Conceptual writing & bpNichol

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What I currently find most interesting about conceptual writing – as exemplified in the work of Sarah Jacobs, Sarah Cullen and Emma Kay – is the engagement with Robert Smithson’s concepts of the ‘site’ and the ‘non-site.’ Robert Smithson, while best known as a landscape artist, also wrote on the relationship of the written word to sculpture and art, treating language as “a material entity, as something that wasn’t involved in ideational values” (Cummings 294). The site / non-site relationship both troubles and informs conceptual writing. Smithson writes that his “sense of language is that it is matter and not ideas – i.e. ‘printed matter’” (“Language” 61). Smithson’s dichotomy of site and non-site is explained by Gary Shapiro where the site is “the source of material or the place of a physical alteration of the land” and the non-site “its parallel or representation in the gallery” (2). Smithson articulates this differentiation as a means of troubling the gallery space, as interfering in one’s expectation of how the gallery economy is constructed, where the non-sites are “maps that point to an area” outside of the gallery space proper, although Smithson’s claiming them as ‘maps’ is troubled; he explains that “the pieces that I do on a landscape are maps of material, as opposed to maps of paper” (Toner and Smithson 236). The site, then, is “a place where a piece should be but isn’t. The piece that should be there is now somewhere else, usually in a room” (Heizer, Oppenheim and Smithson 250).

Smithson’s own Non-Site, Franklin, New Jersey – as an example of the site/non-site dichotomy – consists of five trapezoidal wooden boxes each containing a proportional amount of ore from an area designated in a series of five aerial photographs. This non-site references both the site of Franklin, New Jersey through the aerial photograph, but also through abstracting perception of the site itself. Smithson prompts the viewer to “think about the limits of their spaces and how to extend them beyond the walls of [the gallery]” (Smithson “Earth” 182). This ideation of the exhibited ‘non-site’ as a physical, material map which points outside of itself is a useful means of approaching conceptual books such as Sarah Jacobs’ Deciphering Human Chromosome 16: INDEX to the Report.

Jacobs’ text is available through information as material – a press dedicated to “work by artists who use extant material – selecting it and reframing it to generate new meanings – and who, in doing so, disrupt the
existing order of things” (back cover copy) and published by Simon Morris and Nick Thurston (themselves both authors of conceptual writing) under the information as material imprint. Tellingly, Jacobs is not referred to as the ‘author’ of Deciphering Human Chromosome 16: INDEX to the Report but rather as the ‘co-ordinator’, for the text is an over 500 page volume printed in microscopic type consisting of all of the mapping of human chromosomes 16 as found in public domain texts online. Jacobs’ text is, in fact, solely the index to a downloadable free PDF available on the publisher’s website, making the INDEX a double non-site. Not only does the INDEX point to the actual texts as compiled and ‘co-ordinated’ by Jacobs through information as material, but it also refers to the site of the original public domain text at Project Gutenberg, and ultimately to the chromosomal research which results in these mappings ([2]). Smithson’s insistence that the non-site points to “a place where a piece should be but isn’t” is ironic when applied to Jacobs as her INDEX to the Report is sold at £19.50 despite the fact the source texts – those indexed – are available free online at the very internet storefront which makes the index available (Heizer, Oppenheim and Smithson 250). The purchasable non-site of the non-site INDEX points to the economically absent centre.

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Sarah Cullen’s Maps (see Fig. 1) consists of a series of non-signifying maps, created by a ‘pendulum drawing device’ Cullen created from found materials, which map her progress on a series of walks around Florence, Italy (Cullen [27]). Maps, then, is a writing created by rote, where “language ‘covers’ rather than ‘discovers its sites and situations” (Smithson “Museum” 78). Maps is a Smithsonian non-site which points to the empty centre of the site of Florence. Cullen’s Maps cover the site of Florence, and the author’s presence in that space but also do so in a way which doesn’t articulate the site itself.

Sol LeWitt, in his “Sentences on Conceptual Art” – 35 sentences which operate both as a manifesto and as a piece of conceptual art in their own right – postulates that

28. Once the idea of the piece is established in the artist’s mind and the final form is decided, the process is carried out blindly. […]

29. The process is mechanical and should not be tampered with. It should run its course (222).

This shared processual base for conceptual art and conceptual writing is not to suggest that conceptual writing is a temporally-displaced adjunct to conceptual art, but instead that the two can be seen to share aesthetic val-

ues, and that conceptual art can be understood as a moment of Olipian “anticipatory plagiarism.”

As defining as Smithson’s articulation of the site/non-site relationship, LeWitt’s statements on mechanical procedurality are also vital for conceptual writing, as “[to] work with a plan which is pre-set is one way of avoiding subjectivity” (LeWitt “Paragraphs” 214). LeWitt and Smithson’s statements on mechanical procedurality and resistance to humanist subjectivity seems even more relevant. LeWitt and Smithson wrote in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a generation of writers later, and these statements seem even more charged. In his 1968 statement “Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth projects,” Robert Smithson proclaims that “poetry being forever lost must submit to its own vacuity; it is somehow a product of exhaustion rather than creation” (107).

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Exhaustion, as a creative methodology, is an interesting response to the poetic sensibility of the long poem – as typified by Charles Olson’s The Maximus Poems, William Carlos Williams’ Paterson, and in Canada, bpNichol’s The Martyrology – which is compositionally arranged around a humanist exploration of place, compositional time, subject and subjectivity. As Craig Dworkin points out in a recent piece on Kenneth Goldsmith, the collecting / accumulating aspect of conceptual writing becomes a substitute for the humanist drive at reflection (15). bpNichol, in his 9-volume The Martyrology, uses language to paragrammatically explore both semantic and personal meaning. While known as an inveterate collector, at no time does Nichol attempt to find a “way of avoiding subjectivity” (LeWitt “Paragraphs” 214) but rather creates a fractal subjectivity within language:

visions of poetry

(Nichol 61)

(a particular voice
particular obsession
confused with possession

Nichol’s obsessive use of language – such as his penchant for the letter “H” – while echoing the obsessive collector-minded mentality of conceptual writing, differs by focusing on the author himself as the ultimate subject of the poetic project. Walter Benjamin argues that “[t]he collector
dreams his way [...] into a [...] world [...] in which things are freed from the drudgery of being useful,” (Benjamin 9) and in The Martyrology the reverse is true – Nichol, as collector, dreams of a world where language represents fractally. For Smithson “each poem is a ‘grave’ [...] for [...] metaphors” where “[s]emantics are driven out [...] in order to avoid meaning” instead of reiterated at the paragrammatical level (“Museum” 80).

Nichol’s exploration of the long poem in “Narrative in Language: The Long Poem” contains some dictums which move towards conceptual art:

At a certain point you decide to start with what’s in front of you. There’s no point despairing of a subject, or carrying on some misguided search for a ‘great’ theme when all you have to do is start with what’s in front of you.

(392)

This passage also nicely foreshadows Goldsmith’s suggestion that “w[riting needs to be as simple as possible – just put a net up and catch it” (qtd in Perloff 82). Nichol’s concentration on the poetic, however, pushes the conclusion of his quote towards a more humanist conclusion:

the blue lines, the ink, the pen, the letters the pen shapes, the words the letters make, the table, the window, those leafless trees, these leaves in this notebook in front of me, you – the stuff of poetry (392).

Nichol’s move from “what’s in front of you” to “the stuff of poetry” is the shift that is avoided in conceptual writing, the idea that the content of the “stuff of poetry” is “those leafless trees [...] me, you” and that poetry must ultimately be bound to the person, to the experiential. Interestingly, however, in the same essay Nichol does continue to track writing into a series of statements which elucidate conceptual writing quite well:

Ordinary language is the hardest to write. [...] The minute you write or say the word ‘ordinary’ you draw too much attention to it & it ceases to be; ordinary that is. Extraordinary when you point to it [...] The extra has to do with singling it out. So that what is extraordinary in language is how what is ordinary is ordinarily transparent or invisible to us (392).

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Emma Kay’s Worldview successfully negotiates the schism between the humanist drive and the conceptual compositional strategy where “language is built, not written” (Wheeler and Smithson 228). Worldview is nothing less than Emma Kay’s exhaustive history of the world – from the Big Bang to the year 2000 – written entirely from memory. Like bpNichol’s The Martyrology, Worldview is highly personal, but instead of dwelling on experience, and the inherent ability of language to fractally represent meaning, Kay delivers in the flattened, infallible tone of a high

school textbook a history of the world which is created not through import or sociological subject matter but purely on the idiosyncrasies of Kay’s own (faulty) memories. Worldview spends only the first 75 (of 230) pages on the history of the world until the 20th century, focusing on the encyclopedic reiteration of history primarily from the artist’s lifetime; it is also indexed for easy reference. The index itself, much like Sarah Jacobs’ INDEX, works as the non-site documenting the site of Kay’s memory while it also appropriates the flawless tone of cultural authority. A sample section of the index to Worldview reveals Kay’s own selective sense of history:

HIV, 156, 181
Holland, 45, 57
Holliday, Billy, 113
Hollywood, 86, 99, 145, 190, 195
Holocaust, 92, 95
holograms, 129
Holyfield, Evander, 197
(220).

Worldview is a maddening text, as it testifies that a contemporary artist could actually conceive of a world where ‘Aerosmith’ (p. 132) and ‘Archimedes’ (p. 16) have the same historical credence. Kay presents a text which is both encyclopedic in purview but also centered on the fallibility of personal recollection.

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Worldview’s non-interventionalist practice is typical of much conceptual writing, as the filter between the ‘ordinary’ and the ‘extraordinary’ becomes a theoretical one – one that is explored through Smithson’s ideas of the ‘site’ and the ‘non-site.’ Cullen, Kay and Jacobs all accumulate language and representation in a way that foregrounds the materiality of text. Materiality here is not one of humanist poetic – ‘the stuff of poetry’ – but rather one that is developed through the sheer mass of the extraordinary ordinary.
Notes

1. And while outside the scope of this article, I would include (though by no means limit this genre to) Fiona Banner’s *The Nam*, Caroline Bergvall’s “Via: 48


Works Cited


Fig. 1 Cullen, Sarah. “October 12 2004; 12:45pm Clockwise around Duomo 4 times by bike.”

*Used with permission of the artist.*
____. “Language to be looked at and/or things to be read.” Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings. 61.


