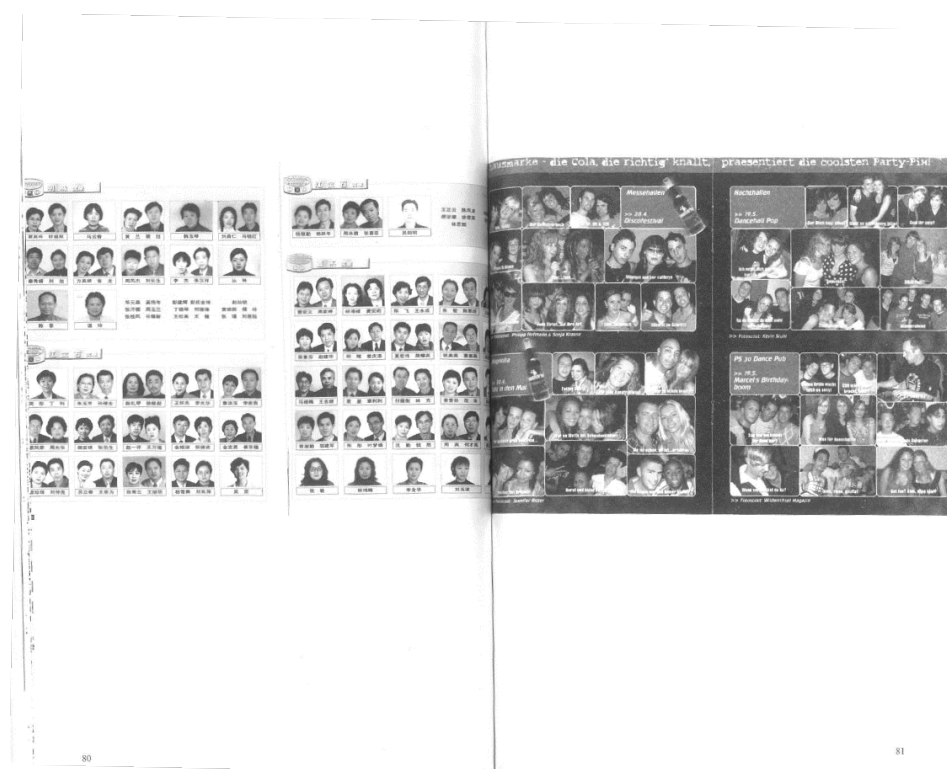
Through these alignments and misalignments, we are forced to look across cultures in uncomfortable ways. Against the discrepancies and surfaces of difference, we begin to see an associative logic emerge. Design, beauty, sex, grid, individual, nature. At the heart of these, and perhaps representing a container for viewing an otherwise expansive arrangement, we observe a couple of particular objects. The first is a "Gallery Plan" for "MAK" Vienna (70-71). Against the architecture of the gallery, history is rationalised, beginning with "The Natural World" galleries and ranging to "Trade and Discovery" at the opposite extremity—through "Art and Civilisation" and "Religion and Ritual"—unified by the central space: "Classifying the World", a junction point to opposing wings. Against MAK, we have an alternate space—an ad for a Kodak competition to win a trip to "Mystery Park", depicted in an image of a radial complex (85). The structure is Jungfrau Park (fig. 18), a Swiss amusement park for children that explores mysteries of the world, a subject of controversy due to the extra-terrestrial beliefs of its designer Erich von Däniken (daniken.com), and a highly opposite institutional structure.

Fig. 18. Jungfrau Park.

Following the museum and park, we have documents pertaining to two contrasting, 'garden' spaces: an advertisement for Roppongi Hills; a slip of a brochure, ticket or ad for "The Rock Garden of Daisen-In Temple" (86-87). Roppongi Hills is a convoluted venture: a combination of shopping (materialism), museums (history and culture), elite living accommodations, and a confusing intertwinement of "Parks, Walking courses, and Green Spaces" ("Roppongi"). On its website, we read contradiction embedded in its self-description, "Roppongi Hills is in the heart of the city, yet surrounded by natural beauty. Communication through nature starts here […]" ("Roppongi"). Importantly, this environment, and the 'true' experience of seasonal cycles are accessible only to a certain subset of people—those who can afford to live in these residences in the first place. The separation of this space from the world is significant: "normally not open to the general public, […] members of the Roppongi Hills community can experience farming and other activities" ("Keyakizaka"). Against Roppongi Hill's sprawling, materially and capitalistically compromised green spaces, Daisen-In Temple

represents an opposite scale and effect. Daisen-In "is considered one of the great masterpieces of Zen style miniature landscapes" (Young 110). Rocks, gravel, trees and shrubs depict mountains, a river and ocean. A rock shaped like a boat suggests a journey, flowing outward towards "the Eternal at the end of life's voyage" (110).

And then we arrive at two last images, spaced out across four pages as though given room for contemplation. A (clothing) swing tag, 65% Polyester and 35% Cotton, ¥ 890.00. The top line reads, "then. then, then?" (89). Three possible inflections on another time. And the blank back of a ticket (91).

A'

bewilder — the soul — intensely (Hu 106)

"A': Garden of Mirrored Flowers", the narrative section of the book, is based around a character named He Shan, designing a theme park also titled "Garden of Mirrored Flowers". The section opens and closes with mirrored scenes, a man and a woman's final meeting at a desserts stall, imperfectly recalled apart from the image of her lips against an ice cream (93, 150). Slight details change but this is the image that is paused in He Shan's memory. The temporality of intervening events is unknown. The orbital of this incomprehensible narrative is set at a containable remove by an addendum just after it, outside of that time: "Addendum in 2050" (151). The narrative worlds are continuous but temporally separated. These are again set in an indefinite relation by a final section of the text, "Attachment: Silent Theatre (II)" (161). No recognition of the preceding material images in sections A and B is offered, nor is there explanation of the relation between textual sections, but we begin to sense an associative significance.

The singular figure or character, He Shan, confuses our reading of these sections. His individualism is important, as per Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism*, but does not present a unified view. According to Hu, "He" is a popular family name, '何', and the pronunciation of "He" is the same as 'River' in Chinese ("Re: Garden"). The fluidity of his name in English translation means that we misread the specificity of He Shan's role across sections. The earlier sections refer to an unfixed "He", as in "He has a distinct feeling that this phrase was still inadequate" (11). When we learn our protagonist's name in A', "The top-level company executives told him in all earnestness, "He Shan, this is the chance of a lifetime […]" (95), our previous reading is unsettled. We wonder whether this is one in the same "He" we had encountered previously, pondering the name of the "Co-collection? Or co-co-co-collection" (11). He Shan is suspended between an initial undesignated role in the material world, the specific narrative of his theme park design, and the additional sections: from a retrospective angle and prospective adaptation. "He", "He Shan" and "he"—the character, designer, consumer, or director (11, 95, 163). In a footnote we read, "He Shan heard the two authors [Joseph Pine and James Gilmour] giving a speech at an international symposium on developments in China's economy, society, and culture in the twenty-first century" (105). He Shan, the character in the story, meets the two real authors of *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre & Every Business a Stage* (1999). As a character, He Shan already transgresses the

conventional divisions between story world and real world, body text, and inter- or hypertext. He is enmeshed in this malleable world as both designer and subject. In the experience economy, however, we must always remember "experiences are inherently personal" (Pine and Gilmour 12).[24]

Intertexts and hypertexts in *Garden of Mirrored Flowers* refract this idea of 'personal' experience through the process of reading. They instigate multiple associative pathways for the reader, and the question of which ones to follow remains open. In reading across sources framed by Hu, we encounter our own limits of perception (singular) and knowledge (cultural). As a non-Chinese reader, this is perhaps exaggerated—relying on translation and unintuitive references. The time elapsed since Hu wrote the text, however, allows a certain advantage, specifically when exploring internet traces. Concerning a moment when web-based companies were burgeoning, He Shan and his friend, Deng Jianguo, work for a "well-known company dealing with memory storage" (99). Deng Jianguo tells He Shan,

> I've become an expert in spamming. I've been posting randomly on the net. One day I'm going to collate all these meaningless messages and create a website out of them. It'll definitely be a hit. Oh yeah, I'll call it shi.com. (99-100)

The term "shi" performs the effect it describes through its translation, "lost in meaning and memory, but still poetic" (100). Searching Deng Jianguo's site instead returns "Computer Software, Hardware and IT Solutions" (*shi.com*). And this would have been the same site, with different graphics, throughout Hu's process of writing. We wonder why Hu has given the character's imagined site a domain name that already exists. Or how this might relate to the "memory storage" company they work for within the text.

Deng Jianguo's shi.com is impossible in our world. Its hyperlink already existed as something else. But the path of following it immerses us in alternate textual traces. In the translated version—attempting to re-enact the loss of meaning and poetic resonances—I search "lost.com". Circa 2003, this site served multiple functions with headings, such as, SciTech, Entertainment, Weather, Directions, IP address, and Satellites ("Lost"). The website's overall impression is akin to the world of Erich von Däniken.[25] Post-airing of the television show, *Lost* (2004–2010), set on a 'mystery island', it morphed into a fan-site,

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[24] See Pine and Gilmour, *The Experience Economy*: when a "company intentionally uses services as the stage and goods as props to engage an individual" (11).

[25] For example, see www.daniken.com.

including fictions and "expanded experiences" of viewers (2009). It still maintained a "SciTech" page like that of the previous site, congruous with the plot of *Lost*. Across the sites we observe parallels with Hu's text—globe, diagrams on a black background, Daoist yin and yang, parallel worlds. But this is most likely a chance over-reading.

shi.com, 2003

shi.com, 2009

shi.com, 2019

lost.com, 2003

lost.com, 2009

"error"   lost.com, 2019 (for sale)

Fig. 19. https://archive.org/web/.

These intersecting false and real discursions contribute to the conceptual 'play' of the Hu's work. On top of the text's complicated structure, certain intertexts appear deliberately misleading. These include: a company called "memory" (100); a citation to *New Economic Pioneer*", 1998 (101); and intertextual segments from a work called *Notes on Meng Yuan* which He Shan encounters within the text. "Meng Yuan" translates to "Dream Garden" (115). If we search for further bibliographic information online, the work recourses to Hu.[26] Through the accumulation of virtual traces and indistinct separations the roles of the author/designer and consumer/wanderer become abstracted. This reflects a section from *Notes on Meng Yuan*, 'reproduced' in *Garden of Mirrored Flowers*:

> *I only need to step into the small alley in the garden, stroll between the green hills and blue waters, and in an instant, I would feel as if the cacophony outside is of no concern to me. I vanish in the middle of the garden, just as the world disappears into the garden.* (140)

The effect of being in this space is of losing oneself but, importantly, it is conveyed as the world blurring into the garden's bounds. This occurs across narrative levels within the text itself. The hierarchies and temporal separations of preceding texts are impossibly allowed to co-exist in their creation. The world enters the garden, just as the design of the garden mirrors the world.

The point of division between these two spaces—the garden and the world—mirrors literary representation more broadly (text and inter-/hypertexts; representation and reality). The feature of the garden wall has a counterintuitive structure relative to this function. The wall of the theme park is present from the outset. When He Shan takes the job, "large parcels of land in the suburbs had already been purchased by the company. In a bid to avoid clashes with the villagers in the area, wire fences and brick walls were constructed around the land" (94). There is a forceful separation between garden and world enacted by the walls. He Shan is aware of a "historical connection" between himself and the "Land Reform Task Force" although he knows "next to nothing about the detail of the work" they did (114). This separation of spaces is reflected in the character's lack of knowledge about this past (economic and class-based). In a footnote, we are similarly informed that in a city that has become "wealthy, arrogant, and extravagant" and "the threat of invasion by foreigners lies

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[26] Hu's *Notes on Meng Yuan* was first published by *Making Worlds*, the catalogue of the 53rd Venice Biennale, 2009, pp. 238–239.

before us—then it is easier to understand Yuan Ye's influence on the protagonist of this novel" (94). Ji Cheng's *Yuanye*,[27] written in 1631, is an important trace of a landscaper's philosophy and practice and, as framed, is a central intertext to Hu's work. The contrasting ethos of this classic text to He Shan's design incentive emerges as a crucial space of contradiction.

We observe *Yuanye's* significance in the direct insertion of its text into the narrative space, as Hu or He quotes: "*Sites should be appropriately selected, gardens should be properly designed*" (94). The importance of site is explained in *Yuanye*, "Skill in landscape design is shown in the ability to 'follow' and 'borrow from' the existing scenery and lie of the land" (39). And yet, He Shan's theme park design is divorced from its physical environs. The intended effect of the garden design is a mystical conflation. As Maggie Keswick writes in her "Foreword" to *Yuanye*, the garden should "make possible a whole range of emotions that otherwise could be felt only in nature" (24). It is an artificial construction of an experience of the natural, or the Dao. The role of the garden wall in relation to this exchange is significant. It demarcates the limits of perception (a clear divide between nature and imitation) but, as explored in *Yuanye*, this is not its extent: "Wooden walls should have many window-openings so that one can secretly enjoy looking through them into different worlds" (76). The wall is both a division and a mediating frame into other worlds—what is there already and what might eventually materialise.
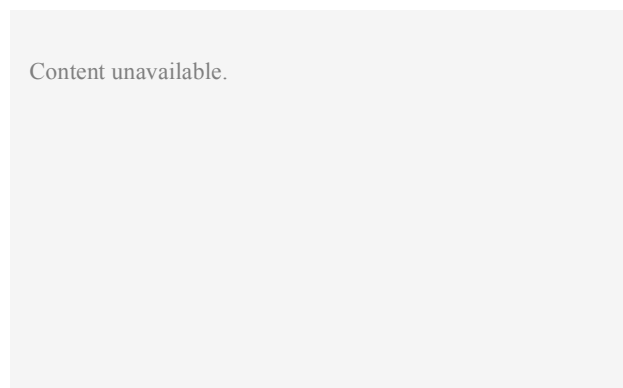

Fig. 20. Ji, p. 98.

In thinking about appropriate garden design, specifically, an interaction with site, we look for other contextual models for He Shan's design. We observe this first in the intertextual premise of the park's plan: "The design and construction blueprint of this theme park will be drawn from *Flowers in the Mirror* (Jing Hua Yuan), a novel written by Li

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[27] I refer to Alison Hardie's 2012 translation, *The Craft of Gardens*.

Rhuzen[28] in the Qing Dynasty" (105). It is a narrative model for an experiential park—not so distant from Kippenberger's premise—but depicted from within the story world of the work. The specific relevance of *Flowers in the Mirror*, as Hu explains paratextually, is its politics of gender equality which remain significant in a present "consumer society in which women are seen as objects of desire" (105). The representation of women in *Flowers in the Mirror* was unthinkable, as Lin Tai-yi writes in the "Introduction" to her English translation, "Li Ju-chen was a champion of equal rights for women at a time when feudal society forbade Chinese women to mingle with men or share their activities" (7). As such, the intertext appears like a window to another 'world'.

In regarding *Flowers in the Mirror* as the theme park's basis, we must be aware of a mystical indirection. Against Hu's explicitly framed awareness of the gender equal ideals of the intertext, the representation of women here strays into strange registers. The experience to be sold by Garden of Mirrored Flowers contains women as aestheticised objects, tourists will find themselves "amidst rare flora and fauna, surrounded by beauties" (105). This is specifically within He Shan's creative control, and yet the character is blind to the disjunction in relation to his source text. Each route to be chosen through the park contains the same compromised representation of women. On the sensibility route of the park, "The Country of Women will have a 'Cosmetics Central', providing specialized cosmetics and beauty spa consultations as well as live demonstrations, and will feature youthful Russian girls as accompanying dancers" (145). Even on the sense route: "Within Hei Chi Country, lectures and discussions pertaining to traditional Chinese culture can be organized, with all of them hosted by beautiful women" (145). Like Li's representation of something beyond present comprehension, we are forced to look at a conflation that defies progressive sense.

We see this reversal centrally reflected in He Shan's own romantic encounters across real and artificial realms. We receive colourful detail of his "Internet lover" (121), his Sims excursions (131), an obsession with a girl at the pool (142). We only realise He Shan's actual relationship with a young intern on the project in fleeting reference—"he could not convince Xiao Ping to go for an abortion" (141). The stark insertion of actual events into the story-world makes us try and look directly at the borders of the real, simulated, or imagined. But their exact separations are impossible to observe. As He Shan expresses, "Nothingness + pleasure, like similar artificial models of pleasure, are in fact the most wonderful" (121). If nothingness and pleasure are approximately equivalent, then we see that they both represent a

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[28] Also referred to as Li Ju-chen.

zero state. They cannot be added or pared apart because they contain no content. They are wonderful only to the subjective individual, He.

The confusion of such equations slowly surfaces as a conscious experiential effect. We are informed, "The sensations that visitors to the theme park will experience are precisely those that classical Chinese literature has always wanted to convey: life is a bewildering maze" (106). This confusion is similar to traditional Chinese garden design, as expressed in *Yuanye*: "In practice the designer manages so to confuse the visitor about how he came in, where he is and how he is to get out, and at the same time so to delight and lull his senses, that the space of his little garden seems to extend indefinitely" (24). Although couched in the frame of "psychological transformation" (Hu 142), the intended effect of the theme park has implications that seem to extend beyond perception. Like the discourse of the unending—realistic—Sims experience: "this theme park will transform the virtual trap into something with substance that you can touch. It will allow people to believe that the dream world is real" (106). The theme park is a "place beyond boundaries" (106)—a recursive, unending contradiction.

This incoherence allows representation to span divided spaces, associatively constructing effects. Shortly after learning of Xiao Ping's pregnancy, He Shan thinks, "ideally the whole of Garden of Mirrored Flowers would be enclosed within [an] artificial environment", controlling the seasons and "the blooming of flowers" (137). Then, on one of He Shan's Sims excursions, we encounter a narrative melding. He is setting out to meet the Fairy of a Hundred Flowers, a character from *Flowers in the Mirror*, who is responsible for the blooming of flowers in the mortal world of the novel (Li 20). There is a sense of recurrence: "This time, he traveled extremely lightly and flew to the indicated unknown island" (131). And on arrival, cross-modal association lends reality to the immaterial: "*This is the island I have been dreaming about; this is the real thing*" (132).

The island, garden, theme-park, and dream appear as mutual spaces: "The author himself also fades away long these routes, dissipating into countless fragments of leaves, traces of light and cracks in the wall" (116). As readers, we are observing through these cracks the experience of an unending and impossible structure. The text offers multiple secret windows into other worlds—close together but dispersed in possibility.

> At one juncture whilst He Shan was documenting his thoughts in a flurry, he
> drew his view back from the flickering computer screen and turned his
> attention towards the gray horizon beyond his full-length glass window. The

evening sun was casting a gradual and feeble smear of light onto the ominously thick layers of clouds. Skyscrapers were lined one after another, clustered like self-propagating cells that were frantically duplicating themselves and stretching all the way into an infinite nothingness. These mingled with one another to create the boundaries of our world. (146)

There is a contradiction here, 'nothingness' is the 'boundary'. Which is not to say there is no boundary. It is already the "place beyond boundaries" (106) of He Shan's intended design. The real world feels ominous. Xiao Ping has had an abortion. The design process is heading towards material realisation. He "stared blankly at the 3D model of Garden of Mirrored Flowers manifesting itself on his computer screen. For a second, it felt like the end of the world" (148).

<div align="center">---</div>

But this is not the end of the text. "Addendum in 2050" and "Attachment: Silent Theatre (II)" follow, giving the central narrative the feeling of historical distance and malleability in collective memory. These extensions reflect the multiplicity of the alternate entrances in sections A and B. In "Addendum" we learn:

Today, Garden of Mirrored Flowers cannot help but be a paradise for the people, and this is in line with its initial objective as an investigation into dialectical materialism—it has finally become an important base for the teaching of Chinese history. (158)

By introducing the conditions of another time, the representational model of the park is distorted. Against the experiential design of the original Garden of Mirrored Flowers, the interpretation reframes a material intent. The product exists suspended somewhere in between, like the first sections of the book (A and B) and their derivatives (A', A"…).

The speculative idea of A" emerges again in thinking about the location of the final section, "Attachment: Silent Theatre (II)". We wonder what might have been "Silent Theatre (I)". "Silent Theatre (II)" reads like an adaptation, but of what, we do not know. The text is intermittently headed: "A Director's Notes", "Him: […]", or "Her: […]". The individual perspective of the director, "A", as in singular, or belonging to our previously encountered realm, A, is unclear. The experiential versus the material again meet in a conceptual frame. The director wonders whether "on a material level, a book might hold more meaning than a film production" (164). Where meaning might sit in relation to either materiality or

experience is not offered. We are presented instead with three untouching perspectives that set the relations between worlds and their meanings askance. Against a postulate for the meeting of materiality and meaning, the Director considers the sense of "disappointment that is akin to the one you feel at the very moment you arrive at the destination of your travels" (164). An arrival that can only occur satisfactorily in the nothingness of simulation?

And so, arrivals, or closures, are consistently deferred in *Garden of Mirrored Flowers*. The feeling of the narrative exists most acutely in these spaces of not quite touching, as pans out in the work's final pages. Through the separated lenses of two unknown 'actors', we read two experiences: "Her", on a flight that "lets her flee from her homeland" (164); "Him", touristically travelling, "the sort of person who has the hotel as a home and his home as a hotel" (174). On her arrival, she is encouraged "to use her body as a sort of investment towards a new life" (167). We are told, the "prerequisites for a body are so closely related to the development of a city" (167). We wonder if this is in terms of classification, or life. The city is a body, and "the city requires bodies as tributes to desire and lust" (167)—it is self-consuming. We read "Him", on the other hand, as "a parasite dependent on information and time" (174), cruel and nonchalant, but empty. At one point, "he accidentally pushed open a wall. In fact, it was a door partition that resembled a wall, which opened up to another world altogether" (179). Illogically permeable, the individual must still navigate a particular experiential course, initiated by the text, intertext, and hypertext, but ultimately dictated by individual whim. As a result, deflections and non-meetings, especially of meaning, seem important. They are the possibilities our own reading did not seek out. The section closes with "A Director's" final notes, "Perhaps he and she will never get to meet; perhaps he and she will always live together—in my outdoor film location" (187).

This incomplete closure finally reflects outwards to Hu Fang's own practice and spatial construct, unclear, but in a way that allows space for certain growths, around material and textual forms, in the gaps between disjunctive worlds.

If flowers are the genitalia of the earth, plants represent the crystallization of love, and green leaves are the skin that sticks close to my being, then it would be a disgrace if I took the initiative to embrace, since it is the inability to touch that is truly beautiful and eternal. (Hu 140-141)

Fig. 21. Wen Peng, "Mirrored Gardens Geological Strata", *Vitamin Creative Space*.

Conclusion

Returning to the epigraphs in my Preface, it now seems possible to articulate some of their problems. The first is in relation to what incoherence actually is, as posed by Meir Sternberg's assertion: "*If all the parts of the work are badly suited to one another, the work is incoherent*" (379). In light of the work of Chapter One, we understand that "all" of the "parts" do not need to be implicated to produce incoherence, it just takes one logical contradiction that problematises the identity of the work. This is an inversion of what previous critics have assumed incoherence to look like—entirely without logic. Next, in to 'badly suit', we read non-specificity around what 'badness' and 'suiting' are being assessed in relation to. This could be on, or between, various different levels of textual construction or reading. More than this, badness—a great notion—suggests a connection to low-brow forms: the amateur, the pulp, the ad, the spiritual, the messy. It troubles the sensible boundaries of literary production and consumption. But finally, "if all the parts of the work are badly suited to one another", then this is one element in which the parts are not badly suited to one another (they are all suited in being badly suited) and the work is no longer incoherent. The judged work becomes coherent according to Sternberg's phrasing, while Sternberg's own framework illustrates the requirements for incoherence formulated in this thesis—a contradiction.

And so, we see one of the ways incoherence has been called upon loosely in preceding discourse. But why incoherence should be raised, and so often in confusing forms, needs unpacking. This returns us to the quote by David Carr: "Coherence seems to be a need imposed on us whether we seek it or not. Things need to make sense" (97). Where this need originates is frequently effaced in intertwined discussions of literature, art, experience, and history. True to Carr's sentiment, coherence often appears forced upon us, a rational ideal deriving from other, 'objective', domains. But it is also a "need" nefariously constructed through our own reading histories—an autonomous readerly expectation. In this way, the idea of 'sense' asserts a connection between the individual reading and a collective body of knowledge as something embedded in logic. But in a literary context, this is necessarily an imagined configuration. We see this, for example, when Mieke Bal talks about narrative in her "Theses on the Use of Narratology for Cultural Analysis" as "a construction, rather than a reconstruction" (225). There is no referent beyond the text. What is able to be distilled from a text is instead a network of associations constructed through language. Incoherence is to break

from the rules of the game, to reveal this associative arrangement, and to foreground its actual means of construction.

As I explored in Chapter One, these associative workings define the process of naturalisation, according to which coherence is assessed. Through Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's clarification of two models—those deriving from literature (constructionist) and reality (naturalist)—I have been able to examine separate sides of coherence in my Chapters Two and Three. In "Chapter Two: Parasitic Horizons", I explored how a work asserts its own relation to a literary context and the ultimately tenuous grounds of this performance. This was done through two processes innate to literary consideration, and intertwined in concern. In *Expeditions of a Chimæra*, poets Oana Avasilichioaei and Erín Moure explore the limits of what a translation can be or do. This is centrally interrogated through the figure of Elisa Sampedrín, a non-linguistically familiar translator and character of disputable origin and separation from the other poets. In *An Arranged Affair*, Sally Alatalo inverts preconceptions of appropriation as an implicitly unethical practice. Her use of other writers' texts allows a reconstruction of self-awareness out of the 'degenerate' materials of genre. The authenticity of this knowingness remains an open question, a constructed, or pre-existing, strain in a genre that is hyper-aware of its own means of production.

In "Chapter Three: Mirror Ends", I turned to the structures of the reality model, and their contradictory intersection with textual content. As Rimmon-Kenan describes, 'real' structures and concepts within this model are "so familiar that they seem natural and are hardly grasped as models" (125). And yet, *The Happy End / All Welcome* and *Garden of Mirrored Flowers* reconfigure these perceptions. The 'real' facets of the authors' or readers' realities are brought into contact with textual, or story, worlds. The effects, which should seem more 'real', are instead distinctly 'unnatural'. For instance, In *The Happy End / All Welcome*, Mónica de la Torre renders a pervasive uncertainty of perspective. Out of the discomfort that results, she forces us to question the reality of her process and exposes disjunction in the most conventional of materials. Hu Fang's *Garden of Mirrored Flowers* represents a final uncertainty of textual performance in relation to context. This is perceived through the relationship between 'Garden of Mirrored Flowers' in the text and 'Mirrored Gardens' in the author's world. The reflective space between is open to alternative expressive modes—uncertain in reference, but resonant of the murky gradations of representation and reality in contemporary experience—what it is to be "in my outdoor film location" (Hu 187) perpetually.

Across both of chapters two and three, we observe how the two models of naturalisation are inseparable, and how this maps onto our notion of incoherence in literature to begin with. There is a blurring of representation and reality, such that both A *and* not-A co-exist. Through these plural assertions, we see that incoherence has the potential to reconfigure representational possibility. Illogic is allowed. The precedents of conceptualism shift evaluative predisposition. And the uncertainty that results is particularly reflective of an experience of the contemporary. This is both an obvious acknowledgement that things closest to us are hard to contextualise, and a necessary recognition of the continual shifting of uncertainty—the incessant emergence of new relations and contradictions in objects we thought we had understood.

As a result of these convoluted attempts at 'sitting' with incoherence in contemporary conceptual writing, I suggest two things: the continual usefulness of the terms of literary analysis in the interpretation of texts that would initially appear to refute their application (i.e. due to evaluative concepts of the incoherent work, or the cross-disciplinary locus of conceptual writing); and in turn, what these incoherent works can do in updating literary terms in line with an unfixed contemporary. This, I believe, suggests the necessity of an updated, and non-evaluative, concept of incoherence in literary analysis.

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Fig. 22. Still from *Whether Line* (2019), a video artwork by Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch: "we jokingly say we're making an amusement park, but it's not really a joke, because we are" (Trecartin in Indrisek).

Figures

Fig. 16. Ibid.

Fig. 17. Ibid.

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Fig. 21. Wen, Peng. "Mirrored Gardens Geological Strata". *Vitamin Creative Space*,
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Fig. 22. Trecartin, Ryan, and Lizzie Fitch. *Whether Line*. 2019, https://news.artnet.com/art-
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