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Architectural Poetics in the Kootenay School of Writing

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis interrogates the influence that architectural theory has had on Vancouver's Kootenay School of Writing (KSW) at the turn of this century. This thesis examines the work of three contemporary, innovative Canadian poets: Jeff Derksen, Lisa Robertson, and Stephen Collis. These poets all respond to contemporary architectural works created by the likes of Bernard Tschumi, Rem Koolhaas, and Charles Jencks. The correlated work of these three Canadian poets point toward a current moment in Canadian art when the innovative writing practices have begun to examine the role of Canadian culture within the urban space of "globalized capitalism." This thesis discusses the work of these three poets, Derksen, Robertson, and Collis, under an architectural rubric of structure, surface, and volume, respectively. Taken together, this thesis suggests the extent to which architecture impacts contemporary poetry's aesthetic design, doing so in order to argue that the contemporary, innovative poetry makes use of an architectural sensibility in order to articulate poetry's participation within the civic realm of the public space.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Introduction

Entrance: a space of perpetual return.

This project came about as I returned to the city of Calgary, Alberta after a three-year absence, between 2005 and 2008. Sustained economic growth – due in part to escalating global oil prices – had continued to drive the bounds of Calgary's urban spaces ever outward and ever upward throughout this millennium's first decade. During that time, civic rejuvenation and urban development seemed all the rage in Calgary. Once dominant landmarks now folded into the architectural surface of Calgary's urban texture – landmarks that stand now as mere instances of urban noise produced by the outline of newly erected high rises and office towers in a city gone mad with economic growth.[1] The city that I returned to had not remained static in my absence; its very fingerprint had changed. Like other global urban centres, Calgary was struggling with ongoing processes of urbanization and modernization, resulting in the city's inclination toward plurality and centrifuge. If we believe the marketing strategies of the city's tourism industry then, much of Calgary's charm remained in its romanticized caricature of a settlement on the edge of a Western frontier "open for business." The city's public website put it this way: "Calgary combines a thriving metropolis with Western roots" ("About Calgary"). It seemed to me that such a claim lacked a sense of irony about the "Wild West," now made clinically urban.[2] Nevertheless, what such a claim had also made apparent to me was that Calgary now played host to a dialectic of global capital – a dialectic that both entwined and shaped the very fabric of the city's urban texture: its art, its architecture, and its civic policy. When poet and critic Jeff Derksen lived and studied here, he had noticed that this dialectic of

global capital became most noticeable "through the multinational oil and gas industry, whose corporate logos hover[ed] above Calgary's gridded streets" ("Text and the Site" 198). We needed only look toward some of Calgary's most recognizable architectures – the (vaguely-priapic) Husky Tower, or the twin Banker's Hall – for evidence of this corporate branding. Even the city's population had broached one million in my absence (although city officials insisted that Calgary was maintaining its disposition as a "friendly small town" despite this boom). In such a short time, Calgary had become, for me, "something else" entirely: somehow richer, somehow "artsier," somehow – dare I say it – approaching the metropolitan. Every aspect of this city's texture, for good or ill, had *intensified* during my short absence: the suburbs had become more extensive; the galleries had become more current. But the city changed only as fast as money allowed – a fact only underscored by the global economic collapse of mid-September 2008. The fallout of this economic crisis inevitably brought many of the city's capital building projects to an immediate halt. Coincidently, that same month also marked my return to Calgary, and it marked the beginning of this project.

Welcome back to the Heart of the New West.™

Form, Sprawl, Scale: Where Has All the Avant-garde Gone?

My project participates in what poet Lisa Robertson calls "the forms and concerns of my community" (*Occasional Works* np) – those of Calgary's literary and academic communities, rescaled to levels both national and global, both contemporary and historical. My project suggests the extent to which architecture impacts poetry's aesthetic design practices, both past and present. My project argues that the influence of architecture on

poetry has allowed for the creation of new, innovative modes of writing within Canada –

modes of writing that express poetry's desire to participate in the public realm both as a

material, cultural artifact and as a socio-political tool. Following from what Hal Foster

identifies as the "textual turn" in twentieth-century art criticism, my project explores our

continuing impulse to "read" space itself as a kind of text.[3] As this impulse plays out within

poetry, poets begin to "spatialize" their own texts; they have become cognizant of the fact

that the creation of textual art occurs *within* culture – rather than progressively or

sequentially *from* culture – and they wish to construct a poetry that best reflects the spatial

mobility of language both within time *and* within space, doing so in order to activate a

socio-political critique of the dominant ideological contexts in which these poetries are

found. As such, my project aims at uncovering a possible critical language that might be

used in order to examine the bourgeoning field of "architectural poetics" – a poetry that not

only is informed by the socio-political and theoretical concerns of architecture and

urbanism at the turn of this century, but also is generated from such concerns within a

contemporary spatial and temporal context. My project attempts to put forward a possible

critical language that applies the discourses of contemporary architectural theory to the

contemporary, innovative writing of Canada's West coast, doing so in order to open up

such a field of "architectural poetics" to public examination. Crucially, my project does not

claim authority over such a critical language, but rather, my project provides a discourse of

possibility that such a critical language might hold for the future of contemporary,

innovative writing within Canada. My project examines, for example, the works of three

contemporary Canadian poets: Jeff Derksen, Lisa Robertson, and Stephen Collis – each of

them members of Vancouver's highly influential Kootenay School of Writing (KSW).

These poets all respond to contemporary architectural works – both real and theoretical –
created by the likes of Bernard Tschumi, Rem Koolhaas, and Charles Jencks. My project
juxtaposes the work of these three Canadian poets against the work of these three
contemporary architects. My project examines the work of these poets in light of the
influence that such contemporary architectural design and contemporary architectural
theory has had on the creation of their poetic works. Ultimately, my project argues that the
correlated work of these three Canadian poets point toward a current moment in Canadian
art when poetry has begun to examine the role of Canadian culture within the urban space
of "globalized capitalism," and further, my project notes the way in which poets make use
of an often radical aesthetic praxis of poetry – a praxis that frequently belies poetry's
underlying political, social, and utopian ambitions. Taken together, my project
demonstrates how contemporary poetry utilizes the notion of architecture as a cognate for
aesthetic design – a cognate that announces poetry's cultural location within the public
spaces of both politics and language within the twenty-first century.

My project consists of five chapters. Each chapter comments on poetry's overlap
with architecture at the turn of this century. This first chapter surveys the current theoretical
discussion surrounding the marriage of architecture and poetry, and this chapter outlines the
work of these three poets, Derksen, Robertson and Collis, reflecting on the architectural
sensibilities demonstrated within each of their respective writing practices. The subsequent
three chapters inspect more closely the work of these poets, relating their work to the
discourses of architecture and urbanism. I begin by inspecting Jeff Derksen's *Transnational
Muscle Cars* (2003) in relation to Bernard Tschumi's *Architecture and Disjunction* (1996).
In this section, I investigate the poetics of form, and I argue that Derksen makes use of a

disjunctive poetic structure in order to articulate a radical methodology for poetry's critique of the larger political world. Further, this section contends that Derksen's disjunctive, paratactic poetic structure lays bare the construction of local, urban identity when such an identity is placed under the effects of global capitalism. Next, I survey Lisa Robertson's *Occasional Works and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* (2003) in relation to Rem Koolhaas's *S, M, L, XL* (1995). In this section, I investigate the poetics of sprawl, and I argue that poetry extends its reach onto the surface of architecture in order to uncover previously unarticulated modes of expression. Further, this section contends that Robertson's exploration of Vancouver's urban topology represents the poet's recuperation of a feminist, lyrical tradition from poetry's historical, avant-gardist tradition, doing so in order to rethink entirely this tradition. Finally, I probe Stephen Collis's *The Barricade's Project* (2005-) in relation to Charles Jencks's *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* (1977). In this section, I investigate the poetics of scale, and I argue that poetry's elastic imaginary recalibrates the social and political cartography of culture in order to reveal assumptions about the use and reuse of language throughout poetry's literary history. Further, this section contends that Collis's recombinant use of poetry's historical modes of expression produces a radically eclectic poetry that underscores the poet's utopian ambition to construct a public commons within the privatized volumes of literary tradition. Taken together, my project discusses these texts under an architectural rubric of structure, surface, and volume. Ultimately, I suggest that advances in virtual, digital technologies have increasingly pushed both contemporary architecture and contemporary poetry toward highly conceptualized designs, hitherto impossible to imagine. And further, the use of such technologies marks a new intersection for these two fields in terms of their modes of

production and their modes of reception. In this final chapter, I note how the perceived "spacelessness" of the digital realm has come to function as a metaphorical model for the limited cultural spaces that currently fail to house, for example, Calgary's own dynamic, innovative writing culture.

My project takes its cues from the conference, "Transgressing Boundaries," held at the University of Salamanca in 2000, with proceedings published under the title *Architectures of Poetry* in 2004. Several highly influential, literary critics from this conference in 2000 have begun to explore the impact that Shusaku Arakawa and his partner Madeline Gins have made on the world of conceptual art. Craig Dworkin maintains in *Architectures of Poetry* that the fields of architecture and poetry "have [never] been too distant or estranged" (7). Dworkin further notes that the influence of architecture on poetry has motivated innovative poets throughout the twentieth century to take up a "literal wager," in which these poets refuse "to take the [terms] 'architecture,' or 'poetry' […] in a merely figural sense" (8) – a wager that continues to persist in contemporary, innovative modes of writing. As Dworkin explains, this wager demonstrates poetry's "willingness to take the unintended suggestions of language as reality," doing so in order to pursue "a figurative and subjunctive hypothesis [of architecture] with a quite literal, demonstrative logic" (8). These poets all seem to suggest that the terms "architecture" and "poetry" must be taken outside of the realm of simple analogy, and, instead, they deposit these terms into a new territory where architecture and poetry operate as cognates for one another: a newfound, aesthetic territory of "architectural poetics." The performance of such a task has led Dworkin to question if "those architecturally attuned poets [are] simply following a trajectory of intellectual interest that has kept a tradition of critical poetry restlessly on the

move and in search of new proving grounds" (7)? In other words, has poetry's movement

towards architecture been an expected result of poetry's already established historical and

theoretical interest in architecture? Or, is this movement, more simply, a linguistic sleight

of hand that has fascinated poetry's elastic imaginary throughout the twentieth century – an

interest that has only now attracted the critical attention of poets who are waking up to the

untapped potential that such a union suggests?

My project proposes that architecture and poetry have been joined together both

historically and critically. Western architectural discourse, for example, has made

analogous the use of language in order to relate the constructions of form, function, and

style to an awaiting public.[4] By the 1960s, however, the languages of poststructuralism and

postmodernism have seeped into this discourse, helping to perpetuate the interdisciplinary

migration of these two artistic fields toward one another. Indeed, critical discourse

throughout the twentieth century has helped to muddy the waters of reading between

artistic practices. The influence of theorists like Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco, for

example, clearly registers within the architectural manifestoes of Charles Jencks and Robert

Venturi. Similarly, just as the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have impacted

the practices of architects such as Peter Eisenman and Greg Lynn, so also have Deleuze and

Guattari impacted the practices of literary criticism at the end of the twentieth century.

Even Jacques Derrida dabbles in architecture in the early 1980s, once architecture picks up

his discourse of deconstructionism.[5] Moreover, many contemporary architects, including

Daniel Liebeskind, Aldo Rossi, and Shusaku Arakawa, list poetical works as part of their

publication credentials. Today, however, postmodern "starchitects," such as Frank Gehry,

Santiago Calatrava, and Zaha Hadid, have all revitalized public interest in architecture's

participation within the civic realm, often through controversies about the merits of their designs. The practices of these contemporary architects have helped to push the discourse of architecture further into the public realm, opening these practices up to both public inspection and public scrutiny. The highly conceptual nature of modern architecture even goes so far as to invoke the term "poetic" within such public discourse. But, as Alan Prohm notes, "[the term] 'poetic' as a label of praise or distinction within architecture is equally a lever for separation and dismissal" (par. 4). The crossover nature of these two fields appears to be somewhat double-edged within the space of contemporary critical discourses. My project therefore asks: Can radical, innovative poetic practices push the boundaries of contemporary, architectural practices in the same way that such poetry has pushed the bounds of literary criticism? What impact, if any, can such a poetics have on contemporary architecture?

My project follows along a similar trajectory taken by Modernist poetry at the beginning of the twentieth-century – a trajectory that, over the past century, has become increasingly more urban in its scope and more architectural in its sensibility. Stephen Collis has argued that our understanding of twentieth-century poetry's "architectural paradigm is crucial to [our] understanding of twentieth-century avant-garde poetics" ("Frayed Trope" 144). Such an influence of architecture on poetry has helped poets throughout the twentieth century to rethink the notions of "form" and "structure" in order to relate these notions to the political contexts in which such "avant-garde" poetry is located. By the early twentieth century, for example, avant-garde poets have already begun to break free from established traditions used to organize the structure of poetry. For these Modernist writers, tradition no longer works as an architectural metaphor for the organization of literary structure within

the avant-garde, and, despite the usefulness of such traditional forms as rhyme and metre, these forms are deemed no longer relevant to an avant-garde that announces its contemporary context to the worlds of art and literature. As a result, these avant-garde poets begin to search for alternative methodologies that might give shape to poetic forms and relate those forms to the social and political contexts of contemporary life. T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, for example, all corroborate the city as *the* central paradigm for Modernism, and they begin to utilize literary elements such as allusion, reference, and quotation in their work, doing so in order to organize their poetry in a manner similar to how the city constructs an urban environment through a sampling from a history of architectural styles and periods. Set within a period of radical social and political upheaval, Modernism's reconsideration of form begins to wake poetry up to the ways in which form and structure might implicate the varying and various political motivations of poets throughout the beginning of the twentieth century. By the mid-twentieth century, poetry's desire to enact a politics of form accelerates its search for other aesthetic proving grounds, and poetry undergoes a kind of discursive and aesthetic rescaling. Just as post-war economics rescales the bounds of the city, by pushing the city far outward into the suburbs and far upwards into the high-rises, so also does poetry rescale outward into multiple discourses and aesthetic practices. Mary Ellen Solt has noted, for example, that the post-WWII movement of Concrete Poetry has "revolutionized the art of the poem on a global scale," by "enlarging [poetry's] possibilities for expression and communication" in the domains of our public spaces (par. 1). This trend later becomes more sophisticated in its approach when poetry begins to engage with the theoretical discourses of post-modernism and post-structuralism in the early-1960s. By the end of the twentieth century, poetry's

challenging of the stability of language further presses innovative writing's formal

experimentation into the realm of the architectural. The examination of the materiality of

language, for example, has led to the treatment of the page itself as a spatial condition of

the text within contemporary, innovative writing – a condition fully charged with semantic

meaning. The architectonics of the text no longer rests on language alone, but rather the

shape of the poem must be carried over beyond the scope of written language, taking into

account the materiality of the page itself as an element of the text that creates meaning.

Moreover, poetry's endless debate over both the length of the line and the line's appearance

on the page, have once again brought the attention of poets back to the concerns of

architecture, since these poets have begun to question how the spatial qualities of poetry in

fact produce textual meaning. The innovation of the long poem, for example, has become

an increasingly important for late-twentieth century innovative writing. The long poem

form provides the poet with a space large enough to explore using multiple styles, genres,

and discourses within a single, albeit sprawling, text – a poetic form that includes the

genres and discourses of the architectural city itself. The American poet Ronald Johnson,

for example, explicitly uses architecture in order to organize the structure of his long poem

ARK – a poem that uses "beams," "spires," "foundations," and "ramparts" to hold the place

of individual cantos within Johnson's built work.[6] By the end of the twentieth century,

architecture's relationship to poetry shifts away from simple metaphors of structure, doing

so in order to articulate more explicitly the desires and attitudes that previously excluded

from dominant ideological discourse. When this architectural paradigm reaches the poetic

practices of Canada's West coast in the early 1980s, these architectural ideas in poetry have

already become "something more" entirely. Members of Vancouver's Kootenay School of

Writing, for example, seem to have identified architecture as a significant paradigm that allows for a poetic critique of the construction and perpetuation of hegemonic institutions within the public, urban realm. For poetry on Canada's West coast, architectural ideas have become an efficacious means to enact a political critique of culturally dominant ideologies, including those of neoliberalism and cultural nationalism. For these innovative writers on Canada's West coast, the use of an architectural paradigm represents a means by which to turn the language of global capital against itself – a language that imprisons notions of identity and subjectivity in a terrifying structure of domination. As such, these writers strive to imagine a poetry that asserts a space of resistance in which the "utopian" operates as a critique of the socio-political order of global capital culture.

Genealogy of Influence: Poetry in the Kootenays

My project operates within the context of Vancouver's Kootenay School of Writing (KSW), a highly influential group of writers who regard the practice of writing as a critical analysis of neoliberal capitalism.[7] Founding member Jeff Derksen recalls that the KSW responds "to the failure of most public institutions to serve their artistic communities" ("About KSW"). This response follows from the forced closure of the David Thompson University Centre in Nelson, British Colombia by the Social Credit government of B.C in the early 1980s. Although the KSW today represents a wide variety of poets who practice an equally wide variety of poetic styles, experiments, and politics, these members all hold true to the KSW's revolutionary origins, often by making politically overt a frequently Marxist critique of cultural production within their writing practice. To cite Derksen again: "[the] School represents a new hybrid: a form of parallel gallery and centre of scholarship,

open to the needs of its own constituency and alert to the possibilities of all disciplines that

involve language" ("KSW"). After relocating to Vancouver in 1984, the KSW continues to

offer "a broad interdisciplinary spectrum of [writing] courses" in order to promote an

artistic discourse both within Canada and abroad. The KSW emerges from a transnational

exchange of ideas, sensibilities, and politics in Vancouver – an exchange activated by the

American "Language movement" of the late 1960s and 1970s, re-imagined within the

context of an emerging Canadian national, literary identity. As George Bowering reflects,

"Vancouver poetry became very lively in the sixties, slacked off in the seventies, and

became interesting again in the late eighties" (122). By bringing with it the languages of

postmodernism to Canadian poetry, this cross-cultural dialogue has helped to usher in a

new era of innovative writing within Canadian literature. The KSW, therefore, represents

the culmination of roughly a half a century of innovative Canadian writing taken into the

twenty-first century. My project showcases the work of three contemporary poets affiliated

with the KSW: Jeff Derksen, Lisa Robertson, and Stephen Collis. The work of these three

poets all respond to the political, social, and ideological realities of globalized urban spaces

at the turn of this century. When taken together, my project argues, in part, that the work of

these three poets continues to register the goals of social change first mobilized by the

KSW and its members in the mid-1980s.[8]

My project also follows a vein of architectural criticism established after May 1968

in Paris, France – a date that Michael Hays argues conceptually marks "the beginning of

contemporary architectural theory" (x). Hays argues that, after 1968, the coupling of both

Marxism and poststructuralism with the discourses of architectural modernism radically

alters the contours of architectural discourse, helping to assert the prominence of theory

within such a discourse.[9] Hays further notes that 1968 also marks the moment when architecture's theoretical projects begin to subsume, rewrite, and displace "the methodological importance of traditional architectural historiography," (x) in favour of conceptual practices that long for "a congruence between object and analysis" (xii) – practices that, Hays believes, produce "concepts as fully objective and material as the built form itself" (xii). This bend toward theory influences an entire generation of architects to reinvestigate how architectural form perpetuates a socioeconomic *status quo* within culture, and the work of these architects have all later gone on to influence the poetries of people like Derksen, Robertson, and Collis. Indeed, the architects discussed by me all share a skepticism with these poets about architecture's ability to alter existing socio-political structures, since architecture is so deeply implicated within capital culture's narrative of "economic growth as progress." Such critique has followed from a tradition of critical analysis that proclaims architecture to be both the translation of political ideology and embodiment of such ideology. Louis Sullivan summarizes this idea in the late-nineteenth century, when he states that "form ever follows function" – a later rallying cry of architectural modernism (403). Problematically, Sullivan's formula implies that architectural use must necessarily define physical space *per se* by attributing spatial uses to spatial existence. This model disenfranchises the users of space from being able to determine the function of space for themselves. Architectural theory after 1968 has maintained that form cannot, or at the very least, must not follow function. Rather, form and function must share a dialectic relationship that remains politically neutral so that architecture might eventually become a catalyst for peaceful political change.[10] There is nothing inherently political about space *per se*, even though space can be, and usually is

imbued with symbolic meaning after the event of its conception. Moreover, such a critique

has become particularly pertinent to the activity of poetry, since notions of meaning

production are deeply implicated within the social space of language.

My project discusses poetry in relation to the theoretical sensibilities of architects

emerging from the generation following May 1968. My project begins by citing the work of

Swiss-born architect Bernard Tschumi. In this section, I examine the "disjunctive" structure

of Jeff Derksen's poetry in light of Tschumi's concepts of "event spaces" and

"disjunction." Just as Tschumi creates architecture through a collision of incompatible

materials and conflicting spaces, so also does Derksen create poetry through a clash of

incompatible cultural references and ideological attitudes. Primarily an architectural

theorist, Tschumi's texts mobilize the diverse languages of Henri Lefebvre and the

Situationists, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, Georges Bataille and Louis Althusser, in

order to uncover how, through the actions of users, the organization of built space creates

what he describes as "architectural events."[11] Tschumi has published many volumes,

including his three-part *Event-Cities* series (1994, 2000, and 2005), *The Manhattan

Transcripts* (1981 and 1994), and *Architecture and Disjunction* (1994). Next, my project

cites the work of Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas. In this section, I examine the ornamental

rhetoric of Lisa Robertson's poetry in light of Koolhaas's concepts of "Bigness" and

"Junkspace." Just as Koolhaas reasserts the prominence of architectural surfaces through

his creation of architectures that dissolve into a single, structural façade located within an

urban cityscape, so also does Robertson use rhetoric in order to dissolve the internal logic

of her poetic sentences until the structure of those sentence becomes merely an ornamental

and decorative façade within her poetic cityscape. Founder of the internationally renowned

architectural firm The Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), Koolhaas has been

widely influential not only for his innovative designs, but also for his numerous volumes of

architectural theory. His more notable works include *Delirious New York: A Retroactive*

Manifesto for Manhattan (1978), and *S, M, L, XL* (1995) co-authored by Bruce Mau.

Finally, my project cites the work of American architectural critic Charles Jencks. In this

section, I examine the radical poetics of Stephen Collis in light of Jencks's concepts of

architectural "utopianism" and "radical eclecticism." Just as Jencks transfers a

contemporary urban experience to the natural and pastoral settings of his vast, unfinished

garden landscapes, so also does Collis articulate such an urban experience of culture within

the pastoral settings of his "life-long" poetic landscapes. We might credit Jencks for being

the first to engage the language of postmodernism within architectural theory, doing so, in

order to question Modern architecture and define its successors – Late-, Neo- and Post-

Modern architecture. Some of his more notable titles include *The Language of Post-*

Modern Architecture (1977), *Adhocism* (1972), and *Signs, Symbols and Architecture*

(1980). For these three contemporary architects, the events of May 1968 represent the

disconnect between the practice of architecture and the ambitions of architecture, both

located on the horizon of emerging social, cultural, and urban change – a notion that has

proved useful for the socio-political critique activated by these three poets.

My project traces the routes taken by three Canadian poets at the beginning of this

century, exploring how each of their practices connect to earlier, established traditions of

innovative, "avant-garde" writing practices. Raymond Williams, for example, relates the

notion of the avant-garde to its historical roots within Modernism. Williams insists that the

historical avant-garde defines itself as a willingness to break free from the past – a key

distinction between the avant-gardes of yesterday and the vanguards of today (59).

Contemporary, innovative writing similarly demonstrates its eagerness to find recombinant

ways to utilize historical modes of cultural production in order to better articulate a politics

of the present. The KSW's own genealogical tree, for example, extends aesthetic branches

not only toward the Language writing movement of the 1970s and 1980s, but also toward

that avant-garde practices of Modernism and beyond. In doing so, the KSW carries out a

project of aesthetic and theoretical re-evaluation first begun by their progenitors within

Language writing. Ron Silliman clarifies, however, Language writing's avant-gardist

position. He explains that Language poetry's distinctive trait "is not its writing, but its

reception, not its attack on a prior canon, but that canon's reaction" ("Negative" 170).

Silliman continues: "Like other avant-garde movements, 'language poetry' began by

identifying its own distinctness, […] but unlike many of its modernist ancestors, 'language

poetry' also drew positive connections between itself and the work of preceding

generations" (170-71). This willingness to draw positive connections between the past and

the present prompts Hal Foster to offer an alternate, institutional model for a contemporary

vanguard. Foster argues that a "neo-avant-gardist" model refuses to "cancel the historical

avant-garde," but, instead, "enacts [the historical avant-garde's] project for the first time"

within the present: "a first time that, again, is theoretically endless" (20). Certainly, we

might view the works that my project discusses as playing host to Foster's neo-avant-

gardist formula, since each of these works demonstrates its own unique alacrity for

revamping history's modes of expression and cultural production. And yet, as Jeff Derksen

points out, "Language writers do not enact themselves for the *first time* endlessly, but rather

work with different strands of the previous national and transnational avant-gardes"

("Inside/Outside" 135). I might argue, instead, that such a description more accurately

describes the route taken by the likes of Derksen, Robertson, and Collis, each of whom

insist on retooling the past in order to better fit that past within the social and political

relations of the present. These three poets engage in a "radical" practice of innovative

writing, insofar as they partake of not only a poetry that imagines novel methodologies of

writing, but also a political critique that attempts to counter the dominant, ideological

narratives of global capitalism.

Finally, my project acknowledges the plurality of the avant-garde, and as such, my

project does not subscribe to the treatment of the avant-garde as a monolithic artistic

movement – if, indeed, such a movement does exist. My project does, however, suggest

inevitable parallels between the artistic practices of both contemporary architecture and

contemporary poetry, since both of these fields do engage in discourses that respond to

history's innovative modes of artistic production. My project also acknowledges the

problematic use of the term "avant-garde" for its apparent totalizing and unifying effects;

the term "avant-garde" refers to a subject position that describes a diverse group of artists

whose work responds to similar contingencies in vastly different ways. My project uses the

term avant-garde in order to simplify an otherwise complex discussion made even more

Byzantine through my project's interdisciplinary focus. My project uses the term "avant-

garde" in order to align the discursive practices of a diverse group of architects with those

of an equally diverse group of poets, all of whom share a desire to push the boundaries of

their respective fields into realms hitherto unimagined. In streamlining this discussion, my

project desires to highlight the degree to which these practices share a dialectic of form – a

dialectic that responds to what Greg Lynn terms the "heterogeneous cultural and formal

contexts" of urbanism taken into the twenty-first century (8). Within this context, both

architecture and poetry struggle to resolve the contingent historical realties of art, literature,

and architecture within the city. As such, my project uses the term "avant-garde" in order to

refer to the innovative writing practices of twentieth-century modernism, and my project

uses the term "avant-garde" in order to refer to innovative modes of contemporary, modern

architecture. When referring to a possible, contemporary vanguard, however, my project

opts to use the term "innovative" in order to denote both a political position that critiques

the mainstream in order to construct a space of resistance within capital culture, and a

subject position that strives to imagine novel forms of artistic production – forms that

attempt to enact such a resistant politics in art. Moreover, my project makes no claims to

periodization except to point out that both groups of architects and poets discussed herein

produce work at roughly the same historical moment in time – and, in some cases, within

the same geographical location in space.

Three Paths of Desire

Just as the avant-gardes of the past have pushed the boundaries of culture, so also

has contemporary, innovative artistic practices pushed the boundaries of today's culture.

The marriage of two or more of these practices only serves to exacerbate the reshaping of

such cultural contours. But, as Alan Prohm points out, "it is no use to go on being called

poets [and, by extension, critics], if the new landscape continues to be measured according

to old coordinates" (par. 4). As contemporary criticism begins to examine how, for

example, architecture and poetry might continue to migrate closer together, I might go so

far as to suggest that such critics now engage more closely with the larger aesthetic

discourse that the marriage of these two fields suggests. I have in mind, here, Steve

McCaffery's concept of a "parapoetic" discourse – a discourse that seeks to lay poetry and

poetics along side the discursive parameters of related, multidisciplinary practices, doing so

in order to suggest poetry's contamination into other, nearby fields of study. Such a

discourse seeks only to uncover a new set of coordinates by which to understand innovative

writing practices within the twenty-first century. In order to imagine such a discourse, my

project, therefore, explores a new set of coordinates outlined by poets Derksen, Robertson,

and Collis, all of whom comment upon the construction of social relations taking place

currently within our global, urban culture. Their work not only represents contemporary

poetry's engagement with such a global, urban culture at the turn of this century, but also

showcases the degree to which the complex interaction of the social and the political might

become built within both the civic spaces of architecture and the poetic spaces of

language.[12] Within the work of these poets, the city stands as an example of what Calgary-

based architect Marc Boutin calls "a verb": "a process, a continually shifting landscape

based on activity, accessibility and imprintability," all of which draws our attention forever

back onto the concerns of the urban.[13] As such, my project explores three paths of desire

taken by these poets in order to uncover contemporary, innovative poetry's location within

the current social relations of today's urban life.

Path One: Jeff Derksen and Transnational Muscle Cars

Transnational Muscle Cars (2003) comes to us through Jeff Derksen. *Transnational*

Muscle Cars follows from Derksen's earlier poetic works, *Down Time (*1990) and *Dwell*

(1994). His work has been published throughout Europe and North America. In addition,

Derksen has lived and worked, among other places, in Calgary, Vienna, and New York. While in New York, Derksen has been a fellow at the Center for Place, Culture, and Politics at City University. Derksen is a founding member of the Kootenay School of Writing. He currently teaches at Simon Fraser University. As a poet and a cultural critic, Derksen takes an interdisciplinary approach in his investigations of contemporary culture. Derksen's various poetic and critical projects attempt to account for the way global capitalism forms subjectivity positions, both within culture and within the city. His poetry fulfills a highly political role through its critique of urbanization and neoliberalism. As such, Derksen's poetry opens for debate notions of how the construction of identity might shift from the personal to the urban, and from the national to the global. We locate Derksen's poetry within an anti-neoliberal social movement that critiques the logic of globalization. Derksen believes that, when placed in relation to urbanism and architecture, poetry becomes a "compelling model for cultural production" – a model that may help undo the mythology of "economic growth as progress" both imposed and perpetuated by neoliberalism ("Your culture" 278). For Derksen, poetry articulates the passage of politics, thereby performing a social function as well as a political function within urban culture.

Transnational Muscle Cars departs from Derksen's earlier Dwell, which Susan Rudy explains "critiques multiculturalism and the politics of diversity for being in the service of nationalism" (Poet Talks 116). Instead, Transnational Muscle Cars critiques "the form of subjectivity being forged through the public discourses of neoliberalism" ("Your Culture Has Been Designated a Week" 282). Transnational Muscle Cars continues Derksen's ongoing conversation that investigates how poetic form situates itself within the discursive practice of capitalism's dominant ideological superstructure. This conversation

challenges, for example, the repressive tendency of "Canadian cultural history" to emphasize "space and place" over "how daily life is shaped at the city level" ("Fixed City & Mobile World" 34). *Transnational Muscle Cars* makes use of textual, visual, and statistical mappings of urban processes, all of which relate to the forces of neoliberalism. These forces, while spatial in nature, often contradict one another both in form and in motivation. Derksen notes that while "neoliberal globalization is partially an ideology of movement and expansion," this ideology "is also an ideology of containment [….] in which cultural differences and particularities are recognized but other differences such as class, racialization and citizenship status are kept at a distance" ("Your Culture Has Been Designated a Week" 281). Rather than succumb to the logic of such a system, Derksen transforms the structure of neoliberalism into a potential landing site for his formal poetic experimentation and radical poetic critique. Within his text, the poet itself figures as a kind of class "structure" that Derksen imbues with the power to alter radically dominant ideological discourses that attempt to contain and constrain such a structure within culture.

Path Two: Lisa Robertson and the Office For Soft Architecture

The Office for Soft Architecture (OSA) comes to us through Lisa Robertson. Her books of poetry include *XEclogue* (1993), *Debbie: An Epic* (1997), *The Weather* (2001), and, more recently, *Rousseau's Boat* (2010). Robertson's career is international in scope. Her poetry, for example, appears in literary magazines throughout Canada, the US, Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. In addition, Robertson has lived and taught, among other places, in Paris, Cambridge, and Berkeley. While at Berkeley, she has held the prestigious Holloway Lecturer position for the Practice of Poetry. This poetic career, no

matter how international in scope, nevertheless roots itself in Vancouver, where Robertson

has been a member of the Kootenay School of Writing since the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Robertson's writing practice emerges from a feminist tradition of innovative writing within

Canada. Robertson's work attempts to demonstrate the entanglement of writing and

feminism, since both writing and feminism practice, in her words, an "analysis of how

power circulates and articulates itself on bodies" (Eichhorn 377). Robertson's work

mobilizes a lyrical poetic tradition re-imagined in order to make space for a lyrical

feminism within contemporary poetics. Robertson achieves her poetic aims by adopting a

multiple persona dressed up as the most ubiquitous of contemporary architectures: the

office. Her deployment of the personal pronoun "we" throughout the Office for Soft

Architecture, for example, gestures ironically at the way in which contemporary urbanism

attempts overwhelm individual subjectivities in a façade of collectivity, a kind of surface

ruse that attempts to erase a history of disparate power relations, both economic and

political, both racial and gendered. She explains further that her decision to become an

architect is merely an "efficient" choice for her, "since the city's economic and aesthetic

discourses [are] increasingly framed in architectural vocabularies" (*Occasional Works*, np).

Ultimately, Robertson bases her "decision to form a fictional architectural office" on the

fact that "most architectural firms don't actually get any built work to do, [at first] they're

just writing proposals" – an observation that leads Robertson to define architecture as a

"language-based rhetorical practice, describing architecture that doesn't actually exist"

(qtd. in Smith). Taken together, the OSA's architectural practice attempts to redesign the

boundaries between the decorative and the functional by reasserting the prominence of the

decorative, constructing it as something other than mere superfluous façade.

The Office for Soft Architecture originates from an exhibit commissioned by Vancouver's Artspeak gallery in 1998. Robertson later writes several essays under the OSA pseudonym. Collecting these "occasional works" under a single title, Robertson publishes *Occasional Works and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* first in the United States with Clear Cut Press in 2003, then later in Canada with Coach House Books in 2006. Her collaboration with visual artists Sharyn Yuen and Josée Bernard results in the OSA's first work, "Soft Architecture: A Manifesto," in which Robertson showcases "what globalism [is] doing to urban politics" (Eichhorn 379).[14] Robertson admits that she finds the genre of the manifesto attractive because of its impractical ambition and utopian idealism. Commenting on Wordsworth's "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads,*" Robertson remarks, "the best parts of manifestoes are their lapses and practical failures" ("The Weather: Report on Sincerity" 30). Both ambitious and urgent, manifestoes attempt to actuate a new kind of politics intended to change the world at large – a desire shared by contemporary poetics. Robertson explains that this urgency to change the world at large often leads to the impractical, even impossible, considerations of authors, and, as a result, the manifesto too often fails in its task to become a utilitarian gesture when taken into the world. The genre's tentative and ephemeral nature likens the manifesto to a kind of superficial façade, or surface – a favourite topic of the office – that Robertson distills into the feminine subject of her poetry. "Soft Architecture: A Manifesto" demonstrates the OSA's first attempt to tear down boundaries erected between disciplinary discourses, in much the same way that globalism demolishes boundaries erected between the local and the global, and between the public and the private – boundaries that mediate ultimately the circulation of power between bodies, both civic and biologic.

Path Three: Stephen Collis and the Barricades

The on-going *Barricade's Project* comes to us through Stephen Collis. In addition to *Anarchive* (2005) and *The Commons* (2008) – both of which comprise sections of the *Barricade's Project* – Collis's other books of poetry include *Mine* (2001) and *On the Material* (2010). Collis applies his architectural interest to poetry in order to articulate his thoughts about possible utopian spaces within language. Currently, Collis edits the on-line journal *The Poetic Front*, and he resides in Vancouver, where he teaches American Literature, poetics, and poetry at Simon Fraser University. Collis is also a member of the Kootenay School of Writing. His *Barricade's Project* attempts to write "towards – or for 'the boundless'" – doing so in order to address the ideological construction of boundaries "whether social, material, linguistic [or] formal" ("The Life-Long Poem" 5). Collis admits to the ambitious and utopian aims of his "life-long" poetic project. He intimates that because "the realization of utopia is (at best!) still a distant, incomplete project" the life-long poem's "formal, aesthetic incompletion is also necessary (or else the poem leaves actual lived conditions too far behind, and ceases to be a true poem-of-a-life)" (8). Collis resists claiming an end to, or closure for, his *Barricade's Project.* Today, *The Barricade's Project* spreads across two volumes with plans for many future sequels to come. The potential vastness of Collis's "life-long" poem helps to remind us of poetry's own struggle to resist closure – poetry's desire to never have the last word, but rather engage or spark conversation that future generations might take up.

The Barricade's Project identifies scale as "*the* contemporary problem" faced by both architects and poets alike: the endless diffusion of capitalism within our contemporary culture ("Life-Long" 6). *The Barricade's Project* represents Collis's desire for poetry to

assert a space of resistance within the volume of this ideological superstructure. In

Anarchive, for example, Collis questions whether such resistance might find a home within

the discourses of poetry. In this text, Collis uses the Spanish Civil War as a springboard

into his own contemporary investigations. In his later text, *The Commons*, Collis expresses

his desire to find a kind of literary commons "outside [of] property's exclusive and

excluding domain" ("The Commons" Talonbooks par. 3). In the face of globalised

capitalism, Collis finds it increasingly difficult to oppose the forces that drive private

accumulation of both material goods and linguistic meaning. *The Barricade's Project*

revisits poetry's historical and underlying social, utopian ambition in order to enact

political change within the volumes of contemporary urban culture. In doing so, Collis

exposes the "singular unambitiousness" of contemporary poetry to participate within the

public domain ("Life-Long" 6). *The Barricade's Project* therefore asks the uncomfortable

question: Does poetry "do" anything anymore? To whatever extent poetry does participate

in the service of the public realm, *The Barricade's Project* reflects the poet's endless

frustration and unwavering hope that poetry might once again rescale its own utopian

ambitions to a position of former cultural prominence.

Poetry in the Form of Cities

In the 1950s, members of the Letterist International Movement in Paris had declared

that "poetry is in the form of cities," forever cementing poetic practice within the civic

realm of the public space (*Potlatch 5*). By May 1968, the Situationist-inspired revolution

had reconfigured the city's architecture "with decidedly *poetic* ends" (Dworkin 11; emph.

provided). Graffiti covered the streets with slogans promising utopia: *Sous les pavé, la*

plage [Under the pavement, the Beach!]. The promise of returning radical social change, which had excited an entire generation of architects and poets to revolutionary ambitions, had also brought with it an equal measure of disappointment at the reluctance of the world to go along with these ambitions – a reluctance that has helped to atomize artistic communities, weaving them into the fabric of inner city neighbourhoods and industrial districts the world over. Today, this atomization and dispersal plays out even in the urban spaces of Calgary, where artistic communities now face a condition of "spacelessness" a condition that has these communities endlessly searching for what little culture resources have been made available to them. The discourses suggested by the marriage of architecture and poetry now seeks to articulate this condition even as these multiple artistic practices and artistic communities continue to migrate together along a path of desire – a path that promises a return to the kind of utopian fantasies that might see these practices and communities assert a space within the urban texture of the contemporary cityscape. What more could poetry – or, for that matter, architecture – ask for: a space in the world and a cool, new confidant to keep it company along the way? As poetry now enters into the second decade of the new millennium, poetry will no doubt continue to forge ahead along already well-established intellectual and aesthetic trajectories, just as poetry will no doubt find new, untapped avenues of potential to explore. But, for the time being, let us enter into what poetry has already constructed in the hopes that such new neighbourhoods lay nearby: the poetry of architecture; the architecture of poetry.

Entrance: a space of perpetual return.

Notes

[1] Here, I use "texture" in the same way that Jeff Derksen uses this term. Derksen explains that "[b]y *texture* I mean the very tactile and material thing that Henri Lefebvre repeatedly insists on throughout his work on everyday life and urbanism – the relationship of appearance, experience, and ideology that 'affords opportunities' to social acts and spatial practices both collective and individual" (Introduction 10). Concerning the connection between the production of writing and the production of space, Lefebvre explains that "writing implies a particular representation of space," and he argues that this connection must be thought of in terms of a "texture rather than of texts" (118). Cf. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space,* trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

[2] In April 2007, *Forbes Magazine* ranked Calgary as the "cleanest city in the world." The full article may be read here: <http://www.forbes.com/2007/04/16/worlds-cleanest-cities-biz-logistics-cx_rm_0416cleanest.html>.

[3] Cf. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1996) 71.

[4] Cf. Georgia Clarke and Paul Crossley, *Architecture and Language: Constructing Identity in European Architecture c. 1000- c. 1650.* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000). In their fascinating overview of medieval and early modern architecture, Clarke and Crossley call into question what they understand to be architectural theory's overriding dependence on linguistic analysis to articulate the experience and production of architecture.

[5] Cf. Jeffrey Kipnis, "Twisting the Separatrix," (*Assemblage* 14, 1991) 30-61.

[6] The long poem also comes home to roost in Canada. bpNichol's *Martyrology*, for example, is among the best examples of innovative Canadian writing's foray into the

format of the long poem. I might even go so far as to suggest that *Martyrology* represents

the long poem taken to its logical conclusion: a project whose ultimate end is contingent

upon the physical death of the author, and must therefore stand forever as an incomplete

project, its potential never fully realized. Nichol's work is also well known for its scale.

Nichol's life long attempt to transform in everyway possible his first poem, "Translating

Apollinaire" (1963), for example, eventually becomes his forever unfinished long poem,

"Translating, Translating Apollinaire." In terms of Nichol's architectonic interest here,

"Translating, Translating Apollinaire" includes entire sections that attempt to map the

poem cognitively as if the poem were a three dimensional object being approached from

various geographical directions by the reader. Cf. bpNichol, *Martyrology*, ed. Damian

Lopes, 2000, *CHBooks*, 10 Aug. 2010 <http://archives.chbooks.com/online_books/

martyrology>; also cf. bpNichol, "from Translating Translating Apollinaire: A Preliminary

Report," *Translating Translating Apollinaire,* ed. Karl Young, *Light and Dust Poets*, 10

Aug. 2010 <http://www.thing.net/~grist/l&d/bpnichol/lnichol1.htm>.

[7] For a fascinating discussion on the origins of the KSW, cf. Steve McCaffery, *North of

Intention: Critical Writings 1973-1986* (Toronto: Segue 2000).

[8] Apart from my own misguided sense of cultural nationalism, I might also like to stress the

influence that the KSW has had on the institution from which my project comes. Just as

Fred Wah and Tom Wayman, for example, have both taught Creative Writing at the

University of Calgary, so also has Jeff Derksen received his PhD from this same institution.

Moreover, in order to substantiate my claim that my project involves itself with "the forms

and concerns of my community," I feel it necessary that this project make use of a coterie

of individuals who not only share my own political and poetical concerns for architecture, but who also share in my own genealogy of writing influence.

[9] Although Hays points out that "Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* and Also Rossi's *L'architectura della città* both appear in 1966," he also notes that "neither of these texts looks much like what goes by the name of theory" today, and he feels that the term "since 1968" covers this disconnect (xiv).

[10] Even Etienne-Louis Boullée notes (as early as the eighteenth-century) that the Vitruvian triadic imperative of durability, usefulness, and beauty– which together makes up "the art of building"–"contains a crass error" since it takes the cause for the effect: "One must conceive in order to make" ("Architecture, essai sur l'art;" qtd. in Tschumi 16).

[11] Cf. Bernard Tschumi, *Event-Cities* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

[12] Within the context of my project, I take "space" to refer to both a material object, built and defined within the material world and a mental process, conceived and articulated product of social interaction. When taken together, these two notions of "space" help to permit, promote, and regulate social interaction within the material and discursive world. Moreover, such a focus on the social production of space helps to expose an overlap between the production of architectural space and the production of poetic space. Within this context, my project refers to "architectural space" taken as both a physical object and a conceptual object. Further, my project refers to "poetic space" taken as both a physical object of poetry and the materiality of the poetic language, both of which help to comprise the poetic object as such. Crucially, the poets discussed by me in this project all make apparent their focus on the material assemblage of poetry – on *how* poetry works to produce meaning, rather than the manifest meaning that such poetry might contain – and, in

doing so, they underscore a spatial and material concern for poetry in the twenty-first

century.

[13] Cf. Marc Boutin, "Negotiated Space," *The Marc Boutin Architectural Collaborative, Inc.,* 17 April 2010, <http://www.the-mbac.ca/site.html>.

[14] Cf. Lisa Robertson, *Manifest pour une architecture douce/ Soft Architecture: A Manifesto*, ed. France Chinière and Susan Edelstein (Vancouver: Artspeak, 1999).

Chapter Two: 'Just how are you replicated in architecture?': Form and the

Architecture of the Self in Jeff Derksen's *Transnational Muscle Cars.*

This essay inspects structure.

Written in Calgary, Toronto, New York, and Vienna, *Transnational Muscle Cars*
tackles contemporary globalization in order to question why "this new imperialism behaves
so much like a classic muscle car – all brawn and horsepower, but with little braking power
and an inability to negotiate curves" ("Transnational" Talonbooks par. 4). Largely
critiquing what Jeff Derksen identifies as the agenda of neoliberalism, *Transnational
Muscle Cars* posits poetry firmly within the realm of the political.[1] Derksen explains that he
finds it "increasingly difficult […] to imagine poetry and politics (or a poetry of politics) in
poetry alone" ("Poetry and the Other Politics" 45). By making use of the languages of
economics, urbanism, and architecture, *Transnational Muscle Cars* examines how
constructions of "local" identity change within a system of globalization. Taking the local
to mean "an intersection of ideology, signification and subjectivity" ("Sites Taken as
Signs" 151), Derksen's interdisciplinary poetry focuses on what he sees as "the burden of
history carried by language" (148) – a history that culture constructs unevenly, heightened
by contradictions present within a system of global capitalism. For Derksen, the city of
Vancouver illustrates this point. He notes that Vancouver is, at best, "unevenly developed,"
hosting both "the richest postal code in Canada (the imperial West Vancouver) and the
poorest (the Downtown Eastside, magnified under gentrification's lens)" ("Poetry and the
Other Politics" 41). *Transnational Muscle Cars* demonstrates the extent to which such

uneven urban development has become symptomatic of globalization in urban centres the world over.

     Transnational Muscle Cars is a collection of long poems, all of which utilize an overt, paratactic structure similar to the form described by Ron Silliman in *The New Sentence*.[2] *Transnational Muscle Cars* forms what Derksen has termed a "rearticulatory poetics," which, as Susan Rudy notes, is Derksen's "making politically overt through startling juxtaposition, the meanings of apparently ideologically neutral terms" ("But is it Political" 196).[3] Derksen's poetic structure places such contradictions side-by-side, doing so in order to expose them to public inspection. This process of rearticulation agitates unintended meanings present within individual poems. Such a process creates a disjunctive text, whose effect momentarily disenfranchises the reader's passive absorption of textual meaning. Derksen's poetry keeps the reader's attention at, or very close to, the level of the sentence. Derksen arranges his sentences into a series of political, aphoristic non-sequiturs – what he calls "Marxist bumper stickers." The paratactic arrangement of these sentences forces the reader to consider how the contextual arrangement of sentences might subordinate the hierarchical arrangement of those sentences. Here, meaning production occurs when the reader forges the necessary syllogistic leaps between sentences that have little or no relation to one another. Within Derksen's poetic structure, the immediate juxtapositions and surroundings of individual sentences invoke textual meaning; coherence is merely an effect of the reader's experience of the text. This technique makes apparent the difficulty of accessing a totalized, narrative structure, doing so in order to allow for a poetic methodology that resists a narrative reading strategy in favour of a more contextual reading strategy. I might suggest that Derksen's poetic structure takes, as its intended poetic

subject, the ideological construction of an identity scaled to a level between both the global and the local. This chapter focuses on two poems: "But Could I Make A Living From It," and "Compression." These poems both comment on how dominant ideology, what we might term "the global," often co-opts identity, what we might term "the local," into forming an "official version" of subjectivity. Each of these poems speak toward how individual subjectivities engage with cultural production in the face of both expanding international economies and dematerializing geopolitical borders. I have grouped this suite of poems together based upon the shared styles and the shared themes of the individual poems, doing so in order to showcase three suggestions that Derksen's poetry articulates: first, how individual (local) identity enters into the discourses of the larger (global) marketplace; second, how the construction of identity responds to the dominant discourses of capitalism; and third, how contemporary artistic practices respond, or writes back, to these forces. These two poems explore the relationship between the public art of poetry and the civic realm of architecture following the neoliberal moment of September 11th 2001.

Structures of Production

Pauline Butling reminds us that "aesthetic radicality" defines the twentieth century within "the discourses of avant-gardism" (17). Butling explains that the "avant-garde" refers to both "a social position – ahead of the mainstream" and "a subject position – that of adventurous, forward-looking individuals" (17). Contemporary poetry's desire to create innovative poetic structures stems from modernism's earlier formal poetic experimentation. Such poetry engages with a radical aesthetic praxis that emphasizes, for the production of poetry, a structural methodology that is both innovative and experimental. The twentieth

century's various avant-gardist projects tie both radical aesthetic innovation and

constructions of cultural identity together within the discourses of a dominant ideology. As

Butling argues, the avant-garde persists precisely because it "fits [within] capitalist

agendas" by enacting "the progressive narratives of modernism" (18). The avant-garde

promises novelty, and, in doing so, "the idea of the avant-garde persist[s] as the basis for

defining aesthetic innovation" (Butling 18). But, the "new" is "old," in the sense that

modernism's cry to "make it new" is a project already complete.[4] Such promises of

aesthetic novelty merely rehearse a capitalist economic agenda that not only reduces

language to capital, but also, as *Transnational Muscle Cars* demonstrates, reduces

constructions of identity to capital as well.[5] Given the tension between the new poetries of

an avant-garde and the hegemonic discourses of capitalism, how might contemporary poets

construct a poetic space that combats or problematizes the larger, hegemonic discourses of

such dominant ideology? Contemporary poetry's experimentation with form has allowed

poets to assert a subjectivity position within the space of language, doing so in order to

interrogate how a dominant, capitalist ideology, in fact, forms such a subjectivity position.

Ultimately, contemporary poetry interrogation of subjectivity considers not only how "we"

fit within a space of collective, "local" identity, but also how such an experience of culture

determines "us."

Marx writes, "the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in

wax" – an action that he believes "distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees"

(284). In a broad sense, the sociopolitical concept of production bridges the philosophical

gap between social space and social praxis, as well as the gap between expected form and

expected uses. There always exists a gap between the conception of space and the

experience of space. Bernard Tschumi labels this gap "disjunction," and he claims that the

performance of a productive encounter with architectural space, for example, necessarily

requires disjunction in order for us to "read" space as we might read a text. The ambiguity

between what Tschumi describes as "ideal space (the product of mental processes) and real

space (the product of social praxis)" does not remain ideologically neutral within culture

(31). Much of how we come to understand our location, both spatially and culturally,

depends upon our ability to reconcile a matrix of often incompatible elements that confront

us daily – what in literature we might normally term a "tradition." Disjunction disrupts

one's expectations of both form and use, and Tschumi argues that such disruption produces

pleasure that users of architectural space gain from the various experiences within

architectural space. Tschumi further posits that users of architectural space relate to this

form of "spatial pleasure" through a relationship of violence, a violence that metaphorically

represents "the intensity of a relationship between individuals and surrounding spaces"

(122). In other words, the "violent" experience with the varying types of architectural space

produces pleasure, which, in turn, allows for a kind of "experienced space" that makes form

ready for consumption.

Form, like structure, refers to the delineated boundaries that make one space distinct

from the next.[6] The carefully thought out syntactic arrangement of these distinct spaces

comprise what architecture has termed a "program" that, when taken together, produces a

structure capable of regulating the interaction between the interior of a form and the

exterior of a form. I might extend this definition to other structures erected outside of the

material realm – structures found within the political, cultural, or ideological realm, all of

which help to govern, regulate, or engineer social behavior. Over time, however, such

"programmatic" architectures have become paradigmatic of their function. A paradigm of function suggests that a hierarchy must necessarily exist between the arrangement of architectural form and the design of those forms. We use, for example, chapels for worship, kitchens for cooking, theatres for performance, and so on. However, the notion that the function of these spaces defines the physical space *per se* suggests that utility alone necessarily determines the essential features of architectural form, thereby imparting symbolic meaning to a structure by virtue of its very design. However, such an activity is, at its heart, most certainly socially determined. This paradigmatic view of architectural design reduces the role of architecture to its most utilitarian ambitions: to work toward some unified political, ideological, or social purpose – architecture's own brand of a limited, official version of the self. Moreover, only when form ceases to work towards its intended purpose – when form no longer follows function – does such a form become "visible" to its user – its structure no longer taken for granted as being one built and defined within the material world.

The obvious – though by no means new – analogy, here, is with language. The syntactical positioning of distinct spaces gives rise to an overall structure, arranged according to the rules of a grammar. Indeed, a history of architectural theory indicates, as Georgia Clarke and Paul Crossley realize, a long-standing use of language as an analogue for both architectural form and architectural style. Clarke and Crossley note that, "the classical distinction between narrative (poetic) and presentative (visual) modes of expression [is that] the former [is often] understood progressively and in time, the latter simultaneously and in space" (2). One of the many implications of this analogy suggests that, if architectural form can communicate some intended function, meaning, or

sociopolitical ideology through syntax and grammar, then this structure can also conceivably be "read" as a language. However, Derksen notes that such an intersection between architecture and language also "leads to a larger – and antagonistic problematic […] of how social meaning is made spatial, and how space is central to the production of social meaning" ("The Obvious Analogy" 119). Only when language, for example, refuses to partake of its utilitarian function of communication does language also become "noticeable" – its structure no longer taken for granted by the receiver of such communication. Nevertheless, the assumption that users of both architecture and language derive meaning directly from those spaces *per se* implies that those same users do not also imbue those spaces with meaning long after the event of construction has taken place. As Tschumi puts it, "[t]here is no such thing as socialist or fascist architecture, only architecture in a socialist or fascist society" (8). Both architecture and language emerge *from* one's social and cultural ambitions, and not the other way around. The problem, for Derksen, lies with capitalism's impulse to graft this social concern for utility onto the body of individuals, thereby projecting "official" social meanings onto notions of subjectivity and identity – notions that have themselves been compressed by the ideology of capital culture.

Transnational Muscle Cars, for example, attempts to construct space for the poem's narrative subjectivity by using a set of often incompatible, ideological and historical markers, expressed in the form of the phrase: "I am so many years younger or older than x." These markers function like a set of coordinates that position the narrator at the intersection of ideology and signification within a given cultural milieu of capitalism. The opening lines from "Social Facts Are Vertical" illustrate this point: "It's not often I lament

a product" followed by "I'm 162 years younger than the term *ideology*" (68). Here,

Derksen compares the parallel events of the narrator's birth and the production of material

goods. This trope recurs throughout the text, and the poet seems to suggest that the

construction of subjectivity links external forms of identity, ideology, and material

production together within the structure of the self. Take the following phrases, for

example: "I'm three years younger than the term *Third World*" (24), or later on, "I am 43

years older than the term 'weapons of mass destruction'" (68), or better still, "I'm six years

older than the term *gentrification*" (103). In each case, Derksen attempts to triangulate the

narrator's identity within a set of intersecting ideological nodes, each node offering a new

terminological definition that not only reinforces the foundation of the narrator's identity

within a national and temporal context, but also reduces the narrator's identity to simple

comparisons of ideological production. These various (local) identity markers help to

strengthen the narrator's perception of his overall (global) sense of self, portraying this

subjectivity as a kind of architectural site located within capital culture.

However, while Derksen's recurrent use of this trope also helps, paradoxically, to

alter the reader's perception of his narrator's identity, thereby undermining the construction

of this identity. The insertion of multiple, new coordinates into the narrator's "structural"

subjectivity shifts the very ground from under the narrator's constructed identity. By

altering slightly the specifics of each of these identity markers, the repetition of this trope

destabilizes the narrator's sense of self. Derksen showcases the instability of such a

structure, and he problematizes the act of locating present or even future identity markers,

since each of these multiple "sites" of identity are kept constantly on the move within

capital culture. As Derksen has questioned elsewhere: "[i]n the face of corporate

constructions of our subjectivity that reduce a person to a 'living example,'" can the subject

assert a space "that goes beyond the limited official version" ("Sites Taken as Signs" 144)?

By recasting, or rearticulating the location of the narrator's site of identity, Derksen lays

bare the disconnect between the concept of identity and the production of identity. I might

even go so far as to suggest that Derksen does so in order to disrupt the reader's

accumulation of these identity markers, stopping any single marker from becoming the

foundation on which the reader might base the entire structure of a narrative identity. The

imposition of such an "official version of the self" grants only the illusion of a unified

subjectivity that might reconcile a matrix of incompatible elements that form the very

structure of subjectivity. By simultaneously constructing and dismantling his narrator's

identity, Derksen articulates his political critique of capitalism within a poetic space of

language.

Your Language Has Been Zoned for Construction

Tschumi rejects architectural analogies to linguistic form and style for reasons both

aesthetic and philosophic. He points out that, since no direct casual relationship exists

between semantic signifiers and spatial signifiers, architecture can neither "be reduced to a

language," nor can architectural space be simply "a matter of style" (3). He further notes

that space has become "generally accepted as a *causa mentale*" in recent years, and we no

longer assume space to be only a "material thing in which all things are located" (29). A

history of mathematics and physics, for example, has gradually dematerialized space into a

concept of an ideal, internal structure – a notion that later allows for the separation of space

into disciplinary subsets of linguistics, psychoanalysis, mathematics, and so on. Any

meaning that one might gain from material architecture, one has more than likely brought

to that architecture independently. By taking for granted that architectural form comes into

the world endowed with meaning, one assumes not only that a hierarchy of spatial

arrangement exists, but also that such an ordering exists necessarily in order for one to

access this meaning: for one to "read" architecture. Tschumi argues that such assumptions

interfere with a user's critical engagement with architectural form, and he demands,

instead, that a user consider space also as a physical thing, built and defined within the

material world. I have in mind, here, Tschumi's radically disjunctive (and often highly

theoretical) architectural practice. In his practice, Tschumi argues for the juxtaposition of a

vast array of incompatible materials and spaces within a single architectural program in

which meaning is produced through the collision of these incompatible materials and

spaces within such a program – a sensibility that Derksen also reflects within his own

poetic practice.[6] In doing so, Tschumi seeks to underscore a key architectural paradox of

space: the notion that space exists simultaneously as both a concept and a percept, both a

product of mind and a product of social praxis (27-29). And although one might be able to

simultaneously perceive space both as an abstract concept and as a spatial reality, "[w]e

cannot," Tschumi notes, "both experience and think that we experience. 'The concept of

dog does not bark;' the concept of space is not space" (17). Through disjunction, Tschumi

believes that a user might come to reconsider his or her own cultural location within space,

and, in doing so, such disjunction might press the user to engage with architectural form in

a such a way as to force the user to reconsider his or her expectations, either socially or

ideologically, to architecture.

Tschumi's theories on the production of form make evident a dialectic relationship shared by form and function, a dialectic that rearticulates the user's role in the production of architectural meaning. For Tschumi, architecture comprises the arrangement of "events," both social and physical, taken together within a given structure.[7] Problematically, however, the organization of such events inevitably suggests an underlying "grammar" at work, and it thereby strengthens architecture's analogous claim to language. Although one might call these events "uses" or "functions," "programs" or "experience," the activity of manipulating spatial signifiers within architecture resembles undeniably the activity of manipulating linguistic signifiers within language. Such a grammar of architecture implies that a functioning narrative exists behind the arrangement of a given architectural program – a kind of critical thought asserted at the discretion of a unified author. Derksen notes that, "this grammar of architecture as narrative […] ultimately deflects a reading of architecture itself [since] architecture must be textualized – rendered into *something else* – in order to be read" ("The Obvious" 117; emph. provided). The impulse to read everything into "text" follows from what Hal Foster terms the "textual turn" in critical theory and art criticism.[8] As Derksen explains, this impulse to turn toward the textual has "emerged from the influence of poststructuralism on postmodernism" (117). During this time, "it became relatively easy, even inviting, to read cultures, nations, history, the body, landscape, and architecture as text" (117). I might suggest, alternatively, that architecture is not merely *a* language *with* narrative; rather, architecture *is* language, just as language *is* text. Such a suggestion broadens necessarily the limits of what such a notion of "event" to be, thereby helping to reinstate the impulse to spatialize language in light of such an architectural discourse. Poetry becomes, for example, an "event" of language; architecture becomes an

"event" of culture. How one comes to understand the meaning that these events invoke depends on the individual's cultural relation to these events. If architecture appears as the built form of our social and cultural practices, then poetry is the articulation of those practices.

"Site" Seeing, or, Poetry as Event

Ron Silliman designates "the new sentence" to be one of many possible radical linguistic tools within the arsenal of poetics. Silliman argues that poets must combat the reader's tendency to circumvent labour production found within the act of reading. Silliman claims that when a reader refuses to partake of meaning production, he or she undermines the labour process inherent to language production. Silliman registers, therefore, the subtext of the "new sentence" within a paradigm of social change. Silliman argues that, since the reader may never gain access to the textual program's totality of meaning, the reader may only consider parts of a text in relation to other nearby parts in order to derive such meaning. By using a paratactic, structural arrangement within poetry, the poet can lay bare the false assumption that accessing such a totalized meaning might be possible. Moreover, his paratactic methodology shifts the reading practice away from a narrative strategy toward a contextual strategy that privileges the immediate, local surroundings of a given textual space. The reader must consider, Silliman argues, the sentence as "a unit of quantity, not logic or argument" – the effect of which intensifies the presence of polysemous ambiguity within the text, thereby intensifying the reader's experience of the poet's textual space (91). By metaphorically cutting up and reassembling – or rearticulating – the text, the reader produces the text's meaning. Although *Transnational Muscle Cars*

clearly utilizes "the new sentence," Derksen's approach differs from Silliman's original

concept. Derksen explains that his own use of hyper-referential, paratactic signifiers

emphasizes "the contingent and tactical over the strategic" in order to rearticulate – that is,

to take a part and put back together – a useful, even necessary, structural methodology

("Conversation" 143). Derksen notes that he redesigns the new sentence in order to better

fit it within his own (local) cultural, political, and poetical contexts (143). Nevertheless,

Derksen's deployment of Silliman's "disjunctive," poetic technique promotes ever-

increasing moments of semantic intensity, all of which activate the reader's critical

engagement with the text by working against the reader's impulse to absorb textual

meaning passively.

Derksen's rearticulatory poetics enjoins the reader to reassemble the poem's intense

disjunctive space into a more coherent text. On a micro-poetic level, Derksen's poem

"Jobber," for example, utilizes a bank of short, terse poetic lines that spill over one into the

next, making for a disconnected reading. Here, "humans (labour), fast" at the "holy shit

level of/ good-evil" (81). In this poetic space, the reader must become a kind of "jobber," or

one who works toward the production of textual meaning. Derksen explains that the poem

is "an allegory/ of ouch stretched/ to an epic, nervous/ get local" (81). Derksen's

disjunctive phraseology demonstrates such a disruptive "allegory of ouch," since he

showcases the ability of language to both prop up textual meaning and halt its passage

entirely. The following lines from "Jobber" might illustrate such a disjunctive poetic space:

"clueless/ guesses soft subs for community/ out of industry, put in/ a post, way/ that you

feel why, help/ it" (83). These lines lack the kind of functional grammatical structure that

allows for the passage of meaning. Instead, these lines embody an arbitrary architectural

ordering that forces the reader's attention toward more localized moments of semantic intensity – "soft subs for community," if you will. Derksen's disjunctive use of the phrase "put in/ a post," for example, temporarily halts the reader. When the reader butts up against these posts in language, the reader must decide how these "posts" function: What image do these posts connect to or prop up – the posts in postmodernism, postcultural, postindustrial, et cetera? At this localized level, the reader either labours "out of industry," choosing to connect these abrupt stoppages together, or the reader simply runs "out of labour," occupying a post-industrial space without a job to perform. Derksen reminds us that the "danger of this researching of the local" occurs when "intentionality take[s] over from context – when the texts ask for a decoding of […] a 'true' text under the agitated surface of signs, and the reader is to arrive at it through a piecing together of a text" ("Sites Taken as" 159). Derksen warns against such a misuse of disjunction, since this method merely performs a kind of "surface ruse" that reinforces the notion of a unified author from whom all meaning is transmitted (159). As Derksen elaborates, such "disjunctiveness" becomes a "device [used] only to agitate the surface […], a kind of cut-up method that leaves the central subject intact and does not challenge how meaning is made socially" (159). Derksen urges poets, instead, to question the extent to which one takes for granted – politically, socially – the architectural structures of identity and subjectivity when such structures become activated within poetry.

On a macro-poetic level, Derksen compiles his "archi-textural" environment through a layering of disjunctive, aphoristic non-sequiturs. While Derksen often juxtaposes these sentences incompatibly with one another, he nevertheless maintains thematic "through-lines" that function like kinds of poetic "events" throughout his text. For example,

Derksen riffs on well-known melodic lines from popular songs throughout *Transnational Muscle Cars*, doing so in order not only to bring out the song's underlying political message, but also to signify the link between popular culture and contemporary poetry. Take, for example, Derksen's line "Stop listen what's that sound of the architects listening/ to the margins of modernism" (78). Sampled from Buffalo Springfield's 1967 hit "For What It's Worth," the original lyrics read "Stop, children, what's that sound? Everybody look what's going down." This song recalls a historical moment of intense, global ideological competition stemming from the Vietnam War. By altering the lyrics, Derksen strives for a kind of recontextualization that extends the song's initial provocations to include Derksen's own contemporaneous identity, city, and ideology. Interestingly, many of these riffs gesture at specific moments of radical, socio-cultural change, moments that are linked to the events of the Situationist-inspired rebellion in May '68. I might surmise that, here, Derksen wishes to "elevate poetry to pop culture" (30), doing so in order to take poetry out of the institution and into the streets of everyday language. Consider Derksen's replication of class struggle found within his sampling of the Rolling Stones' hit "Jumping Jack Flash," – a song also released in May of 1968: "Concrete and glass/ it's a class, class, class" (19). Or, the line, "Killing me softly/ with your architecture" (42) – after Roberta Flack's single "Killing Me Softly With His Song" (1973). In each case, Derksen reframes his usage of musical lyrics in terms of architectural themes. When taken together, these musical riffs comprise the urban, acoustic surroundings of Derksen's cityscape, in which his narrator sets out to uncover the construction of his identity.

Tower One: But Can I Make A Living From It

Derksen's narrator demands to know, "Just how are you replicated in architecture?" (28). We might reframe this question in one of two ways: how do I, either as a user of space or as a reader of text, identify with my spatial environment; or, how does space come to embody social ideology? The first question addresses the creation of spatial and textual programs on a local, personal level; the second question addresses the creation of spatial and textual programs on a global, urban level. These two questions work in tandem throughout *Transnational Muscle Cars*; however, Derksen offers us a couple of avenues for exploration within his poem, "But Can I Make A Living From It." Consider the opening sentence: "That's a nice sunset you have there" (24). Now compare that sentence with one occurring a few lines later: "The sun reflects off the triangular glass tower down-/town and into my bed – I sprawl on this corporate/ light" (24). Here, Derksen narrows the reader's scope from the universal, an image of a sunset, to the geopolitical, "the triangular glass tower," then finally to the personal, "I sprawl." This simultaneous vertical movement and horizontal narrowing helps to triangulate the narrator's subjectivity within the civic realm of the built space, all of which Derksen frames in the languages of capitalism and architecture. Notice also how Derksen displays his narrator, placing him not under the shadow of an office tower – the very symbol of corporatized capitalism – but basking in the light reflected off of the surface of a neighboring architectural structures. By ironically suggesting that his narrator might bask in the light of capitalism and capitalize upon the universal – that "you," for example, can "have" a sunset that is "idealistic 'cheerful' and unrelenting" (33) – Derksen activates the narrator's ironic desire to accumulate goods, to participate within the global, dominant ideology.

The narrator's leisure time is soon interrupted, however, and his thoughts begin to turn to the economy and his place within the economy. The narrator remarks, "Leisure is just organized production" (27), and he concedes the fact that he is merely "a proud yet flexible and disposable worker" (27). Throughout this poem, the narrator expresses his anxiety about poetry's inability to participate productively within the economy. The title of the poem even suggests this anxiety: "But Could I Make A Living From It?" However, the narrator acknowledges, even welcomes, his static position within poet-class once such a class has been taken into the corporatized, urban world: "Outside of metaphor I have a body, but as a statistic/ I at least can show up on a bar graph" (25). He even goes so far as to suggest that, "If only we could elevate poetry to pop culture," then he might be able to legitimize poetry as viable, productive class structure: "A slough of pop culture with its eternal returns" (36) – "smells like corporate spirit" (30)! Unfortunately, his desire remains unfulfilled, and he resigns himself, stating, "I'll quietly wait for my big break" (30). He later explains that, "The problem has not been me, but my inability to admit that I am the problem" (31), and he decides to "Rank [his] unhappiness and then write a book" (31). The same processes that construct class systems present within global capital culture, also drive architecture and poetry into the arms global capital: the ranking of individual subjectivities hierarchically based upon the ability to produce towards or for the betterment of the economy.

As the narrator begins to identify his role within the global economy, the poem becomes more explicit with its architectural metaphors. For example, the narrator comments: "The cultural plan has me a highrise whereas I want to be a stadium" (32). This sentence precedes the statement, "The cold humanizes the city – its body steams" (32).

Here, Derksen conflates notions of the body – both the human body and the architectural body – by swapping out one for the other as needed. Derksen draws the reader's attention to the plasticity of the body and the plasticity of identity, paralleling them with the plasticity of the architectural city. These moments of architectural reference tend to occur in close succession throughout this poem, appearing as kinds of intense, semantic events within the text. Consider the following three lines: "Just how are you replicated in architecture?" (28); "Autonomous condo" (29); "I am the same age as Mies van Der Rohe's Seagram Building" (29). Derksen brackets this image of a single, urban dwelling with, on one side, a question pertaining to how architecture represents individual identity, and, on the other side, a statement suggesting how subjectivity relies on architecture for its production. Taken together, these three moments suggest that notions of identity, subjectivity, and the body are all housed within an independent space, like an "autonomous condo" within the urban superstructure of the city: identity replicated in architecture.

Tower Two: Compression

Derksen's critique of the logic of neoliberalism comes to a head in "Compression." This poem registers the full impact of neoliberal globalism by tracing the fall-out of the events of September 11th 2001 – an event that, at its heart, demonstrates how conflicting ideologies and subjectivities might play out on the stage of architecture. Within the discourses of the post-9/11 world, the site of the World Trade Centre (WTC) transcends material architecture by embodying the very essence of corporate America under attack. The destruction of the WTC site registers as perhaps the loudest critique of neoliberalism to date, and the fallout of which continues to impact the world of art, literature, and politics.[9]

Derksen's poem argues that the context of future discussions surrounding this event form a "narrative that begins… 'When the markets were rising and everyone was getting rich" (110) – in corporate America, at least. "Compression" begins by measuring the impact of 9/11 on scale of corporate loss: "Insignia remembers" (104), "Pace University remembers" (105), "Bank of America remembers" (108), "AON remembers" (110) – all companies that lost offices and employees in the attacks. But here, Derksen attempts to counter this corporate constructed narrative. He asks his reader, instead, to consider: "If capitalism kills you, who do you complain to?" (110). For Derksen, the events of 9/11 represent the reversal of American globalism's target, its intent turned back on itself. "Compression" questions at what scale do corporations measure loss, "In paper not people!" or in "People not square footage"? (104). In this regard, "Compression" attempts to imagine a counter-narrative that refuses to activate fully the post-9/11 "narrative that begins, 'Under the old capitalism…'" (104), and the poem suggests the role that contemporary art might play in the years to come. I might even suggest that Derksen seems to take a critical position that echoes the response to the events of 9/11 articulated by the current *enfant terrible* of the visual art world, Damien Hirst. Hirst claims, for example, that 9/11 is "an artwork in its own right," and he explains that while the attacks are undoubtedly ignominious, "[the hijackers] achieved something which nobody would have ever thought possible": the widespread changing of our visual language on a scale that art may only aspire to.[10] Hirst's comments have sparked widespread public condemnation not only because of their timing – the eve of the first anniversary of 9/11 – but also because his comments shift the focus of 9/11 away from the public's understanding of the event as an act of terror perpetuated against American people to a critique levied against the everyday activities of America.

Certainly, the political rhetoric of the day draws such a line in the sand. Recall, for example, President Bush's demand for unilateral support – "with emphasis on *uni*" (Derksen 105) – when he addresses the United Nations: "You're either with us or against us in the fight against terror."[11] Within this context, I might argue that Derksen's poetry interrogates where exactly such a dichotomy leaves poetry when poetry aims at securing political dissent within the public realm.

Derksen suggests the extent to which public art has been made suspicious in the face of tragedy, as if to imply that, by seizing upon (cultural) events of crisis in order to make some artistic or political statement on such events, art violates the terms of freedom that neoliberalism affords to culture at large. "Compression" puts it this way: "Two types of freedom (now seems even excessive)" (106).[12] The poem's opening line, for example, reads: "No photos, it's not Disneyland," and Derksen follows this sentence with the command, "Get your avant-gardist good life out of my face!" (103). However, Derksen quickly points out that WTC site has itself become commodified, the site transformed into a place where one might pay tribute to the wounds left behind by the enormities of global capitalism. Even in the absence of architecture, the architectural site draws our public curiosity towards it, energizing it with the potential for the "Commodification of everything, again" (108). The poem even goes so far as to note that, following the attacks, "Suddenly a city [became] saturated with police, globally guarding Starbucks," (104) while no one "noticed any new forms of imperialism" (104). Indeed, I might point out that President Bush's plea for Americans to "go shopping" suggests the overriding desire to maintain an economic status quo following the attacks.[13] As the poem notes, "Today the climate is … 'favourable for business'" (105). But what of the business of art? Should

poetry also "go shopping" for alternate grounds from which to confect its critique of culture? Or, should poetry simply abandon its line of criticism in favour of more politically neutral modes of expression?

Daniel Libeskind recalls, for example, that when he had first begun to design the site of the new World Trade Center, "New Yorkers were divided as to whether to keep the site of the World Trade Center empty or […] to build upon it" ("Memory Foundations par. 5). He notes that both stances posit an "impossible dichotomy" that his architecture might confront: either the site must remain empty in order to "acknowledge the terrible deaths," or, he must rebuild the site in order to "[look] to the future with hope" (par. 5). By refusing to comment upon the events of history, art renders itself useless, defunct as a means to articulate our cultural ambitions and cultural aspirations. Ultimately, Libeskind bases his choice to construct a new, memorial architecture on the belief that art presupposes its ability to restore "the spiritual peak to the city," and he argues that by creating a new architecture, such a work might speak "of our vitality in the face of danger and our optimism in the aftermath of tragedy" (par. 12). The local, political demands of the urban compresses our individual subjectivities together with our cultural desires, doing so in order to form a singular "site" of signification – a site that poetry gladly announces to the world, both as an event within language and as an event within culture. Derksen's poem, "Compression" makes apparent the notion that hegemonic ideology must not be kept off limits and at a distance from the activities of art, even when, or especially when these activities attempt to levy a critique against such ideologies. When art freely critiques urban policies, structures, and ideologies, art charges the city's creative terrain with an energy that might inspire future urban regeneration.

Bernard Tschumi tells us that "[a]rchitecture is not about the conditions of design but about the design of conditions that will dislocate the most traditional aspects of our society […] in the most liberating way" (259). I might argue much the same for poetry. Derksen's structural methodology exposes how the forces of the dominant ideology of globalized capitalism form subjectivity. *Transnational Muscle Cars* reflects the poet's attempt to contextualize both his spatial and his temporal location within the language of local identity. Within this matrix of ideology and signification, the subject, for Derksen, becomes a kind of site – an "architecture" built disjunctively within culture. Ultimately, Derksen performs this kind of research by using a poetic structure that enacts a methodology for social change. As poetry continues to take up the tasks of architecture, the gap between these two fields of architecture and poetry narrow. This narrowing provides for the establishment of new relations between textual spaces and linguistic events. As this gap narrows, our conception of space begins to take on new discursive and ideological parameters that may yet prove useful to the formal considerations of poetry's future generations. The dialectic of form shared between these two fields suggests opportunities for these two fields to share resources of design, theory, and methodology. The design of poetic spaces that enact a political critique of dominant ideology might even prove useful as a model for architecture's own critique of such a politics. Poetry may yet find a way to melt solids into air.

Notes

[1] Harvey argues that "[neoliberalism] is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices [– a theory] that proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong property rights, free markets, and free trade," and neoliberalism also "seeks to bring all human interactions into the domain of the market." Cf. Harvey, David, *Short History of Neoliberalism*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006) 2-3.

[2] Bob Perelman, for example, characterizes the "new sentence" as being symptomatic of a culture that has become increasingly familiar with the non-sequitur, paratactic arrangement of information. He explains that, since we have become objects of the media's attention "we are inundated by intense, continual bursts of narrative […] but these [narratives] are tightly managed miniatures set paratactically against the conglomerate background that produces them" (313). The new sentence technique uses parataxis in order to write in opposition to these market forces. When reading a poem that utilizes the technique of the "new sentence," for example, meaning production stems from the reader's experience of the text taken over time, and not managed by the author who produces the text. Cf. Bob Perelman, "Parataxis and Narrative: The New Sentence in Theory and Practice," *American Literature* 65 (1993) 313-24; also, cf. Ron Silliman, "The New Sentence" (New York: Roof, 1987) 91.

[3] Cf. Jeff Derksen, "Poetry and Other Rearticulatory Practices," unpublished.

[4] Cf. Bök, Christian, and Darren Wershler-Henry, "What Poets Are Doing: An Interview" (*Brick* 69, Spring 2002) 109-10. In this conversation, Bök notes that "novelty is no longer particularly ground-breaking, since newness has itself become nothing more than an

upgrade to the software of ideology" (109). Wershler-Henry responds to this insight,

explaining that poets "can no longer 'make it new' because that was what the modernists

did. Making it new is old" (109-10).

[5] Here, my argument follows from insights made by the likes of Ron Silliman, Charles

Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, Steve McCaffery, and Jeff Derksen – all of whom comment upon

how language functions as capital and how poetry shares a dialectic relationship to

capitalism. While the arguments made by these critics are both compelling and convincing,

these arguments are also far too extensive to rehearse here with any justice. All of these

critics, however, suggest the ways in which a radical poetic structure may be used as a

methodology to combat the potential alienating forces of capitalism. Cf. Ron Silliman,

"Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World," *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*

Book, ed. Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1984)

121-32; Charles Bernstein, "The Dollar Value of Poetry" *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-*

1984, (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1986) 57-60; Lyn Hejinian, "The Rejection of Closure,"

(*Poetics Journal* 4 [1984]) 134-43; Steve McCaffery, *North of Intention: Critical Writings*

1973-1986, (NY: Roof, 1986) 201-21; and Jeff Derksen, "Where Have All the Equal Signs

Gone?: Inside & Outside the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Site," 10 Aug. 2010,

<http://www.lot.at/mynewidea_com/critframeset.html>.

[6] Cf. Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996)

207-26.

[7] Concerning the assemblage of architectural sequences, Tschumi argues that architecture

includes three relations: first, architecture implies "an internal relation, which deals with

the method of work, […] a device, [or] a procedure"; second, architecture implies "the

juxtaposition of actual spaces," whose spatial arrangement has remained more or less "constant throughout history," but whose "morphological variations are endless"; third, architecture implies "a program [of] occurrences or events," which characterize architecture's "[s]ocial and symbolic" connotations (153). Taken together, these three relations comprise what Tschumi terms a "programmatic sequence" of architecture – a paradigm that Tschumi desires to critique through his use of disjunction. Cf. Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996) 140-172.

[8] Cf. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

[9] I do not wish to lessen the tragedy of the events September 11th; however, when taken as a critique of the social logics of neoliberalism, 9/11 poses important questions regarding the role of art within the urban environment. How does architecture, for example, go about rebuilding the site? Or, similarly, how does poetry respond to similar temporal events and crises? Derksen's poetry demonstrates that events like 9/11, no matter how heinous, must not be kept at a critical distance from the discourses of art, literature, or architecture. Such an act abdicates the ethical responsibilities that these artistic practices have to culture: an idea that Derksen often repeats throughout his creative, critical work.

[10] Cf. Rebecca Allison, "9/11 Wicked But A Work of Art, Says Damien Hirst," *Guardian Online* 11 September 2002, 14 August 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2002/sep/11/arts.september11>.

[11] Cf. "Bush Says It Is Time for Action," *CNN.com* 6 November 2001, 14 August 2010, <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/11/06/ret.bush.coalition/index.html>.

[12] Slavoj Žižek argues that there exists two type of freedom active today: "formal" freedom and "actual" freedom. He explains that, "the distinction between 'formal' and 'actual' freedom ultimately amounts to: 'formal' freedom is the freedom of choice within the coordinates of the existing power relations, while 'actual' freedom designates the site of an intervention which undermines these very coordinates" (122). Derksen's anti-neoliberal poetry attempts to enact such an "actual" freedom. Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001) 122.

[13] In George W. Bush's "Address to the Nation" on September 20th 2001, he asks for the nation's "continued participation and confidence in the American economy," and he notes that these attacks have been focused on "a symbol of American prosperity" – a telling sign of architecture's ability to function outside of the built, material realm. Cf. "Transcript of President Bush's address to a joint session of Congress on Thursday night, September 20, 2001" *CNN.com*, 20 Sept. 2001, Cable News Network, 25 Jan. 2010, <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/20/gen.bush.transcript/>.

Chapter Three: Sprawl and 'the ornamental grammar of the surface' in Lisa

Robertson's *Occasional Works and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*

This essay scratches the surface.

Occasional Works and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture documents the changing urban landscape of Vancouver at the end of the twentieth century. Robertson reflects that, during a period when Vancouver has begun to "[disappear] into newness," she wishes to archive the city's changing urban texture (1). While trying to recall Vancouver's fluctuating civic spaces, however, Robertson can only remember the city's lost "surfaces." The Office for Soft Architecture (OSA) captures the author's struggle to remember these civic spaces within a rhetorical space of poetry by thematizing images of surface. Doing so, the author forms a poetic archive of Vancouver, an archive, which documents architectures that simply no longer exist. Such an archive records – as a kind of memory – the city's economic and social fluctuations over time, commenting on the historical uses and functions of civic space. Robertson's poetry utilizes a rhetoric of personal experience – a rhetoric that conveys both her body's immediate perception of space and her memory's eventual reconstruction of space. This personal rhetoric facilitates the poet's collaboration with the built world so that the reader might perceive the quotidian topologies and textures of the cityscape as a kind of cohesive surface articulated through a poetic medium. But, as Robertson points out, "Memory's architecture is […] soft," made malleable by the combined recollection and integration of daily experience (13). We recount the world, claims the Office for Soft Architecture, as a "persistently soft […] florescence of surface" (15), a surface that gestures at space; it *describes* space just as it *is* space, integrated within

this personal rhetoric of memory and recollection. Robertson's focus on the surface gives rise to the term "Soft Architecture" – a kind of revisionary architecture that collaborates with the physical world in order to articulate that world within the rhetorical spaces of poetry and to rethink the notion of subjectivity within that world. Robertson forms what I might term a "revisionary poetic strategy" that documents an urban texture in a state of flux – a poetry that treats the surface as a liaison between the perception of the built world and the rhetorical reconstruction of such a world.

Robertson divides *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* into two sections. The first section, "Occasional Works," is a collection of poetic essays tracing the architectural history of public space. These essays operate both as a manifesto and as a treatise for Robertson's fictional architectural firm. The second section, "Seven Walks," investigates the "psychogeographies" of Vancouver, as recreated within the rhetorical space of language.[1] These seven tours attempt to reconstruct the city's social spaces within a contained poetic text. Both sections ultimately expound on the relationship between art and architecture within the city. These sections express how this relationship between art and architecture might provide contemporary, innovative writing with the means to recuperate otherwise "lost" architectures of poetry: styles, genres, or subjectivities of poetry previously outmoded, abandoned, or unexplored within a contemporary avant-garde poetic practice. Stephen Collis, for example, notes that Robertson's particular interest in the "archi-textural" cityscape lies in the "ideological construction of gender, genre, the natural (pastoral), identity, and the rhetorics of sincerity and description," all of which Robertson mobilizes in her feminist critique of the lyrical poetic tradition ("Frayed Trope of Rome" 155). Robertson's enunciation of public space

distills her literary interests into the feminine subject of her poetry, doing so through the rhetorics of both ornament and description. Characteristically, Robertson achieves this critique through her sampling of textual elements and found materials from a collection of past literary styles, remembrances, and references. This sampling enables Robertson to construct a poetry that collaborates with the poet's urban surroundings, doing so in order not only to articulate her perception of the public space, but also to reevaluate the very construction of such a space.

Sprawling Cityscapes

For its part, the materiality of language proffers a complex of differentiated, disparate, and fiercely heterogeneous elements that have, in Steve McCaffery's words, "provided an abundance of architectural possibilities [for poetry]" – possibilities that continue to emerge from within contemporary, innovative writing (98). Or rather, to be more accurate, architectural ideas have become a critical response to contemporary urban exigencies placed *on* such writing due in part to the urban given of modernity. For much of the twentieth century, the poetic avant-garde has attempted to articulate poetry's political, ideological, or literary context within an urban setting. Modernism's avant-garde poetic projects centralize the concerns of architecture in order to make explicit the relationship between artistic practices and urban contexts. Stephen Collis, for example, is unsurprised that "the city be taken as *the* architectural paradigm for modernism," when one considers "Joyce's Dublin and Woolf's London, Eliot's 'unreal city,' […] and even H.D., whose city represents the artistic collective under fire from the materialism and violence of modernity" (147, emph. provided). Poetry that attests to an architectural sensibility tends to bear out the

concerns of the *polis* in such a way as to elucidate the quotidian demands placed upon language by collectivity, community, and urban interaction. Such poetry shares a primary social concern with architecture, since both practices posit themselves, in Collis's words, as a "nexus of an imagined community" (147). Contemporary, innovative writing inherits this paradigm from their modernist predecessors. Moreover, Collis argues that poetry's relationship to architecture must not be limited to discussions of form and structure as ends in themselves," but, rather, this relationship "points toward the ways in which form and structure have become political and have possible (utopian) social implications" (144).[2] Political gestures inevitably carry social implications. Collis argues that, by turning toward architectural ideas, the poet attempts to embed poetry within the public space, doing so in order "to incorporate or create a 'space'/locus for the social/communal in the apparently antisocial realm of the poem" (147). Collis concludes, "[t]he poem as city, or as public architecture, seeks to be the poem as *polis*" (147). In this way, the city becomes a kind of experimental surface on which the poet might come to explore the complex formal contexts of contemporary urbanism.

Rem Koolhaas tells us that "Bigness" defines the twentieth century. He suggests that, "beyond a certain scale," size alone "embodies an ideological program, independent of the will of its architects" (496). Despite careful planning and calculation, the contemporary city suffers from an overwhelming vastness that makes the public space conceptually problematic to define within a rigid program. Without a rigid program, the contemporary city voids its sense of classical collectivity, opting instead for social, economic, and technological multiplicity. In this way, Bigness appears as an inflexible, difficult slowness that plagues the contemporary public space. However, Koolhaas spies, in exactly this

untenable state, twentieth-century urbanism's intellectual imperative. Bigness, writes

Koolhaas, "instigates the *regime of complexity* that mobilizes the full intelligence of

architecture and its related fields" – all of which ultimately allow for the "recognition of the

social world" (497-99; emph. provided). Rather than theorizing such a modern urban

condition within a totalizing program, Koolhaas's concept of Bigness *describes*

modernity's urban scene as a system of disparate, yet increasingly interrelated, elements

that fold together in order to form a complex "surface," which we might normally term "the

city." Koolhaas suggests that, taken together, Bigness allows us to regard the modern city

as a singular, massive, architectural site, in which a vast array of complex and differing

elements interact freely in ways hitherto unimaginable. In this way, Bigness partakes of the

"*entire apparatus of montage* invented at the beginning of the [twentieth] century to

organize relationships between independent parts" (507; emph. provided). Bigness

"generates a new kind of city," a wholly modern city, which "represents the city; it

preempts the city; or better still it is the city" at the turn of this century (515).

Within this context, Koolhaas separates out the architectural from the urban. While

the architectural creates built spaces that permit collective activities to take place, the urban

drives the need for collectivity within this built context. Koolhaas notes that urbanism

creates "symbolic spaces that accommodate [the] persistent desire for collectivity," doing

so in spite of the city's fluctuating contexts of the economic, political, social, or spatial

(604). Such plurality, however, inevitably invites conflict. As Koolhaas points out,

architecture rather brutishly capitalizes on a cultural desire for collectivity by staking claim

to the symbolic spaces created by urbanism's social impulse. Wherever "urbanism

generates potential," writes Koolhaas, "architecture exploits it" (515). As architecture

generates more sites for social interaction, the urban, in turn, inundates these sites with the potential for collectivity. This competition between the architectural and the urban can force the bounds of the city outward so as to accommodate the expanding desire for collectivity within the built, public space. This competition leads Koolhaas to posit that a city's "Bigness = urbanism vs. architecture" (515). In other words, the city's Bigness depends upon a productive competition between the desire for collectivity and the need to express this desire in its built form. Paradoxically, architecture's attempt to contain urbanism within a singular site or program promotes uncontrolled sprawl and purposeless mega-scale, a feature that, Koolhaas identifies as marring the landscape of twentieth century architecture. Not only have architects become the "instigators of a partly successful experiment" now "running amok," but also the built works of architects, be they buildings or otherwise, have become merely decoration on the already sprawling surface of the collective cityscape (509).[3] In the twentieth century, the urban superstructure simply dissolves its boundaries.

Steve McCaffery points out that sprawl is not only an "architectural and urban condition," but is also a "condition of modernity," affecting multiple aspects of contemporary urban culture (96).[4] Sprawl, McCaffery argues, "constitutes both the dematerialization of physical structures and modernity's urban given," which together register "the contemporary city's inclination [toward] heterology and centrifuge" (96). While the city's rapid outward expansion may constitute physical sprawl – globalization, digital technology, and contemporary knowledge are also kinds of sprawl. Furthermore, I might also include the need for architectural ideas in poetry as being part of poetry's conceptual and creative sprawl under the effects of modernization. I have in mind, here,

McCaffery's concept of "parapoetics," which, as Alan Prohm notes, is "not a blending of poetry with other media, but a contamination of its creative/critical principle into other discourses" (par. 4). I would also add that this contamination also constitutes a kind of sprawl that allows poets to practice, in Steve McCaffery's words, a "poetics without borders" (94). This architectural sprawl affords contemporary, innovative writing the opportunity to give expression to the previously unexpressed exigencies of urban modernization. To make such "spaces" reality, the poet's participation within the public space, as Collis notes, "exceeds and outstrips the uses, limits, and possibilities imposed by material reality and/or economic, technological, personal, and historical contingencies" (143). If, as Collis suggests, the poet creates a space for the poem – a space that expresses the social concerns of the *polis* – then this expression must also exist as the modern city exists: as a verb, a process that effaces finite delineations of space in favour of the city's concatenated heterology of sprawl.

Robertson's poetic cityscape is "largely the arrangement, layering and juxtaposition of cultural and personal remembrances and resonances," in which "textual passages are cited and collaged from various pasts just as the city 'cites' the past in its array of architectural styles" (Collis 148). Robertson's textual layering promotes her poetic sprawl outward not only into other disciplines and textual sources, but also into the larger political, social, and utopian discourses of the urban. Moreover, this sprawl allows her poetics to participate in the ongoing process of urban development that reflects the city's own grammar of function, use, and inhabitation. Such a grammar "always involves duration and memory" wherein points of citation and reference might rest (Collis 148). These points of citation and reference, or "cites" within Robertson's work emblematize how architecture

often functions as ornamental decoration on the city's surface – ornaments that become

particularly noticeable during periods of urban rejuvenation and within areas of urban

reconstruction. Here, both language and architecture share common ground in the

decorative space of the rhetorical: an ornamental space also constructed from past memory

and usages. Robertson highlights this idea by focusing her poetry on "the material out of

which space is made rather than the space itself" (Collis 156). In doing so, Robertson's

poetry thematizes the city's rhetorical surfaces by attempting to reconstruct the city through

language. By focusing on the surface, Robertson enacts a kind of poetic collaboration with

the city – a collaboration that performs, what the OSA terms, a "horizontal research" that

opens up the city's rhetorical and social spaces to inspection and documentation – to

memory (16).

The OSA scours through the cityscape's palimpsest of cultural layers, and it

exhumes the city's underlying surfaces. Each layer of such a palimpsest marks a point of

historical inhabitation and memory, both within Robertson's architectural text and within

the architectural city. Robertson's poetic urban reconstruction takes a decidedly revisionary

stance, a stance that seeks to recuperate the city's lost spaces of gender, class, and race, all

of which have been previously hidden from public inspection. Here, however, the OSA

finds that "Under the pavement, pavement" – a sign of excess and abundance, no doubt

analogous to the kinds of excess and abundance normally associated with both the

ornamental and the decorative (15).[5] In "Site Report: New Brighton Park," for example, the

OSA unearths a decorative space lost to the city, and by doing so, the OSA reinvestigates

the mythology of civic origin within the context of an urban utopia. This essay surveys

Vancouver's Lot 26, New Brighton Park, and this essay describes Lot 26 as civic space that

"beautifully lack[s] architecture" (37). Prefacing the essay with Koolhaas remarks on "new urbanism," the OSA argues that new urbanism "will no longer be concerned with the arrangement of more or less permanent objects but with the irrigation of territories with potential" (*S, M, L, XL* 200). Void of any architecture, a rich history of inhabitation and use encumbers Lot 26. The essay notes that here, at Lot 26, "Vancouver began" and New Brighton hosted "the first real estate transaction in what was to become our city" (38). Lot 26 represents the epicenter of Vancouver's civic origin, both historical and mythical. The OSA notes that "[t]he first post office, customs, road, bridge, hotel, stable," (38) and so on, were all built here, but Lot 26, New Brighton Park stands today on an "inverted utopia" where "[n]othing and everything took place […] then moved on" (37). As the locus of civic and textual origin, Lot 26 connects its current occupants – in effect, its readers – to a past both real and imagined. This past marks not only the moment that renders the city tangible, but also the moment that registers the city's future potential to become used for any conceivable purpose, whether pleasure-ground or, in the case of Lot 26, internment camp. New Brighton's history of usage and architecture figures as excessive, civic decoration now lost to time. Nevertheless, such decorative excess "confect[s] a prosthetic pleasure-ground" (41) that not only invites the recuperation of histories excluded from the present, but also establishes new territories that erase such a history of use for the convenience of urbanism's newfound potential. New Brighton functions as the exemplar of urban excess and abundance within Robertson's text, an exemplar that Robertson desires ultimately to critique: "Change its name repeatedly. Burn it down. […] with fluent obliviousness, picnic there" (41).

Junkspace, or, the Problem of Poetry

In a later essay, Koolhaas describes what he terms the "Junkspace" of

modernization, a condition that, he feels, plagues our contemporary public space. In this

essay, Koolhaas breaks from his earlier assertions posed in "Bigness, or the Problem of the

Large" (1995), in which he optimistically claims that – along with a theory of Bigness –

architects might tame twentieth-century mega-scale into a useful regimen. Instead,

"Junkspace" (2001) exposes a (perhaps) naïve belief that such a theory of Bigness might

uncover an underlying aesthetic of sprawl. "The built product of modernization," Koolhaas

contends, "is not modern architecture but Junkspace. Junkspace is what remains after

modernization has run its course or, more precisely, what coagulates while modernization

is in progress, its fallout" (175). The "partly successful experiment" that has sought to

recuperate architecture's utopian "instrumentality as a vehicle of modernization" now

dangerously teeters on falling prey to its own overgrown scale, to its own Bigness (*S, M, L,*

XL 509-10). "Junkspace" accuses modernization of transforming the public space into a

scrap yard that "thrives on design, but design dies in Junkspace" (177). Koolhaas posits

that, within such a scrap yard, critical discourse has begun to base theories about the

production of space and the production of meaning on, "an obsessive preoccupation with its

opposite […] i.e. architecture" (176). He feels that this preoccupation stunts both the

quality of design and the quality of production since modernization focuses on only the

accumulation of this "junk," the detritus of material reality. In many ways, Koolhaas feels

that the reliance on decoration and ornamentation drives the production of material reality

to excess. This clamour for excess does little to add to the quality of design, only to its

abundance. From this "inverted utopia," one might exhume theories about the production of

space and the production of meaning, for example, but even these theories eventually die in Junkspace. I might parallel Koolhaas's critique of modernization in "Junkspace" and Robertson's reclamation of the decorative in her work, since both authors respond to the kinds of formal experimentation now "running amok" in their respective fields. Despite their differing positions on the place of decoration in the public space, both Koolhaas and Robertson share an anxiety about the decorative being merely, in Koolhaas's words, "flamboyant yet unmemorable" (177). What buildings are to cityscapes, literature is to language: decoration on an increasingly growing pile of detritus.

Stephen Collis notes that Robertson's poetry "lack[s] the functional structure *behind* [its] rhetorical surface," and instead Robertson's poetic structure relies on her constructing "surfaces *about* surfaces" (152; emph. provided). This accumulation of excess surfaces taken together with Robertson's feminized poetic subject helps her to distill a feminist sensibility into the "ornamental" layers of both the architectural city and the lyrical tradition. Moreover, Robertson uses idea of surfaces in order to illustrate her poetic methodology for "synthesizing" the public space. The OSA defines "spatial synthetics" as "a system of designing with frank or overt social implications, a spatial matrix from the dematerialized concepts of language, or, in this case poetry" (77). While, on the one hand, poetry often uses architecture as a metaphor for poetic structure – and vice versa – Robertson, on the other hand, uses architecture in order to enunciate the fluctuation of our social, political, and intellectual landscapes over time. Crucially, Robertson does not wish to arrest the changing topologies of the city within language; rather, she wishes to underscore the various political processes by which these changes come about. The OSA argues, for example, that the problem synthesizing the public space "is not how to stop the

flow of items and surfaces in order to stabilize space, but how to articulate the politics of

their passage" (78). Such an articulation constructs an architectural environment that not

only embodies the material world, but also idealizes this world within the rhetorical space

of language. Moreover, this articulation creates an "erotic hope" for the future of poetry's

as yet unrealized potential (79).

Seven Walks on the Surface of Vancouver

On its surface, Robertson's long poem "Seven Walks" explores the neighbourhoods

of Vancouver over the course of a single day. The first three walks occur, for example,

during meal times: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The fourth walk occurs at night during a

period of restless contemplation. The final three walks each reflect on the day's events,

filling the interstitial gaps between the previous four walks. In one sense, Robertson's

narrator documents her exploration of Vancouver's civic surface, recording her thoughts

and impressions of the city as she does so. However, by mapping her exploration of the

city, she also involves herself in the creation of the civic surface that she inhabits. In other

words, by exploring the city, Robertson's narrator creates the city, activating a rhetoric of

urban experience and personal memory. Ian Davidson notes that Robertson's interest in the

surface seeks to integrate the rhetorical relationship between the construction of an interior

(feminist) subjectivity and the construction of an external (utopian) space (93). The

reinsertion of such a feminized subjectivity into an avant-garde poetic project legitimizes

the rhetorics of the ornamental, the decorative, and the superficial, resuscitating their use

from the trash heap of Koolhaas's "Junkspace." To cite Davidson again, Robertson's

poetics contests "the essentialist nature of the body of the work (poem or building), dressed

in ornamental clothing that is in some ways superfluous or unnecessary" (93). Such a

redressing of the ornamental helps to bring to light a feminized aesthetic hitherto excluded

from projects of both the lyric and the avant-garde, and the OSA thereby rethink

completely the notions of both the lyric and the avant-garde. Within this context, I might

argue that each walk represents metaphorically the author's attempt to recuperate such a

feminist lyrical tradition. The first, matinal walk drafts the formation of the lyric; the

second walk takes place during the lyric's temporal zenith in the nineteenth century, the

"noon" of the lyric; next, the third walk approaches the poet's own temporal context, the

twentieth century, which allows for the reconsideration of a literary tradition under the

effects of feminism. Within this scheme, the fourth walk might represent, then, a moment

of crisis when the poet finally realizes that such a predominantly masculine, lyrical

tradition fails to articulate her own lyrical subjectivity. As such, the final three walks send

the reader back to the drawing board, doing so in order to re-draft a lyrical tradition in

terms of a feminist poetics. A reading such as this might ultimately bring to surface

Robertson's own "erotic hope" for poetry's potential to irrigate the urban space with new

forms of expression.

     "First Walk" preempts its conclusion. The narrator attempts to "recall the subject of

official commemoration" during a day that would "proceed with its humiliating diligence,

towards the stiffening silver of cold evening" (277). She decides, however, "whatever we

said about it [the subject of the text] we said about ourselves" – be that subject the city,

poetics, or our identity – an activity that only serves to flaunt a mythos of our origins (277).

She concludes, therefore, that "it is unhelpful to read a day backwards" (277). Thus, she

begins again. She begins in the morning, commenting on the origin of her day's journey.

She decides it best to "document the morning" alongside the city's civic topologies (278). Her guide explains, for example, that, "The fragile matinal laws makes room for all manners of theatre and identity and description of works, the tasting and having, bagatelles, loose-vowelled dialects – lest we get none in paradise" (278). Her guide figures almost as a Virgilian trope in the Dantean sense, a poet guide who ushers a future generation of poets through an imagined literary cosmos. Immediately following this exchange, the narrator describes the architecture of the first libraries, whose now "bombed windows admitted morning, which flowed in shafts and tongued over stones" (279). Robertson parallels these matinal events with origins of architectures most intimately linked to literature: libraries. The utopian architecture of these libraries stand redundant, however, their commodious spaces emptied of their familiar texts. Here, Robertson draws a further parallel between the origins of literatures, and the expectations that these literatures might also possess the ability to carve out utopian spaces, "lest we get none in paradise" (225). The narrator explains that such expectations appear outmoded to sensibilities that are more "modern." She has been, after all, "advised in the morning papers that there was no longer a paradise. Hell was also outmoded. That is why we were modern" (225). Instead, the narrator desires a new mode of expression, one that recapitulates, "the dialects of sparkling impatience […] even the dialects of civic hatred that percolated among the offices and assemblies and dispatches" (228). The rhetoric of the morning expresses the author's desire to better know her origins in the present.

"Second Walk" moves away from the formal architectures of libraries and offices, and, instead, the poem moves into the indolent space of civic parks, where the city "oozed through its historical carapace to become a paradoxical ornament" (231). Here, the park

represents both surface structure and decorative ornament within the urban cityscape. "Habitually," writes the multiple author, "we walked in the park late afternoons," where "it was as if everything we encountered had become some sort of nineteenth century" (231). Once again, Robertson draws our attention to the link between space and time. The author describes an idyllic setting of folly and play, as if the park's texture forms anachronistically its own a kind of urban "lyrical" space. She begins to recognize that "we were the outmoded remainders of a class that produced its own mirage so expertly that its temporal disappearance went unnoticed," and she exclaims, "we were of the lyric class" (232). The nineteenth century's lyrical sensibility, though lapsed in mode and relevance, seems alive in this space of poetic idleness and play. This lyrical sensibility also functions on a more literal level, revealing yet another surface within Vancouver's civic space. The narrator concludes that, with ornamentation and "passionate sincerities," the lyric may produce that same "erotic hope" that the multiple author so desires. She sees herself "gazing outwards towards an agency that required us no more than we required the studied redundancy of our own vocabulary" (234). She theorizes that, by studying this redundancy, she might form a new mode of lyrical expression, and she explains that "Hope became a spectacle, a decoration" that revealed "only the critical extravagance of our narcissism" (234). Such an extravagance sets into motion the rhetorics of desire and longing for agency and legitimization. She must recuperate the lyric, she concludes, in order to ensure poetry's continuation within the public and political spaces of the city.

"Third Walk" lingers in the atmosphere of architectural interiority. In the evening, the narrator and her guide "pass through the sheer façade" (241) of restaurants, a façade that prompts her guide's "peculiar formality" (242). The design of the restaurant space

seems to impose a regime of expected social behaviour, to which the author responds in this poem. The restaurant space both constrains and dresses up its productive output. But, "the flavours are plagiaries" (243), decries the narrator, culled "according to the precise instructions of ancient didactic books" (242). Such a condemnation seems to imply that the author longs for a more authentic, or integrated relationship between language and experience, a kind of "making it new," perhaps, of tradition and artifice, which might otherwise end the rehearsal of outmoded, poetic styles and structures. Her response to these "plagiarized flavours" might also signify the author's interrogation of the kinds of formal poetic experimentations born out of the "Pound" and "Eliot" traditions of High Modernism, if not the lyrical considerations of Wordsworth, all of which she questions. After all, the OSA argues that, "if we spoke in the accent of the rhetorical past, in the myriad ligatures of cities, if desperation belonged to our texture, it is because, massively vulnerable, we were precisely unfree" (245). The multiple author desires to become unfettered by such a past. While stressing ornamentation and decoration, the architecture of this restaurant space does little to free up Robertson's poetic interiorities and subjectivities; instead, such architecture aims at engineering and constraining social behaviour where "Pleasure is a figured vacuum that does not recognize us as persons" (244). Robertson's narrator demands that her reader reinvestigate this space, considering it as the "sublime falsehood" of our historical rhetoric of use. Moreover, this failure to express a feminist lyric also sets up ultimately the narrator's later contemplation of poetry's crisis of ethics in the following walk. Only through her momentary respite within the space of the restaurant does she come to realize the need for the rethinking of such a tradition.

"Fourth Walk" observes what the multiple author describes as the city's "ritual of crisis and form" (242). Here, she contemplates how the city's various neighbourhoods taken together articulate the city's economic trajectory through both time and space. In this walk, she also parallels the economics of the textual realm with the economics of the material realm. Take, for example, the previous walks wherein the author explores the city's most active districts – the shipyards, the parks, and the restaurants – all of which participate in the urban economy. In this walk, however, she finds herself located within the city's derelict neighbourhoods, where she remarks, "It's hard not to disappear" (249). Throughout the OSA, Robertson makes explicit her desire for a kind of impermanence, since the OSA focuses its efforts on archiving architectures that no longer exist. Just as new architectures do expose the city's most profitable times to the public, so too do the ruins of old neighbourhoods expose the city's least profitable times to a similar inspection. In this walk, she and her guide explore "the unprofitable time of the city, the pools of slowness, the lost parts" (249), and together they breach the city's degraded avenues, where she admits to her "struggle to recognize a city" (250). When processes of gentrification and recuperation juxtapose the city's least affluent communities against its most affluent ones, this juxtaposition magnifies the intensities of both urban ruin and urban abandon. The city wears its economic memory on its surface. Such a form of "soft architecture" bids us to "notice the economies that could not appear in money" (250): the abstract economies of class, gender, community, and language, all of which exist readily within the heteronomy of the city. Realizing that she too inhabits such a space, the author feels that she must express her own experience as a poetic inhabitant of this space. However, her memory presents her "with looted images, tying them with great delicacy to our mortal memories

and hopes" (250). She recognizes that her personal rhetoric is ornamental at best and

merely decorates the false reality of her memory's attention. Ultimately, she concludes that

the ephemeral nature of such an ornamental civic space may only tether her "separate

moralities to a single mutable surface" of memory (250).

"Fifth Walk" returns us to the morning, doing so in order to "redress" the previous

walks in terms of the author's desire to recuperate what she feels time and tradition have

abandoned: a feminist lyric. Compare, for example, the description of morning that the

author presents in this walk with her previous matinal text, "First Walk." She begins by

juxtaposing a patriarchal inheritance alongside her ability to consume the material world:

"My guide and I carefully selected our items, which I then purchased using my father's

money" (253). Here, she accuses her patriarchal inheritance of determining her current

economic autonomy. She may only consume what she purchases legitimately with her

father's money. Her status within a system of patriarchal economic determination unsettles

the author. As such, the narrative begins to leap backward in time. She begins to remember

the "indiscreet neighbourhood" that she has traveled only hours earlier, where "the smell of

spoiled fruit linger[ed] in the moist air like an outmoded style of punctuation" (253). The

connection between these indiscreet neighbourhoods and those outmoded styles of

punctuation suggests a further link between the past's inability to bear viable fruit and the

author's inability to determine her own textual autonomy. As her guide points out,

"Something is not being represented" here (259). This insight leads the author to disclose

what this "something" might be: "I speak here of the civic grief that has passed from

sorrow to anger, as such grief does during the extremes of ethical abandonment" (259).

This abandonment drives the poet to uncover what was once hidden, missing or lacking,

doing so through a personal rhetoric of experience and memory in the hopes that she might

find a new ethics of poetry located among this civic grief. The neighbourhoods that she

remembers, however, abandon architecture. Within these various neighbourhoods, the

narrator perceives the "Generations of wanderers" who "had remapped the city's inchoate

routes to lead to this district's venerated mound" (255-56). Compare this neighbourhood to

"Lot 26, New Brighton Park," a territory that she also describes as being "venerated" with

the past but ultimately empty of structure. These non-existing architectures represent, for

the multiple author, not only the would-be ambitions of cultural period within the history of

the city, but also how those ambitions inevitably become subsumed by – or, even

supplanted by – more aggressive cultural paradigms. She puts forward a new paradigm: a

feminist lyric built within a historically patriarchal lyric tradition.

"Sixth Walk" doubles the author's previous efforts to bridge poetry's past with her

present. In this walk, she constructs a kind of lyrical architecture, a poetic bridge, out of the

rhetorical detritus of material culture. She catalogues these materials: "tiny mirrors,"

"smashed crockery," "limp silken roses on green plastic stems," and "woven umbrella

spokes," which together were all "knit as if with an indiscernible but precisely ornate

intention" (261-62). This bridge functions as an important "Koolhaasian" moment in the

authors work: a kind of "Junkspace" that stands in place for the poet's overall vision of the

city. "When I started off towards my guide," she writes, "the bridge seemed to be made of

astonishingly tawdry materials" (261). The architecture of this bridge confronts the author

in a way that takes her by surprise, and she becomes uncertain of her foothold when

standing on this structure. She discloses that, "This was not a bridge I would have chosen to

cross," but, having no other available recourse, she "embarque[s] on the superb structure"

in pursuit of her guide (262). Once crossed, her perception and her experience of the civic

space changes decidedly; she remarks that this moment "was held by the bridge the way

sleep is contained by a person […] autonomous and festal" (262-63). Ultimately, her

crossing this bridge recontextualizes the body's place within already problematic civic and

textual landscape. In order to inhabit this civic space, she must confront the problems of the

material world fully, by simply "cross[ing] that bridge" when she comes to it. Here,

"context has become internal," an emotional hyperbole that allows for her memory's

reconstruction of her civic environment (264).

　　　　"Seventh Walk" dallies in the "late civic afternoon" like so much "frayed

connective cables" and "sacral nostalgias" transitioning into evening (267). Here, the

multiple author "documents the present" (268). This walk contrasts the author's desire to

flaunt an "authentic origin" as she did within her opening salvo, "First Walk." Here, the

author "paint[s] [her] place in the polis," and she seeks political autonomy from the

demands that her urban surroundings place upon her. As her guide remarks, "The fact

remains that we are foreigners on the inside […] but there is no outside" (268). But what

does the author mean, here, by her use of the term "outside": outside of language; outside

of the city; outside of our identity? Her hesitancy to define her terms might suggest that

she, in fact, purposely conflates these terms. "Make no mistake," she remarks, "Here I am

narrating an abstraction" (268). Both the architecture of her thought and the logic of her

rhetoric sublimates into nothingness. As in "Lot 26, New Brighton Park," the author

surveys the space around her, and she finds this space empty of structure, but full of

remembrances. She recognizes "the frayed connective cables" of this space "sketched by

words like 'went' and 'pass'" (267). The disappearance or emptiness of architecture offers

the author her longed for erotic hope. The emptiness of this civic space floods a newfound

poetic territory with a potential opportunity for the author's poetic expression. As seen in

"Lot 26, New Brighton Park," the author's practice of description and documentation

sublimates architecture into poetry, "words into atmosphere" (268). In doing so, the author

espies a utopian space forged within poetry, a space that she describes as "a searing,

futuristic retinal trope that oddly offered an intelligibility to the present" (267). The author

renders this "present" space "intelligible" only through her documentation and description

of it, opening up the civic space to reading. By poem's end, the reader witnesses the author

standing on the precipice of poetic possibility. "It was the time for the lyric," (271) she

exclaims – a lyric recuperated from the "forged memory of plenty," (268) and redesigned

as part of a new feminist sensibility. Ultimately, Robertson's poetry suggests new avenues

of poetic "intensities" that future poets may choose to explore.

    Steve McCaffery reminds us that "[t]here is no city just as there is no language only

linguistic utterances, and architectural usage and events" (105). The history of such

architectural usage and architectural events helps us to define the "texture" of a city. The

Office for Soft Architecture highlights this idea by focusing on the rhetoric of a city's

material surface: its soft architecture. For her part, Robertson contextualizes this focus

within a lyrical sensibility, re-imagined as part of a contemporary, feminist poetic project.

By bringing poetry's lyrical past to bear upon poetry's present, Robertson suggests a

poetics akin to architecture: a poetry that "remembers" a city's history of style and form the

way that architecture might also remember such a history. The concomitance of urban

intensities with poetry's desire to articulate these intensities creates, for Robertson, a

language of personal experience, which she uses in order to archive the changing urban

spaces of Vancouver. As the Office notes, "Place is accident posing as politics. And vice

versa. Therefore it's tragic and big" (16). I take Robertson's suggestion, here, to mean that,

by tackling the concerns of the polis, poetry expresses an impossible desire to transcend the

confines of language in order to participate more fully – to become built – within the public

realm. Nevertheless, by bridging together the political concerns of both architecture and

poetry – either usage and event or subjectivity and expression – Robertson struggles against

the impossibility of this desire. Poetry's passage into the urban distills the complex

interaction of the city into the subject of contemporary, innovative writing practices, doing

so through a kind of "Bigness" that pushes poetics into the world. By articulating such a

desire, poetry itself becomes big.

Notes

[1] Cf. Guy Debord, "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography," (*Les Lèvres Nues* #6, 1955). Psychogeography simply refers to "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals."

[2] Here, Collis follows Charles Bernstein's central argument in *The Politics of Poetic Form* with some contention. Bernstein argues that "radically innovative styles [of poetics] can have political meanings" (vii) that allow for "a more comprehensive understanding of the formulation of public space: *of polis*" (236, emph. provided). Although Collis agrees with Bernstein's assertion, he also adds that "the architectural gives expression to poetry's social and utopian desires, and furthermore, that the architectural paradigm is crucial to the understanding of twentieth-century avant-garde poetics"– a notion which Bernstein falls short of enunciating (Collis 144).

[3] Cf. Rem Koolhaas, "Junkspace" (*October* 100, 2002) 175-190.

[4] Cf. Aaron Betsky, *Architecture Must Burn* (Corte Madera, CA: Ginko Press, 2000). In his text, Betsky argues that, if an aesthetics of sprawl exists, then such an aesthetics has not yet been adequately accounted for by either theorist or critics. "The issue is not how to stop sprawl," Betsky argues, "but how to use its composition, its nodes and its leaky spaces to create a kind of architecture" (np).

[5] Like many architects of his generation, Koolhaas also points out the irony "that in architecture, May '68 – "under the pavement, beach" – has been translated into *more* pavement, *less* beach" – a criticism perhaps of architecture's inability to "imagine ways in

which [urban] density can be maintained without recourse to substance, intensity without

the encumbrance of architecture" (*S, M, L, XL* 200; emph. provided).

Chapter Four: 'I diverge/ you diverge/ we diverge': Rescaling Cultural Volume

in Stephen Collis's *The Barricade's Project*

This essay takes up volume.

The Barricade's Project examines why poetry might be considered "the revolutionary act *par excellence.*"[1] Stephen Collis notes that while, he "want[s] the old Situationist adage […] to be true," he "fear[s] it is not" (qtd. in Mclennan par. 5). In spite of his apprehension, Collis tests this adage "again and again" within his poetic practice (par. 5). Collis hopes to uncover "how far [poetry] can be pushed, both into the past and, from there, into as yet unrealized futures" (par. 5). For Collis, poetry must perform a function that articulates our cultural aspirations as a utopian gesture within language. As such, Collis scales his poetry to a level situated between the social and the political, and he hopes that such a poetry might generate peaceful sociopolitical change within the volumes of a common cultural space – the multitudinous forms and traditions that, when taken together, comprise both contemporary modes of representation and contemporary modes of cultural production. Collis's work reframes the notion of how contemporary poetics might enact sociopolitical change within the built spaces of culture, rescaling those spaces to the level of language. Furthermore, Collis seeks a poetic language that not only partakes in the concerns of the public space, but also inhabits the common spaces of the public, urban domain. Where poetry does not inhabit these spaces, Collis argues that poetry must move toward occupation. As Collis notes, "our languages are common. Shared. Un-enclosable," and as such, poetry must resist privatizing forces that might otherwise attempt to lay proprietary claim on such a shared poetic language (*The Commons* np). Taken together,

these ideas allow Collis to thematize the public space as a kind of "volume" in which

poetry's radical impulses play out. Collis's *Barricade's Project* forms what he terms a

"poetry of scale," a poetry that addresses existing institutional, privatized systems of genre,

grammar, and language taken together within a context of the globalization of capital.[2] In

forming such a poetics, Collis seeks an alternative to these systems: a resistant (perhaps

utopian) structure that enacts poetry's hope for social change.

Collis cuts *The Barricades Project* across three volumes (with more to follow). He

sets his first volume, *Anarchive* (2005), in 1936 revolutionary Spain. He continues in the

Wordsworthian landscapes of the English Lake District in *The Commons* (2008), and he

speculates about a future project that he might set among the streets of Paris in his

forthcoming collection, *The Red Album*.[3] Collis intends to set *The Red Album* in the

revolutionary histories of France, both 1789 and 1968. Each text carries a distinct tone. The

first activates an aggressive rhetoric of revolution and declamatory public address; whereas,

the second meditates upon poetry's pastoral and lyrical past in order to undermine this

history. Despite their differences, Collis treats each text as "parts of the same," albeit

"discontinuous long poem" that questions, "where the relationship between part and whole

resides – socially, linguistically – in terms of the poem, the serial, the book, the *oeuvre*"

(qtd. in McLennan par. 12). Collis's treatment of the project suggests ties to what he argues

is "*the* contemporary problem: the globalization of capital" ("Life-Long Poem" 6; emph.

provided). He feels that this problem ultimately reduces to a matter of scale. Structurally,

each text bears remarkable similarity to one another (although *The Commons* is

undoubtedly the denser of the two texts). Collis divides each text, for example, into three

sections: the first section contextualizes the individual work historically; the second section

locates the textual program, or plot of the work, geographically; finally, the third section

returns us to *The Barricades Project*, spatially rescaling a segmented poetics (of parts) in

terms of a complete *oeuvre* (a whole). Collis's rescaling of poetry's historical modes and

institutions form what Alfred Noyes has called a "borderless structure" within the volumes

of both poetry and culture, a structure that is "thoroughly of nowhere," and whose

particularities "can be permitted to speak of the 'Barricade's Project,' without having a

sense of its limits, origins, or ultimate ends" (137; *The Commons*). By allowing this project

to inhabit multiple historical periods, geographical locations, and textual volumes, Collis

underscores poetry's desire to take up residency within our built world, where language

often becomes reduced to a form of capital, and poetry often functions as a capital project.

Resistant Architectures

      Charles Jencks theorizes a critical architecture that reforms, rather than rejects, past

sensibilities of Modernism's avant-gardist projects within a contemporary urban setting.

Jencks aims to correct what he feels is architectural modernism's tendency "to be

overwhelmed by the reductivist paradigm" that represses the obvious plurality and

complexity of our modern urban context (Beck 9). He recalls that, while literary figures

such as Joyce or Eliot explicitly toy with questions surrounding urban complexity, such

questions in architecture remain largely unarticulated until the late 1960s. Correcting what

he understands to be an oversight of architecture, the languages of postmodernism motivate

Jencks to form "an architecture of complexity based on meaning" – an architecture that is

both "socially and politically motivated" (Beck 9). Jencks bases his design process on a

purposeful criticism that reevaluates past modes of expression in order to formulate a more

meaningful design methodology for the production of our contemporary built spaces. Jencks envisions "the rebirth of a democratic mode and style," where the individual "can create [a] personal environment out of impersonal subsystems" (*Adhocism* 15). Contemporary design must not, in his view, supersede the past; rather, contemporary design must work with the past in order to better contextualize the present. By engaging in a more democratic mode of design, Jencks argues for a kind of "radical eclecticism" from which we might extricate various parts or subsystems from their previously whole contexts.[4] As Jencks notes, "[e]clecticism in itself is a senseless shuffling of styles" that does not stress that "these parts must be unified creatively for a specific purpose" (*Language of Postmodern* 310). Jencks's aesthetic sensibility advocates for the mixing of past modes and styles with contemporary modes and styles. This mixture must resist homogenization, however, in order to find semantic justification for use and reinterpretation. By advancing toward "radical eclecticism," Jencks believes that architecture might "express the meanings [that] a culture finds significant, as well as elucidate certain ideas and feeling that haven't previously reached expression" (315). Ultimately, Jencks argues that this design methodology creates an architecture that codes itself as "readable," made even more engaging by its radical, eclectic tendencies.

Of course, embracing diversity does not entail the haphazard inclusion of material and reference. Rather, this movement towards an aesthetic of plurality entails the formation of new codes and new modes of expression that utilize varied subsystems in a "semantically appropriate way" – one that opens up "the real possibilities for a rich and articulate environment" (*Adhocism* 87). We might look to Antonio Gaudi's *La Sagrada Família* in Barcelona in order to illustrate such an approach to design. Jencks argues that

such an approach to design "flourishes in composition when flexible means make the

thematic end ambiguous" (149-50). Similarly, Collis cites Gaudi's work among the key

influences for his poetic considerations. He explains that Gaudi's *La Sagrada Família*

works as a cognate for poetic form, "in part for [Gaudi's] organicism," but also because

Collis finds "something so utopian in [Gaudi's] unfinished *Sagrada Família*" – a forever

incomplete building that suggests an incomplete social project "in a city with a

revolutionary past."[5] When the poet forces the reader, for example, to become productive in

the creation of meaning, designing structures for specific social or political purposes

becomes a rudimentary, practical approach to poetic design. Similarly, Jencks notes that, if

a reader can in theory "connect any line from a poem with any other line, creating his [or

her] own sonnets *ad hoc*," then the reader realizes suddenly the potential that poetics might

hold in order to "forcibly broaden [the reader's] concept of what form can be" (150). In

doing so, poetry enters into a dialectic of utopianism, a dialectic that interrogates possible

future avenues for contemporary architects and contemporary poets alike to pursue.

  Jencks tells us that, "the avant-gardes of the past believed that humanity was going

somewhere, and it was their joy and duty to discover the new land and see that people

arrived there on time" ("Post Avant-garde" 224). The irony that built architecture exists

entirely at the whim of hyper-capitalist economic agendas, for example, has become a

frustrating reality for an entire generation of artists who seek to critique the effects of

capitalism after May 1968. The economic constraints of capitalism work against the praxis

of an architectural criticism that seeks to alter this system. The possible persistence of an

avant-garde into the twenty-first century suggests that the avant-gardes of the past have left

their utopian aim largely unfulfilled. However, this inability to find closure does not

dissuade the persistence of an avant-gardist project, nor does it dissuade an avant-garde

from expressing new forms of utopian idealism within their artistic practices. If a vanguard

exists today, then it does not exist as it did within Modernism, for example: a monolithic

reflection of "the dynamism of capitalism" with its "waves of destruction and construction"

(Jencks 222). Such a vanguard of particularly adept individuals, who deliver utopia's

closure to the world, does little to avoid an essentially elitist agenda. This agenda harbors

capitalism's inherent impulse to consume new architectures and new poetries, thereby

perpetuating such a dominant ideology within the avant-garde's artistic practice. Rather, the

vanguard of today joins a network of multiple subjectivities, voices, and political positions,

all mobilized together, each in their own way, with a shared purpose: first, to articulate

experiences hitherto unexpressed within culture; second, to resist the dominant ideological

discourses within culture.[6] This "new-garde" resurrects utopian ideals with the knowledge

that such ideals remain largely impossible to achieve. David Harvey reminds us that the

"imaginative free play" of utopian idealism defines alternatives "not in terms of some static

form or even some perfected emancipatory process," (*Spaces* 163) but, rather, such ideals

define alternatives "rooted in our present possibilities at the same as [such a dialectical

utopianism] points towards different trajectories for human uneven geographical

development" (196). Disillusioned with how globalization develops culture unevenly,

today's vanguard proposes alternatives to work around globalization's constraints. In doing

so, such a "new-garde," while attempting to uncover ever more exciting ways to articulate

fantasies of a utopia to an awaiting public, engages problematically with a project that

suggests inevitable ties capital culture – a project that contemporary radical poetics find

themselves engaging with in order to undermine from within such a project.

Stephen Collis engages with literary history's private and privatizing past in order to undermine this history. Alfred Noyes notes, for example, that Collis collaborates with poetry's revolutionary past in order to assert a poetics at the nexus of social reformation. As Noyes explains, the past of interest to Collis here "is the past of change, a history of willed futures, a history of movements for change" (138). *Anarchive*, for example, takes place in "the midst of a recognizable revolution," whereas the setting of *The Commons* takes place at the moment when the "English common lands were taken, by force and parliamentary decree, out of the hands of local, collective use" (138-39). Revisiting the past, either through reference and citation, or through stylistic devices, draws the reader's attention to the activity of language as a shared, or "common," event. A combination of citation and reference mobilize the text toward creating a highly pluralistic, even eclectic, language "commons." Noyes explains that a "commons is not so much an alternative to the system of private property as it is the *absence* of the private" (139; emph. provided). Take, for example, the theme of trespass within *The Commons*. The text demands intertextual movement across the increasingly privatized English countryside of the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in an attempt to open up this past to contemporary reexamination and speculation. Here, an imagined past can no longer be consigned to the private annals of history; rather, the past becomes a site designed specifically for public reformation, reinterpretation, and trespass. Noyes explains that, "[i]n so far as a literature takes on a practice of quotation, collage, allusion and intertextuality [literature] holds out a sort of commons – a page on which any may write with the common resources of the poetic past" (139). Collis binds his larger political critique with the activities of reconstruction through metaphor, allusion, and intertextuality. Within this context, Collis attempts to defeat

potential privatizing boundary markers – either real or poetic – of genre, local, and historical periodization. The obvious cognate for such a space is that of the built public domain in whose volumes the social life of culture takes place. The architectural considerations of *The Commons* propose alternatives to the regimes of genre and periodization, rescaling these histories and traditions in order to reform, or redesign, them. Ultimately, Collis poetry tests both the boundaries of poetic institutions and stabilities of such institutions, which have been carried over from modernism into postmodernism and beyond.

Out of the Poems and Into the Streets

Walter Benjamin recalls Georges-Eugène Haussmann's plan to modernize Paris during the nineteenth century. He reminds us that Paris had been redesigned by Haussmann in order to include boulevards that might not only beautify modern Paris, but also secure "the city against civil war" (174).[7] As Benjamin notes, Haussmann's scheme had demanded that, "new streets were to provide the shortest route between the barracks and the working-class areas" (174). These boulevards had increased the breadth of the streets, and in doing so, had made "the erection of barricades impossible" (174). By redesigning Paris, Haussmann had shifted the context of whether we might conceive of the modern experience of culture, and therefore art, without first questioning temporal events and crisis. The processes of modernization represent an attempt to rescale cultural production in order to meet the demands of a particular time and place. Haussmann's reconstruction had rescaled Paris, for example, under rubric of social engineering, doing so in order to rid the city of the threat of radical, social upheaval. Christiana Freire notes that the "theme of

reconstruction" necessarily "involves the dialectics of construction and destruction as a form of cultural production" (135). Similarly, Haussmann's "strategic" act of urban beautification both destroys the Paris of the past – by altering its existing patterns of social behaviour through architecture – and creates a Paris of the future – by forming new ways for the city to do business through architecture. This "business" also includes the business of art, which, as Freire points out, does not remain autonomous from the dialectics of destruction and construction within a contemporary urban setting (135). As she notes, artistic activities are performed both "in society and in history," and are therefore associated the activity of artistic production "to the values and the representations of a certain time" (135). As such, art also must respond necessarily to modernization's impulse to "rescale" culture.

Collis's *Barricade's Project* rescales the events of history in order to fit them within a contemporary poetic landscape. *Anarchive*, for example, comments on how the general often envelops the specific, rescaling it to fit within the volumes of our contemporary political, cultural, and linguistic spaces. His portmanteau title suggests that the poet wishes to create both "an archive" designed to preserve literature's historical modes of representation, and "an anarchy" designed to destroy these modes of representation. On the one hand, "an archive" preserves the volumes and artifacts our culture deems significant by shelving these artifacts away from the reach of the public; on the other hand, "an anarchy" suggests that these documents are seized by public unrest. By embracing the plurality of our cultural remains, these remains lend themselves to recombination and reformation within the volumes of a common, cultural landscape. *The Commons*, for example, uses England's privatized countryside as a metaphor for how literary tradition often lays a

proprietary claims to landscape, style, genre, historical period, and subjectivity, and Collis

suggests that today's poets might reform this impulse through their own work. *The*

Commons invades the spaces of the past, doing so in order to seize the consignment of

these modes of representation to a private history. Collis uses England's Lake District in

order to register symbolically a volume in which the poet might figure as a kind of

landscape architect. Here, Collis's "architect" transforms the Romantic countryside into

idyllic, common space that fits within an alternate, temporal and cultural context. In both

texts, Collis implements an aesthetic that retools the past in order to reform the present – a

process of design that relies on using resources already at hand to erect, as Alfred Noyes

puts it, "a barricade in language" (137). Within this landscape, the reader shares in the

poet's trespass among the privatized spaces of literature's multiple periods, traditions, and

genres. Poetry, like revolution, longs for blockade and stoppage. As Noyes explains, "dead

ends force us to circle back to other streets – streets not yet blocked, streets that might be in

need of blockading – streets of possibility, streets of trespass and occupation" (138). If

contemporary, innovative poetry "does" anything, then such poetry explores the previously

unexplored avenues of cultural representation. For its part, Collis's *Project* throws up such

a "barricade in language" in order to "(temporarily) obstruct a passage in Capital – or,

alternatively, [cast down] a fence put in place by the language of capital" (Noyes 137).

Collis's poetry forces the reader to help re-route literary history's proprietary claim to

period, genre, or mode of expression, so that this history might become more fully "in the

present." Collis creates a diachronically fluid poetry that freely moves through the spatial,

temporal, and textual volumes of history. By turning toward poetry's revolutionary past,

Collis aligns his text with the languages of protest and reform. The distillation of

literature's revolutionary past into our textual present allows Collis to take up multiple

residencies both throughout time and within space as a kind of protest. From these

positions, he is able to launch his poetics, and by extension, literary culture into a shared

and radical, public space.

"Common" Spaces and Other Barricades

Collis threads segments of his poem "Dear Common" throughout the texts of his

Barricade's Project. This threading allows Collis to maintain common locations across the

breadth of both volumes, as well as throughout each individual text. The reader must move

in and among multiple texts, spaces, and periods in order to read the poem. I might argue

that Collis takes advantage of the reader's impulse to accumulate textual meaning by

constantly sending the reader away to discover the poem elsewhere, like a kind of textual

barricade. However, the reader never gains access to the poem's entire text since this poem

is still being written. Collis claims that his purpose here is to "produce what is past/ again

and again" in the hope that "the violence of forgetting/ will be remembered/ with

indignation" (*Anarchive* 10). Such a provocation seems to question the role of

contemporary poetry within culture. In particular, "Dear Common" asks whether today's

poetry can effect social change at all, or whether poetry has itself become an outmoded

form of expression. In other words, can poetry "do," rather than simply "be"? Is the poem

leading the charge? Or, is poetry merely the material detritus from which we form these

barricades? Between each text, Collis's mode of inquiry differs. *Anarchive*, for example,

voices an anxiety of ethics through the rhetoric of declamation. In *Anarchive*, Collis's

"Dear Common" calls for the dismantlement of our public space. Only through its

dismantlement can this space be rebuilt from the grammatical detritus left behind in *Anarchive*'s revolutionary wake. *The Commons*, however, takes a more erosive approach. In this text, Collis mixes anachronistically contemporary twenty-first-century modes of expression, events, and languages with nineteenth-century poetic sensibilities, locations, and genres. Collis slowly undermines the Romantic's claim upon the public commons of the English Lake District. In both texts, Collis combines, in a radically eclectic way, the material detritus of the past with the poetics of the present. Ultimately, this poetry mounts toward an examination of how we might reform the hierarchical institutions of tradition and history.

In *Anarchive*, "Dear Common" pledges, "to name you futures/ that have not been/ written down," (9-10) and the poem considers "the heart of the future/ repetition" (10). We might take the antecedent of "you" to refer back to the "common" space of language itself – the subject of the poem's proper addressee, "Dear Common." In this way, Collis names the "Common" to be the "futures/ that have not been/ written down." Within poetry, language alone presents itself as the "common" element shared between both text and reader alike. The poem takes itself to be its own subject; "Dear Common" pledges itself, therefore, to be a kind of textual future, and the poem telegraphs its recurrence in correspondence with the external reader. The poem invests itself as language capital, and it speculates upon its own textual and semantic delivery. Indeed, Collis's disintegration of the poem's text seems to make good on this promise, even though individual textual fragments might not always be of the same scale as previous, or even, future segments. Collis spreads these textual "parts" among "the ruins of/ imagined communities" (15) whose own radical dismantlement had urged the "soft walls" of these communities "to remain/ a whisper outside/ the institutions/

of palaver" (14). For Collis, the city acts as a cognate for the socio-political space of language. Like the city, language organizes our multiple dialects into imagined utopian communities. These "daily approximation[s]/ of utopia" (16) attempt to form "spontaneous links" (15) between multiple, fractured elements of culture. These traditions organize a culture's constituent parts into a governed whole. Collis's poem provokes the dismantlement of such an artifice of cultural institutions. He tells the reader to "break off" from the whole: "I diverge/ you diverge/ we diverge […] so in this way one/ may become isolated," (14-15) until "we the anarchists/ are everywhere and nowhere/ nowhere at once" (15). This divergence fractures "Dear Common" into radical constituents in language, rescaling the poem into a formless structure, or "barricade," located within such a "ubiquitous utopia" (31). By disintegrating its structure, Collis liberates the poem so that the poem might later become a kind of thematic barricade that stops readers in their tracks.

Yet, the poem never escapes being a poem. The poem remains part of its own imagined community, a resident in the institution of a poetic tradition. Collis reminds us that, in the "abyss of history […] rebellion was in [poetry's] blood" (31). This rebellion was continuously "looking for/ a space for hope" (33) from which it might "[campaign] against/ what history is/ in the mind" (33). Here, Collis points out the frequent gap between the expected results of revolutions past and the actual outcomes of these rebellions. On the one hand, one might hope that radical ideology might alter the social world, but, on the other hand, failure always remains a viable, if not frequent, option within any revolutionary movement. As Collis remarks, "Poetry demands/ the impossible–/ put this bookish poem aside/ for we have not won/ our political battles" (32). He seems to suggest that, even when poetry attempts to dismantle traditional, institutional hierarchies, poetry often fails to

remove the perceived hierarchy between the poet who communicates all textual meaning and the reader who passively receives this meaning. Rather than tearing down the hierarchy between poet and reader, poetry's ideological radicalism often inverts the author-reader relationship, and poetry begins to rely on the reader to construct meaning instead. In doing so, poetry trades, in a sense, one "Franco" for another. "[In] real revolutions," Collis notes, "every ideology shatters/ thrown down by the throng" (15). The poem wishes to "campaign against […] what the poem is" (33). Here, the poem's tone shifts, disclosing poetry's past failures to the public. "Dear Common take/ these letters as/ confessions," (72) writes Collis, "as I wait for the/ fuse to burn the/ fascists to strike so/ we can strike and throw/ the state down just/ throw it down and/ begin without boundary/ bound" (73). The text urges poets to purge language of its privileging hierarchies, doing so without simply replacing these structures, which might otherwise equally block the potential passage of language's shared progress. As Collis reminds us, "you cannot/ commit acts for/ liberty that counter/ the essence of liberty" (71-72). Nor can one liberate a commons within language if one also seeks to privatize that language. Ultimately, Collis strives to imagine a poetry that might achieve a kind of anarchic textual autonomy that resists the privatizing impulses of capital culture.

If *Anarchive's* "Dear Common" produces a kind of melody from the languages of revolutions past, then the "Dear Common" of *The Commons* performs a kind of counter-melody that "choruses out of context" (*Commons* 137). In this text, Collis thematizes his narrator's trespass through the volumes of the English countryside in order to mimic the poem's own trespass into the literary spaces of the past. Collis begins this text with a fragment of "Dear Common." This fragment helps to propel not only the text's forward

momentum, but also the momentum of Collis's revolutionary politics. Watch how Collis

emphasizes movement in the open sequence of *The Commons:*

> In Essex attacked tax commissioners
>
> 1381 marched on London
>
> out of Essex teaming streams
>
> through Aldgate past Chaucer's apartment
>
> burnt John of Gaunt's palace & Fleet prison too. (20)

Collis begins by recalling early modern England's revolutionary past: a peasant revolt

against, among other things, new laws preventing the mobility of labour. This stanza traces

the geographical and political spread of the rebellion throughout the medieval English

countryside. The combination of prepositional phrases and verbs of movement reinforce the

poem's cartography. Interestingly, this stanza not only maps the political and geographical

movement of underclass rebellion in definite space and time, but it also maps the route

taken by Collis's protagonist, John Clare centuries later on his return home. Compare the

above passage with Clare's later statement in *The Commons*: "returned home out of

essence/ and found it led to London/ standing under the hedge/ I could see no tree or bush/

hummed the air/ alone near a wood/ the sign seemed to stand oddly/ nest nest all gone to

roost" (52). Clare's desire to return home consumes him; it is *of essence*. Yet here, Collis

puns overtly: essence and Essex, essential nature and absolute space. Similarly, Clare

describes London laid out before him as "nest nest" – the architectures of home where one

might "go to roost." Taken together, this passage suggests that rebellion finds its home

within poetry, if only as a passive observer to the events of the history, reconsidered and

rearticulated for the benefit of the present.

"Clear" and Common Volumes

The narrative of *The Commons* follows the so-called mad poet John Clare as he escapes from his asylum in Essex and travels to his home in Helpston. Clare is a thoroughly quixotic character who – rather than defeating antagonistic windmills – "vanquish[es] fences" in order to "forcefully [open] enclosures" in language (44). We first meet John Clare in the opening sequence to the second section of *The Commons*. Collis entitles this sequence, ironically, "Clear as Clare," punning on the French adjective *clair,* meaning "clear." However, Collis's protagonist is anything but clear; his personal language often borders on nonsensical ravings that, like fences cutting through the volumes of the English countryside, obstruct the passage of meaning to the reader. Take, for example, his description of an old quarry landscape that he passes on his journey home: "old quarry/ swordy well/ lip tipped and vetted/ pilfering hedgerows/ sheep and dale/ roly poly scriptor est/ botanized and abetted/ rough grass/ to trim lawn/ remains disinhabited" (35). On the one hand, Clare describes a typical English country landscape. This landscape contains an abandoned stone quarry surrounded valleys divided by stone fences. On the other hand, Clare's deliberate "un-clarity" does as much to critique this landscape as it does merely to describe it. The "pilfering hedgerows," for example, not only rob the landscape of its "common" ground by delineating the bounds of private property, but also these walls owe their existence to the "pilfering" of stones from quarries – the literalized robbing of the "common ground." Here, even nature turns against itself: "rough grass" and "sheep" aid and "abet" the accumulation of property. Curiously, Clare's remark that this landscape "remains disinhabited," rather than "uninhabited,*"* suggests that privatization does not deter settlement here, but, rather, privatization prevents settlement. Moreover, Clare's rejection

of normative grammar and syntax also cuts away at our shared language, creating a personal dialect of English. Clare experiences this space through a poetic assemblage of personal remembrances and rhetorics, an assemblage that Clare ultimately filters through the obscure medium of language.

Indeed, Clare slips repeatedly into his personal dialect throughout the text – a kind of "real language of men" beyond what Wordsworth conceives.[8] Clare's utterance "as ey in meyne and theyne" (115), for example, carries a unique accent out of joint with time or location. Visually, the phrase appears almost nonsensical; however, when taken aurally the text gains a new synthesis of meaning. The phrase might in fact sound something like "as *I* in m*i*ne and th*i*ne" – literally placing the lyrical "I" (rescaled to "ey") into the second person possessive. Clare implies that his "language" belongs equally to both himself and the public. This "rescaling" of the first person recurs throughout the text. Compare this line to a later excerpt from "Dear Common" in which Collis writes "Ordinary things/ "doves" and "stones"/ other bodies/ exteriority *in me*/ movements posing/ the world (123; emph. provided), or, similarly, to an earlier line: "that *me*/ was *we* in my private version" (108; emph. added). This repetition of placing the lyrical subject into the collective whole suggests how the personal might in fact belong to the liberated, public domain. Collis compels the individual reader to find common ground within the common cultural volumes of language. He even goes so far as to place Clare's personal language firmly within this shared public space of literary tradition. For example, Clare's observation that "aapral es cruddle moot" (115) – which I take to mean, "April is the cruelest month" – is perhaps a brief, anachronistic dig at Eliot and his modernist cohorts. This short, but radical, encounter with Eliot aligns Collis's text with the Modernist avant-garde in addition to the text's

already established link to Wordsworth's formal experimentation. Taken together, however, these references draw our attention to the "present-ness" of this text, since the text belongs to neither historical period nor avant-gardist movement.

In "Words' Worth" Collis tells us that the "words' value is in the words' freedom" (111). For Clare, freedom of the word entails the liberation of the word from grammatical and semantic signification. By destroying the position of the word within normative grammar, the poet destroys the status of the word in language. In "Words' Worth," we read that Clare now inhabits "that Poetic Region" – the landscape of Wordsworth's Lake District. The characteristics of these lakes quickly take on significance. These lakes become the "swimming language lakes" (111) of literature now dotting the landscape of tradition. Collis writes "*lake* a flock of sheep" or "more *lake* a man/ *lake* clouds sound" (109; my emph.). Notice here, his use of the word "lake" to operate like a corrupted simile. I might even go so far as to suggest that, since Collis wishes to undermine Wordsworth's claim on these lakes, we must perform our own renovation of this passage by replacing those errant "lakes" with "likes" – as in "more *like* a man/ *like* clouds sound." Any textual alteration that we perform here, we do so without doing the text any overt violence. As Clare remarks, "this land is your [Wordsworth's] land but/ I've bought it now" (108). This transfer of ownership seems to entitle Clare to do with the land as he pleases. But Clare soon recognizes the danger of this assumption. He realizes "that me/ was we in my private version," and that any subsequent "colonized description" of the land would only "guide to death" (108). Clare claims, therefore, that any further act of privatization would only serve to undermine his efforts to create a shared space in language to be used for our public well-

being. As he notes, "the poem [is] not a/ nation's property   but a commons all can share,"

(108) – a (perhaps utopian) commons liberated from literary privatization.

Charles Jencks believes that architecture is the "last utopian profession," since, "[a]

utopia fantasy has to be what architects sell" (qtd. in Jourden 45). "Why else go to an

architect," explains Jencks, "if you don't want something better or best that changes your

life?" (45). I want to propose a space for poetry in Jencks's statement. In spite of various

contingences and demands that threaten poetry – such as a lack of public and institutional

funding, or waning popular interest – poets continue to produce poetry, constructing

"spaces of hope" for both an imagined future and an imagined past.[9] Unlike architecture,

however, Collis's poetry imagines a utopia that drives the impulse of artistic production

toward the resisting the agendas of commerce and capital. And although we might easily

debunk the fantasy of utopia, dismissing its viability as a means to organize our daily lives,

such a fantasy in both architecture and poetry nevertheless proposes possible futures that

these professions might construct in hope of changing the order of dominant institutions.

Alfred Noyes writes, "[all] time's peasants pin a hope" (*The Commons* 140). By linking

together multiple texts, revolutions, and languages, Collis exposes the impossibility of the

enclosure of language, and he reveals his hope for a shared, common space in language.

This project is one of many cultural experiments currently undergoing testing within

contemporary poetry. In spite of – or, perhaps, because of – poetry's anxiety about its

power to enact social change, poets continue to test the limits of such poetic potential. This

kind of project differs greatly from the ongoing projects of social engineering currently at

work in larger institutions of government and finance – institutions that impose a regime of

control and subjugation. By throwing down walls that prevent progress and by erecting other barriers that promote radical movement, Collis proposes an alternate image of the world, unfettered by such imprisoning regimes. However idealistic this proposition might be, poetry offers utopia.

Notes

[1] Cf. Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Trans. Malcom Imrie (London: Verso, 1996).

[2] Cf. Stephan Collis, "*The Barricade's Project*, the Life-Long Poem, and the Politics of Form: Notes Towards a Prospectus" (*The Poetic Front*, 2010).

[3] Collis intimates, "I had thought there would be a book in [*The Barricade's Project*] called *The Red Album*, and another entitled *Fuller*. Now I'm not sure" ("Life-Long" 10).

[4] Charles Jencks, *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977).

[5] In a personal email correspondence, Collis lists several architects, theorists, and poets who have been of "crucial importance" to his own poetic practice. Among those figures, Collis includes Rem Koolhaas, Antonio Gaudi, David Harvey, and Ronald Johnson.

[6] Cf. Pauline Butling, "'Re' poetics: 'again, against…anew backward,'" *Writing in Our Time* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier UP, 2005) 21-23; also, cf. Fred Wah, "Poetics of the Potent," *Faking It: Poetics and Hybridity Critical Writing 1984-1999*, (Edmonton: NeWest, 2000) 203.

[7] The Situationists, of course, prove Haussmann's designs ineffectual. In May 1968, the Situationists take to the streets, prying up the very same paving stones left by Haussmann's road crews a century earlier. During May 1968, these stones become both projectile and barricade.

[8] In "Preface to Lyrical Ballads," William Wordsworth explains that *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) began "as an experiment" in order to discover how poets might use "the real language of men" as a model for the metrical arrangement of poetry (par. 1). Wordsworth continues, explaining that the language used by "even the greatest Poet" often falls short "in liveliness

and truth […] of that which is uttered by men in real life" (par. 16). Wordsworth hopes that his lyrical experimentation might inject some of this "real life" passion into poetry, doing so in order to rescue poetry from obsolescence and stagnancy. In spite of his better intentions, however, Wordsworth's poetry never actually lives up to this claim, and his poetry adheres strictly to regular metrical patterns and ornate poetic diction. Cf. William Wordsworth, "Preface to Lyrical Ballads," *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800, *Prefaces and Prologues*, ed. Charles W. Eliot, (Vol. 39, New York: 1909-14), 283-306, *Bartleby.com: Great Books Online* 26 April 2001, 1 August 2010 <http://www.bartleby.com/39/36.html>.

[9] I borrow this term from David Harvey's book of the same name. In his book, Harvey explores our contemporary urban experience within the context of economic equality and social justice. Cf. Harvey, David, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000).

Conclusion

Calgary: a tale of two cites.

It seems to me that two cities now comprise Calgary's urban scene: first, the economic city that respires with corporate activity throughout the day, inhaling its workers inward toward the urban centre in the morning, and exhaling those workers outward toward Calgary's hulking suburbs at night; second, the artistic city that sows its cultural nodes – its artist-run centres, studios, and galleries – throughout Calgary's inner city neighbourhoods and industrial districts. While remaining largely independent from the corporatized branding of the city's multinational institutions, this second Calgary has often had to compete for the limited cultural spaces available within the city. Unlike the centralized, downtown core that houses this economic city, Calgary's artistic city has long been afflicted with a kind of "spacelessness" that sees the city's creative resources atomized and without the necessary, multi-use infrastructures that might nurture and sustain creative production within Calgary's urban setting. This spacelessness has prompted civic policy makers, in recent years, to adopt strategic political initiatives that have been aimed at overcoming such a condition. In March 2005, for example – the same spring that I had left the city – Calgary witnesses the arrival of the city's first designated authority for arts development, an authority that has been instituted by Calgary's Civic Arts Policy, having been passed through council only a year earlier.[1] This organization recognizes, for example, that the majority of city's creative sector operates beyond the purview of the larger, established institutions of Calgary's multinational economic sector. Historically, Calgary's art scene has been allowed to parasitize the city's corporate body, doing so in order to take

advantage of the so-called community building policies that have been instituted by the very same multinational oil companies that have sought to dominate Calgary's urban economy and real estate. As one such company has put it: "we'll put money wherever we drill" – a comment that suggests the desire to buy-off creative dissent with the promise of financial sponsorship.[2] Recently, however, Calgary Arts Development has sought to correct this problem of artistic spacelessness by proposing to a build an urban hub designed to house what they call, sustainable "creative entrepreneurship." They argue that by building such a space, Calgarians might be able "to leverage the benefits of co-location, diversity and collaboration" within the city ("2010 Space Demand"). They imagine, for example, that such a space might provide artists with "opportunities for knowledge sharing and critical debate," as well as opportunities for "networking" and the "sharing of skills and resources," all of which might be achieved, they argue, through mobilization of "various public, private and third-sector partnerships" ("2010 Space Demand"). Such an ambitious project today, however, remains largely speculative, existing only in realm of online surveys and public debate. Nevertheless, strides have been made to link these two, distinct cities together – an innovative (perhaps utopian) project that underscores the relationship between art and architecture within the city

Calgary's vibrant writing scene has also seen its fair share of spacelessness over the years, a condition that has kept Calgary's writing culture atomized and scattered across the city's urban topology. Indeed, only a handful of literary spaces today assert their prominence as being possible locations for Calgary's literary and writing cultures to "call home." Pages Bookstore on Kensington, for example, has a longstanding history with Calgary's literary community. Located north of downtown in what was once a branch of

Calgary's Public Library, Pages hosts a well-established, year-round reading series that promotes the work of Canadian writers, both established and emerging. Similarly, the artist-run TRUCK Gallery has also been receptive to Calgary's nomadic literary culture, since it opened its doors downtown in the late-1990s. Like other artist-run urban centres, TRUCK Gallery recognizes that the limited availability of cultural spaces within the city has become a luxury that must be shared among Calgary's creative communities, and, as such, these spaces must be willing to donate their resources, should they wish to animate artistic production within the urban centre. Calgary's familiar, yet transient, "culture of readings," for example, has long found itself searching out any possible, available venue for writers to read their work publically. This quest to find space has led reading events to take place in multiple, diverse locations throughout the city, not only in bookstores and galleries, but also in theatres and saloons. The task of finding such a shared, urban space for creative writing has been made even more difficult following the closure of Calgary's largest independent bookstore, McNally Robinson, in 2008. Co-owner Paul McNally explains that the choice to close his Calgary branch represents an example of how Alberta's heated economy has over-reached "the potential of the bookselling business," since "[c]urrent real estate prices in downtown Calgary make it difficult to sustain a bookstore" within a downtown, urban environment ("McNally" np). While Calgary's escalating economy has made urban expansion rapidly present within the city, this vigorous economy has also made it seemingly impossible to establish anything remotely resembling a cultural, literary hub within Calgary's downtown core. The economic city has not only out-paced and out-priced Calgary's artistic city, but has also exacerbated the further dispersal of Calgary's already atomized creative writing culture.

And yet, Calgary's creative writing culture thrives. Despite the economic contingencies that keep such a culture constantly on the move and in search of "space," Calgary's writers have, nevertheless, been able to work around the constraints of such a fast-paced, expansive city. Small literary presses, such as Broadview and No Press, have both of them helped to disseminate Calgary's writing culture to the public, both nationally and transnationally, while literary magazines, such as Dandelion, Freefall, and filling Station, have all of them helped to establish affiliated reading series that bring about local, public awareness of Calgary's diverse writing practices. In the past, these reading series have relied mainly on word-of-mouth advertising, however, in the age of the digital revolution, the organizers have these events have been quick to adopt ever more sophisticated, technologic solutions for press and promotion. The innovation of online social media and social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, for example, have been able to bring news of literary events straight to the handheld devices of interested parties at any hour of the day or night. Small Press Action Networking Calgary, or SPANC, even hosts its own blog, Facebook page, and Twitter feed, all of which are aimed at keeping the public abreast of current literary happenings around town – a technocratic solution, perhaps, to the perceived, artistic spacelessness of Calgary. But while these online sites do afford artists exciting new ways to organize, promote, and participate in these various events inexpensively, effectively, and efficiently, these sites do not, however, offer any real solutions to the spacelessness that forces Calgary's artistic communities to take up residency within the Internet's ideated environments in the first place. If artists cannot afford a physical location to practices the business of art, then the Internet offers the next best thing: a free, public domain open for business. Within the context of this thesis,

however, this final point concerning contemporary writing's relationship to online, digital

cultural might be of particular interest to the future discourses of architectural poetics, since

the digital realm has become *the* central paradigm of innovation – a paradigm that has not

only reshaped the cultural contours of the early twenty-first century, but has also reshaped

how artistic production operates within such a paradigm. This final chapter, therefore,

endeavours to investigate further, how this newfound digitalism might be used in the

service of artistic production in order to construct a public commons in which the

innovation, promotion, and preservation of poetry-intensive activities might take place.

Furthermore, this final chapter notes that this paradigm of digitalism has also reshaped

cultural notions of how poetry interacts with cultural spaces, both physically and digitally.

Site; screen; escape.

Digital culture registers the ambitions of our time within a paradigm of social

change – a paradigm that itself has become catalyzed by these advancing technologies.

While advances in digital technology do afford us new and popular ways to organize our

daily lives, so too do these advances offer fields such as architecture and poetry new ways

to organize their artistic practices. I might even go so far as to argue that the influence of

digital media on the aesthetic praxis of both contemporary architecture and contemporary

poetry suggests that such media might ultimately drive these two fields closer together in

century to come. I do not wish to suggest, however, that twenty-first century "digitalism"

imposes a forceful migration of architecture and poetry together.[3] Rather, these two fields

rendezvous willingly at the intersection of pioneering digital technology and innovative

aesthetic methodology. If one of the goals of this project has been to showcase how these

two fields of architecture and poetry historically, theoretically, and aesthetically take up residence within the same neighbourhoods of politics, place, and *polis*, then digital technology marks merely a new intersection further along the same road. If the task of both architecture and poetry is to articulate the forms and meanings that culture deems significant, then why not let architecture and poetry take up the concerns of the digital age, both aesthetically and ethically, within their respective fields? This contemporary digitalism generates new potentials for art to keep pace with our increasingly global culture – a culture that valorizes the fast, the rife, and the cheap as its primary modes of cultural production.

Render *Me* Useless? You CAD!

The language of architecture already permeates digital culture. Whether in the secure domains of e-commerce, or in the inviting playgrounds of social networking, the language of architecture anchors contemporary digital culture to the material world, articulating life in the wake of the digital revolution. I might even go so far as to argue that, in spite of digitalism's impulse to render the material world virtual, the grounding of the digital by the language of architecture renders contemporary digitalism conceptually and democratically graspable. We are, after all, familiar with the transparent metaphors of "windows," "rooms," and "sites," which have become so pervasive in our understanding of cyberspace. Marcos Novak notes that, when taken as a means of cultural production, the construction of "cyberspace" implies a "radical transformation" of both our "conception of architecture" and our perception of "the public domain" (249). He further argues that the concept of "cyberspace" also extends permanently "the notions of city" and "infrastructure"

from a context of "physical proximity" to a context of "relationships, connections and associations," all of which " are webbed over and around the simple world […] of commonplace functions" (249). The widespread use of digital communication technology, for example, inculcates a palpable demand for evermore dynamic, ideated environments in which contemporary culture might "virtually" play out. The fulfillment of such demands ultimately naturalizes our interaction with the dematerialized realm of the public domain – demands that are compounded by our escalating interface with such technologies. Within twenty-first century digitalism, digital culture gravitates intuitively towards entirely conceptual spaces that – beyond the virtual world – do not exist. Moreover, digitalism's vocational imperative assures architecture's necessity to ideate such virtual spaces in order to better organize our social, technological, and economic lives.

As these technologies become ever more accelerated in their operation, pervasive in their use, and inexpensive in their production, the designers of our future cultural spaces must take measures not to become themselves rendered useless by such technologies. In recent years, for example, digital media have become the industry standard for architectural design. Advances in both computer-aided design (CAD) and computer-aided manufacturing (CAM) have made these tools readily accessible for everyday use within the architectural practice. Indeed, some of the most exciting architectures in production today owe their inception to digital media. One need only look toward Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao (Spain), Zaha Hadid's Guangzhou Opera House in Guangzhou (China), or Daniel Libeskind's Royal Ontario Museum extension in Toronto (Canada), in order to witness how digital media impacts the architectural design of the twenty-first century.[4] Not only have the designs of these highly conceptual projects been

made possible by the use of digital media, but also the construction of these new

architectures have been rendered *plausible* as well. The confluence of the possibility of

innovative design with the plausibility of construction has altogether instigated a new

regime of theoretical and philosophical possibilities within the architectural practice.

Moreover, the realization of these highly conceptual projects also helps to open up the

architectural field to a wider conversation within the public discourse – a conversation that

debates the merits, functions, and, ultimately, designs of these new architectures. Taken

together within the context of contemporary digitalism, these new discursive parameters

assist with democratization of the practice of digital architecture.

Branko Kolarevic maintains a useful definition for "digital architecture." He

explains that "digital architecture" refers to any architectural design concept that generates

forms from algorithmic computation instead of more conventional design methodologies

(13). Kolarevic notes that architects who use digital media in their practice increasingly use

this technology "not as a representational tool for visualization but as a generative tool for

the derivation of form and its transformation" (13). He terms this methodology "digital

morphogenesis," and Kolarevic further separates the act of designing these forms from the

act of merely rendering these forms. "Instead of modeling an external form," argues

Kolarevic, digital morphogenesis "articulate[s] an internal generative logic which then

produces, in an automatic fashion, a range of possibilities from which the designer could

choose an appropriate formal proposition for further development" (13). But while digital

morphogenesis alters radically the context of what it means to design architectural space in

the twenty-first century, digital morphogenesis also places the act of rendering digital

architectures on unstable ground. The highly conceptual nature of the rendering itself

assures that most digital architectures never actually become realized fully, built within the material world. The rendering, therefore, expresses only an ideated environment meant to articulate a moment of contemporary life, either real or imagined, which exists beyond the confines of the material world – architectural designs that are neither here, nor there.

Marcos Novak's often quoted essay, "Liquid Architecture in Cyberspace" (1991), accounts for the use of digital media in architecture. In his essay, Novak notes that the technological revolution has called upon the architect "to design not the object but the principles by which the object is generated" (250). He argues that the act of rendering digital architecture necessitates the need for organizing information along a continuum, wherein the architect no longer designs "a single edifice," but rather the architect designs a nest of architectures, each "smoothly or rhythmically evolving in both space and time" (250). He terms this type of design "liquid architecture," and he identifies a new triadic imperative for design in the twenty-first century. As Novak explains, "I use the term liquid to mean [an] animistic, animated, [and] metamorphic [praxis of design]" – a praxis that simultaneously guides the behaviour of a project – its uses and its functions – through time and space, as well as a praxis that incorporates architecture's "capability to change in location through time […] [and] change in *form*, through time *or* space" (250; emph provided). When taken together, these elements imply, Novak argues, architecture's "crossing [of] categorical boundaries" into the dematerialized realms of dance, music, and, ultimately, poetic thinking: a kind of "parapoetic" leap for architecture into the twenty-first century.

I doubt very much that many contemporary architects lament the loss of the drafting table for the personal computer. The utopian promise made by the digital revolution – that

life might be made easier, more accessible, and faster in the years ahead – has paid off – at least for architecture. Nevertheless, the uses of these new technologies inevitably raise important ethical questions regarding the role of the designer in the twenty-first century. Specifically, at what point does the architect stop designing and become merely a renderer of digital forms? Lebbeus Woods, for example, notes that much of the talk "about computation in architecture" today centres not only on the "implications for the design and production of tectonic objects," but also on the "inescapable philosophical consequences" that these new technologies also imply ("Zero and Ones" par. 1). In particular, Woods questions how architects might use digital media simultaneously to enact and to embody an ethics of design. In order to establish such a practice, Woods advises architects not to abdicate their vocational responsibility to the design practice itself; he advises them not to render computational images without regard for the kinds of political, ideological, or social consequences that such an abdication might imply ("Zeros and Ones" np). The machine must not design architectural space alone; the machine only computes possibilities that the architect must choose either to pursue or to ignore with a demonstrative logic. The computer may only produce the rendering, not conceive it.

Jack Self notes that, within current architectural theory, "there is no consensus [about] what constitutes a 'render'" (par. 2). He explains that a rendering "[is] neither a construction document nor a faithful depiction of reality – [the rendering's] domain lies somewhere in the space between abstraction and resemblance" (par. 2). Such an ambiguous definition posits the act of rendering within a theoretically dubious space. Lebbeus Woods puts it this way: "[t]he act of rendering is the making of a version of reality" (qtd. in Self par. 7). The rendering suggests an idea of space that might only exist as a concept; its

enactment trumped by its conception. Like the "liquid architectures" of Marcos Novak, the rendering at best represents an intermediary space between the fluctuating abstractions of ideas and possibilities – a kind of "graphic speculation" that does not ever need to become fully a reality. As Woods further explains, "[t]hese drawings are not preparations for construction – in each case they are the project" (qtd. in Self par. 77). However, digital renderings often teeter on meaninglessness, since rendering digital images also represents only the artist's expression of ideated beauty and not, necessarily, a political, social, or vocational pursuit – all of which, when taken together, help to innovate, or push forward the field of architecture into as yet unrealized futures. In order to combat the impulse to create beauty without meaning, Woods argues that today's digital architect must create renderings that strive to transcend the rendering's liminal status. Anyone can render a digital image using software; but, unless that rendering aspires to fulfill some other social, political, or academic purpose, then the renderer merely shirks his or her ethical and vocational responsibilities, fulfilling only the most garish purposes on behalf of self-gratification.

Pages? We Don't Need No Stinking Pages

Russ Rickey and Derek Beaulieu have noted that, "[t]rying to make a statement on anything regarding the Internet is like trying to catch a train – when the train is roaring by at sixty miles per hour" (par. 1). Nevertheless, in spite of the very real possibility that this paper might succumb to its own technical obsolescence, I believe that this project merits a few words on contemporary, innovative writing's relationship to digital culture. In particular, I often wonder why innovative writing "plays so hard to get" online, given the

ubiquity of digital technology today. While the virtual spaces of the Internet have, for sometime now, renegotiated our interaction with dematerialized world, these spaces have also rapidly renegotiated both the speed at which language changes over time and the context in which language manifests within space. One might conclude that digital technology harbors a breeding ground for innovative writing that, for one reason or another, contemporary writers have been slow to adopt. This complaint has been widely expressed since the earliest days of the Internet. Charles O. Hartman, for example, vents his frustration about digital poetry in the mid-1990s (ancient history, in terms of online culture). He notes that, "[t]alking about computer poetry is almost like talking about extraterrestrial intelligence: great speculation, no examples" (1). Nearly two decades on, poetry still seems hesitant to address adequately the milieu of contemporary digitalism in any meaningful way. Perhaps this hesitancy stems from the inundation of creative and critical possibilities that has kept poetry aesthetically nomadic throughout its history. Nevertheless, the lack of digital representation within poetry seems to be a glaring oversight on behalf of poets the further into the twenty-first century we go. Digital culture may have indeed shot out of the gate like a *shinkhansen* out of Tokyo more than twenty years ago, but poetry, meanwhile, seems to have been left standing on the platform, unaware that the train has left. I do not wish to suggest, however, that excellent examples of "digital poetry" cannot be found. Certainly, the works American poets Jason Nelson, Jody Zellen, and Golan Levin represent a salient handful of some of the more technologically adept poetic projects to date.[5] However, even these examples merely provide the exception to the rule. When contemporary poets do utilize digital media, their projects often fail to showcase the full potential that digital media might hold for poetry. The future of poetry

may be here; but this future is, at best, unevenly distributed. Beyond the word processor, digital media is not the industry standard for contemporary poetry – if such an "industry" exists – nor does the use of such media within contemporary poetics seem to provide any innovation beyond what online marketing already achieves daily – and often better. Thankfully, poetry seems to be catching up (although taking a slower, less definitive, and perhaps more divergent, path than that taken by architecture). Nevertheless, I find myself compelled to retrace poetry's steps on the path toward the digital, reflecting upon earlier imperatives made by several of today's contemporary poets.

Charles Bernstein, for example, has proclaimed that the mid-1990s might have been "a particularly important time for poetry" ("Warning" par. 14). He explains that "the formats and institutions" implicated by online culture might "provide models and precedents for small-scale, poetry-intensive activities" in the future to come (par. 14). Moreover, these new, interactive environments might create "new possibilities for every aspect of poetic work, from composition to visualization to display to performance to distribution to reading, and indeed, to constructing publics" (par. 14). Bernstein refuses to allow the future of poetry to be left to the whims and desires of modern technology's utopian promise. Bernstein later comments to Marjorie Perloff: "Poetry is too important to be left to its own devices" ("A conversation" par. 43). As enticing as the new, digital world of poetic potential seems, many technologically attuned poets have agreed that these technologies must be employed in the service of poetry and not merely poetry's creation. "I don't believe that technology creates improvement," maintains Bernstein, "but rather that we need to use the new technologies in order to preserve the limited cultural spaces we have created" ('Warning" par. 14). Bernstein foresees the importance of the Internet for

poetry, but he argues that this role must not lie in the new, aesthetic praxis of digital design alone. Rather, the Internet must prove itself useful through its seemingly endless ability to construct a public space in which we might preserve, disseminate, and, yes, even produce poetry into the twenty-first century and beyond. "Don't lament, or don't lament only," Bernstein commands, "construct" (par. 25).[6]

As contemporary poetry now engages with digital media, I might even go so far as to suggest that today's "digital poets" divide their projects between those that create "poetry online" and those that create "online poetry." Such a line of distinction runs between the acts of preserving poetry digitally and the acts of producing digital poetry. Darren Wershler-Henry clarifies this distinction further. He recalls, for example, Damian Lopes's contrast between "poetry online" and "online poetry" in that the former represents a "written text that has been dumped into HTML and posted on the web," and the latter represents "a poetry that utilizes the functionality of the medium, as well as drawing its structure, syntax and tropes from the Internet" itself ("Noise in the Channel" par. 4). Similarly, Kenneth Goldsmith has identified two of poetry's earliest tendencies, both of which manifest when poetry attempts to embrace the Internet's ideated environment. First, poetry attempts to replicate the "static text onto the medium of the web," doing so in order to recall "the experience of reading a book" in the absence of the book (i); second, poetry "engages directly with technology," doing so in order to "provide […] a new type of online reading experience" (i). In both cases, Wershler-Henry and Goldsmith make explicit their preference for innovative writers, who pursue an "online poetry" more fully, to maintain stewardship over those public cultural spaces that have been designated for poetry's production, distribution, and consumption online.

While poetry's movement from the material realm of the book to the dematerialized realm of the digital has brought with it new, radical spaces for poetry's conservation, distribution, and consumption, this movement has also brought with it an anxiety about the potential loss of the book, as well as the potential loss of meanings that the loss of the book might imply. Craig Dworkin, for example, contends that poetry's attachment to the material page "is not romantically nostalgic, but semiotic" ("Net Losses" par. 2). He notes that, when we transfer poetry from book to screen, not all of the meanings that the physical artifact invokes transfer with the text. Dworkin also notes that "[t]o move from print to the web, for example, is to move from a medium defined by the page to one in which pages […] do not, in fact, exist" (par. 2). To cite Dworkin further: "like all the material aspects of a book – layout, typeface and font, binding, ink, et cetera – [the] page carries a full semantic charge," whose material elements "are not merely implicated in the meaning of a work, but they are, in themselves, fully a part of that meaning" (par. 2). Because the semiotic parameters of the digital page differ so greatly from the material page, poetry's intermedial transfer strips away (or, at best, only approximates) the meanings implicated by the material artifact of the page itself. Thus, digitizing poetry for the sake of preservation in fact contributes to the overall loss of the text's meaning. Nevertheless, the purpose of digitizing texts is not to preserve the text, or to conserve it only; rather, we digitize the text so as to invite the reader to participate in the text's re-inhabitation – an act that paradoxically both destroys meaning and creates meaning. Whether page or webpage, media implies a kind of meaning – an implication that does not ultimately detract from the reading process, but, rather, proposes alternate reading strategies for the reader to adopt. In doing so, we promote the reader's awareness about how form ultimately *informs* the

construction of the text's space. Poets need not lament the loss of the book; not all poetry is digital, just as not all poetry is digitized – nor need it be. You can have the book and digitize it too.

In an essay entitled "Born Digital" (2009), Stephanie Strickland outlines a manifesto for the production of digital poetry.[7] In her essay, Strickland argues that, in order for poetry to qualify as being "born digital," "computation is required at every stage" (par. 2). Such a poetry demands that coding, programming, and computation all become generative processes for poetic production. Strickland argues that, when taken together, these generative processes result in a project that requires users to interact, operate, and play with these digital forms, creating a poetry that "does things rather than says things" (par. 3). Appropriately, poetry's digital morphogenesis responds to the kinds of new social conditions created by online culture and, as such, this poetry requires that we develop equally new reading strategies in order to negotiate these novel structures. As Strickland maintains, "reading e-lit requires taking an aesthetic attitude toward the textscape as an object that stimulates the senses" (par. 10). The navigation of these sensorial landscapes demands that users pay close attention not only to the differing types of media being used within a single project, but also to how these various media interrelate to one another within such a project. We might think of digital poetry, then, as network of media nested within a network of media. The most basic premise of digital poetry requires "that human reading and machine reading work together" as a kind of nested entity, through which both the coding of language into a readable text and the programming of language into digital space allow for meaning production (par. 13). Ultimately, digital poetry creates "built worlds" that encourage readers to participate in the construction of these worlds both over

time and within space. Such an action requires that, on some level, the user produce the text, thereby becoming evermore integral to the production of meaning. In doing so, the digital poetry forces the crossing of categorical boundaries between writer and reader, and, for poetry "born digital," between coder and poet.

Of course, digital poetry is not confined to the Internet alone. Some of poetry's earliest experiments with digital media have focused on creating automated writing programs, which might allow computers to produce poetry without the need for human intervention.[8] Christian Bök, for example, has expressed his desire for a poetry-producing machine that might allow him to collect royalties at little or no cost to the author.[9] Other authors before Bök have also speculated about the existence of such a machine. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, for example, even goes so far as to describe a "writing engine" that "might write books in philosophy, poetry, politics, laws, mathematics, and theology, without the least assistance from genius or study" (51; bk. 3, ch. 5). By the late 1950s and early 1960s, both computer engineers and avant-garde poets begin experimenting with new, innovative technologies in order to achieve such a task. In 1962, for example, R.M. Worthy devises a computer program that utilizes a bank of 3,500 words and 128 sentence structures in order to write automatic poems – a program called "Auto-Beatnik."[10] Worthy's machine even catches the attention of *Time Magazine* (although less for the quality of Auto-Beatnik's poetry and more for the implications that such a "cool" machine might hold for the future of poetic production): "[w]ith other machines also turning to the muse, there is the chance of a whole new school of poetry growing up. […] But with even an auto-beat computer costing $100,000 to build, the output will certainly not be free verse" ("Pocketa" par. 11). Such a "new school of poetry" has only grown in size since then, having been

made possible by both the increased capability of new technologies and the decreased cost of such technologies.

Despite half a century of innovation, however, the quality of automated computer poetry may still be called into question, both aesthetically and ethically. Chris Funkhouser notes that, "automatically generated [poetry] does not mean an enormous amount of effort has not gone into its production; nor does it mean that it has reached its final form" ("On Virtually Disembodied" par. 7). Human input is still *de rigueur* when it comes to filtering out the digital noise produced by computation. From a critical stand point, it is not enough for poets to legitimize linguistic fragmentation simply because a computer has made it so. As Funkhouser notes, poetry uses fragmentation in order to "challenge the stability of language as a point of meaning" (par. 7). Just as architecture uses digital media in order to compute possibilities more efficiently, so too must poetry use digital media as means to establish formal propositions in the service of poetry. To cite Bernstein once again: "the answer is not in our machines but in our politics" ("Warning" par. 22). Only once digital media is being used in the service of poetry might such a digital poetry enact a politics of form that has become so desired by today's innovative writing practices.

How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Collaboration

Darren Wershler-Henry notes that, "online poetry engenders a high degree of collaborative work," since "one writer rarely has all of the skills required to make a particular project happen" ("Noise" par. 14). Between coding online poetry and writing online poetry, one must also design the aesthetic layout of the project – a skill akin to graphic design and typography. The success of an online poetic project entails that a poet

be an expert at all three of these skills – any one of which is difficult enough to acquire in

its own right. The simplest means to overcome this problem might be to collaborate with

one or more artists who possess a complementary skill set. As Wershler-Henry notes,

however, such collaboration rapidly changes "traditional notions of authorship," which

have become "inadequate descriptions of creating an online text" (par. 14). It might be an

interesting future project for poets to consider organizing a kind of "poetic design studio"

akin to the studios of architecture. Imagine: The Office for Digital Poetry. After all, the

tyranny of the lone architect has itself become quickly a passé notion in the age of digital

technology. Perhaps the future of poetry lies in a world without the "Poet"? In the

meantime, however, a few digital poets have already presented their own possibilities for

the future of online poetry – poets who each demonstrate similar sensibilities to the works

of Derksen, Robertson, and Collis.

Structure: Jason Nelson

Jason Nelson has recently made a name for himself as a promising digital poet.

Currently, Nelson teaches digital writing at Griffith University in Queensland, Australia.

Nelson's website, *Secret Technology*, is a collection of his flash-based poetic experiments,

many of which explore notions of space, both real and virtual. One of his more recent

experiments, for example, is entitled, "Birds Still Warm from Flying." The composition is

an interactive, multidimensional poetry cube that invites the user to rotate sections of his

poem in a similar fashion to a Rubik's Cube. Each individual square is labeled either with a

numbered line of poetry or with an animated gif, and, like a Rubik's Cube, Nelson invites

his users to rotate sections of his cube along axes both vertical and horizontal in order to

read his text. Unlike a Rubik's Cube, however, Nelson's cube is an unsolvable puzzle that

provides the user endless ways to compose a readable poem. The numbered lines of poetry

only give the impression that some manner of order exists. The illusion of coherence is

merely an effect of the user's experience of Nelson's poetic space. The ordering of his

poetic lines depends entirely upon the user's arbitrary arrangement of the cube itself. I

might suggest that Nelson's project parallels the design sensibilities of Derksen, insofar as

Nelson strives to imagine a paratactic, hyper-referential methodology for design. This

project may be viewed along with his other projects via his website:

<http://www.secrettechnology.com>.

Surface: Jody Zellen

Jody Zellen is a California-based multimedia artist. Her installation work has

appeared in numerous institutions worldwide, including the prestigious Whitney Museum

in New York. Her work often juxtaposes a vast array of media within a single project,

including photography, painting, text, and digital art. She has composed several webpages

that explore the relationship between online space and urban space. One of her larger,

ongoing projects is entitled "Ghost City," which has been active since 1997. This project

attempts to document the Internet's ever-changing technologies over time. In doing so,

"Ghost City" has become an archive of the Internet's outmoded styles and forms. Zellen

explains that "Ghost City" explores how mass media represents the city online. Each page

of "Ghost City" appears as a kind of architectural screen that filters representations of the

city for the user, doing so through the media of both image and text. Users enter "Ghost

City" by clicking on any one of the embedded links located on a five-by-five grid of

flashing, animated gifs. As the user interacts with Zellen's animated graphics, "Ghost City" encourages users to uncover and explore the many hidden spaces of the Internet's imaginary city, where "Reality can be anything," and the site urges the user to "walk through memory" (np). I might suggest that Zellen's project parallels the design sensibilities of Robertson, insofar as Zellen desires to construct an archival city of memory. Within such a city, Zellen preserves old, web technologies as kinds of "surfaces" related to the memory of online culture. This project may be viewed along with her other projects via her website: <http://www.jodyzellen.com>.

Volume: Golan Levin

Golan Levin's work exemplifies digital media's collaborative potential. His many works explore the notion of how languages, both verbal and nonverbal, communicate protocols within a given system. As his personal website attests, Levin makes use of digital technologies in order to "highlight our relationship with machines, make visible our ways of interacting with each other, and explore the intersection of abstract communication and interactivity" (par. 1). Levin's "Ursonography," for example, collaborates with Dutch sound poet Jaap Blonk in order to retool a new, audiovisual interpretation of Kurt Schwitter's *Ursonate*. Using a speech recognition program to project real-time, "intelligent subtitles," Levin rescales Schwitter's already guttural gymnastic poetry into a typographic, sensorial extravaganza. Levin's "intelligent subtitles" interpret the cadence, timbre, and dynamics of Blonk's performance, and the program translates this performance into a dynamic work of visual poetry projected onto a screen behind him. The program's wide variety of typographic styles and interpretations helps to reveal the underlying structure of

Schwitter's text, thereby recontextualizing the *Ursonate* within a contemporary digital culture. I might suggest that Levin's project parallels the design sensibilities of Collis, insofar as Levin desires to retool the avant-garde's historical modes of expression in order to better articulate a poetry of the present. Moreover, by making visual the acoustic space that the Schwitter's invokes, Levin materializes the space of an otherwise nonexistent "volume" of architecture. This project may be viewed along with his other collaborative projects via his website: <http://www.flong.com>.

Exit to the Left, Around the Corner

In tracing contemporary, innovative poetry's relationship to architecture, my project has argued three points. First, my project has argued that innovative poetic structures have become a means for poets both to enact and to embody a politics within the public space of language. Second, my project has argued that, by articulating a politics of form, poetry declares its ambition to transcend the limitations of language, doing so in order to become built more fully within the material world. Third, my project has argued that poetry occupies the public spaces of culture, doing so in order both to promote peaceful, sociopolitical change within these public spaces and to resist possible, privatizing forces that might otherwise arrest the movement of language within these public spaces. This project has discussed these points as they relate to the architectural themes of structure, surface, and volume in poetry. Taken together within the context of architecture, these three arguments suggest that poetry is moving closer to the construction of its own public, cultural space. Moreover, this movement towards the material realm of architecture has also pressed poetry further to become evermore ambitious in its experimentation with structures,

surfaces, and volumes in other media. Each of the poets discussed in my thesis has tackled these arguments. Derksen's use of poetic structure, for example, showcases not only how globalism informs personal, national, and cultural identities, but also how globalism constructs these identities as a kind of "architecture" that embodies political ideology. Robertson's use of rhetorical surfaces uncovers the hidden spaces of poetry by dismantling the institutional regimes of both genre and gender, doing so in order to promote poetry's creative, conceptual "sprawl" onto the surface of the public realm. Collis's use of radical poetic form demonstrates the ways in which poetry embodies the social, utopian ambitions of language – ambitions that he uses in order to construct a public, common space within our shared, cultural volumes. As poetry now enters the second decade of the new millennium, these poets and others like them are no doubt going to have to contend with increasingly sophisticated contingencies that push our world ever further into the global market. Contemporary digitalism, for example, has become so pervasive an element on our socio-cultural horizon that neither architecture nor poetry has much recourse, but to take up digitalism's potential for aesthetic innovation – a provocation that even now challenges the artistic communities of contemporary Calgary. As these two fields of architecture and poetry survey this new territory of potential, they are no doubt going to have to continue to move closer together, sharing what resources and critical knowledge they turn up. In doing so, critics are going to have to develop new, critical languages that best articulates this interdisciplinary migration – a language that my project has attempted to survey: a criticism of architectural poetics.

Exit: a space that longs for return.

Notes

[1] Cf. "Backgrounder," *Calgary Arts Development* <http://www.calgaryarts

development.com/node/22>.

[2] Purportedly, this reply had given by one such corporation in response to sponsorship

requests made at the behest of the University of Calgary's I'Poyi (Speak) Aboriginal

Writers Conference in 2009, a telling indictment of the city's corporate relationship to its

art communities.

[3] Digitalism refers to the cultural turn towards the use of digital technology as a means of

cultural and artistic production. This movement begins with the innovation of the personal

computer in the early 1980s, which has made the use of personal digital technology both

ubiquitous and inexpensive. Digitalism gains momentum throughout the 1990s with the

widespread use of the Internet, and digitalism explodes in terms of its dynamism at the

beginning of the new millennium. With no signs of slowing down, contemporary digitalism

has immeasurably impacted the practices of graphic design, visual art, and architecture over

the past thirty years. Because digitalism has so radically altered the landscape of art, I feel

that this project might be remiss not to account for avant-garde poetry's past, present, and

future participation within this newfound digital world.

[4] All of these projects may be viewed online, along with additional information concerning

the construction, conception, and implications of these projects. Cf. *Guggenheim Bilbao*

<http://www.guggenheim.org/bilbao>; *Zaha Hadid Architects' Guangzhou Opera House*

<http://www.zaha-hadid.com/cultural/guangzhou-opera-house>; and *Studio Daniel

Libeskind: Royal Ontario Museum* <http://www.daniel-libeskind.com/projects/show-

all/royal-ontario-museum>.

[5] I would also add to this list the works of British poet John Cayley, the works of Japanese poet Yugo Nakamura, and the works of Austrian poet Jörg Piringer. These projects, along with those listed above, may all be viewed online. Jason Nelson's *Secret Technology* <http://www.secrettechnology.com>; Jody Zellen's website <http://www.jodyzellen.com>; Golan Levin's *Flong* <http://www.flong.com>; John Cayley's

P=R=O=G=R=A=M=M=A=T=O=L=O=G=Y <http://www.shadoof.net>; Yugo Nakamura's *MONO*crafts* <http://yugop.com>; and Jörg Piringer's website <http://joerg.piringer.net>.

[6] Indeed, both poets and critics alike have taken up Bernstein's imperative. Today, numerous poetic institutions dot the Internet's digital landscape. In addition to numerous online literary journals and personal websites, some of the more notable institutions include the University of Buffalo's *Electronic Poetry Center* <http://epc.buffalo.edu>, Kenneth Goldsmith's *UbuWeb* <http://www.ubuweb.com>, and *PennSound* at the University of Pennsylvania <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound>.

[7] What I have termed "digital poetry," Strickland terms "e-poetry" or "e-lit." I use the term "digital poetry" to maintain a parallel between what Strickland calls poetry "born digital" and what Kolarevic calls "digital architecture" – structures that use digital media as a generative process for aesthetic design.

[8] Cf. Chris Funkhouser, *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: An Archaeology of Forms (1959-1995)*, (Tuscaloosa: U Alabama P, 2007).

[9] Christian Bök, interview with Jian Ghomeshi, *Q*, CBC Radio, Toronto, 23 June 2010.

[10] *Time Magazine's* original article, "The Pocketa, Pocketa School," published on May 25th 1962, credits *Horizon Magazine* (May 1962) for being the first to bring Worthy's machine

to public knowledge. The full *Time* article may now be read online, preserved for the sake

of posterity in space of the magazine's public digital archives. Cf. "The Pocketa, Pocketa

School," *Time Magazine*, 25 May 1962, print, *Time.com*, web <http://www.time.com/time/

magazine/article/0,9171,896273,00.html>.

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