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Eleven More American Women Poets in the 21st Century

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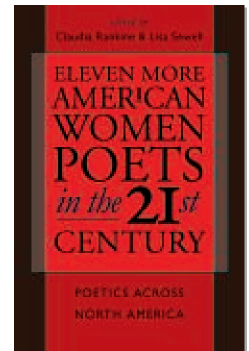

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We are not designed to perceive most of what surrounds us or to fully understand the rest.
history gardens from etiologies disasters confused begins a zig yes
the celebration of combinatorial excess, with these 5 integers, with this fractal curve the escape from finitude begins
Yes x-y was very us that sparsely rattling quoting poem or no much longer kick
The manic combinatorics of the fugue inducing giddy ecstasy in the listener
just in history gardens from etiologies disasters confused begins a zig
it's the nature of music to elude questions of fallibility, the poetic claim to
zig yes x-y was very us that sparsely rattling quoting poem or no much longer kick
Flotillas of swallowtails disappear into themselves. This is neither true nor false
in history gardens from etiologies disasters confused begins again from A to Z
in the face of that so much predatory intention love of reason what if sublimation does induce melancholia x-y out each word is a stroke of genius that could bring on all the rest

THE METHOD "IN *MEDIAS* MESS"

Jena Osman

Joan Retallack's book *AFTERRIMAGES* opens with a quote from Victor Weisskopff, a scientist who served on the Manhattan Project:

> On July 16, 1945, as the countdown at Alamogordo approached zero the P.A. system began to broadcast music from a nearby radio station operating on the same frequency. This is how the explosion of the first atomic bomb came to be accompanied by a Tchaikovsky waltz.[1]

AFTERRIMAGES was published in 1995, the year of the 50th anniversary of the dropping of the bomb. Other detonations that year included the Oklahoma City bombing, a Unabomber bomb that killed a California lobbyist, and the bombing of Bosnia and Herzogovina by NATO. Ten peo-

ple were convicted that year of bombing the World Trade Center in 1993. Other shatterings included earthquakes that killed hundreds in Japan and Greece. Hundreds died in a Chicago heat wave. The Barings Bank in England collapsed due to one man's speculation. Itzhak Rabin was assassinated and Ken Saro-Wiwa was hung by his own government.

At the same time that such political and ecological explosions were occurring worldwide, attempts at "de-fragmentation" were being asserted domestically in the United States. The Million Man March took place in Washington, D.C. The Republicans gained control of both houses in Congress for the first time since 1953 (which was the year the hydrogen bomb was first made public). The Contract With America was passed. Internationally, the World Trade Organization was created. Such defragmentations have their dangers; socio-political forms of unity—which derive from desires both idealistic and ideological—require diversity and complexity to be homogenized beneath a sheen of unanimous consensus. Such forced alignments are inextricably linked (even if indirectly) to the fragmenting detonations of the past century. And as Joan Retallack has stated in an essay called "What Is Experimental Poetry & Why Do We Need It," "literary and sociopolitical structures have always exhibited more than coincidental parallels."[2] Aesthetic forms that mimic orderly homogenization (through classically harmonious constructions, unproblematized subjectivity, and monolingual articulations) can be as reductive of lived experience as social forms with similar values, and therefore need to be troubled. Retallack proposes that poetic forms model forms of life; it is therefore the poet's responsibility to make complex forms analogous to the complex orders found in everyday circumstance.

In the late 1980s, Retallack began to use the term "poethics" to describe this critical connection between forms of art and forms of life. The concept emerged originally from her study of Wittgenstein in the mid-1960s, and with her subsequent graduate study of philosophy in the Wittgensteinian mode with the analytic philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe. At the beginning of his *Philosophical Investigations* (of which Anscombe was the English translator), Wittgenstein states

> It is easy to imagine a language consisting only of orders and reports in battle.—Or a language consisting only of questions and expressions for answering yes and no. And innumerable others.—And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.[3]

In the introduction to her book of interviews with composer John Cage, *Musicage: Cage Muses on Words, Art, Music*, Retallack recounts how taking a course taught by Anscombe about the meaning of "wanting" coincided with her first meeting with John Cage at a Merce Cunningham performance.[4] The confluence of Anscombe (who was author of a book

called *Intention*) and Cage (whose works were all about non-intention and non-wanting) created a paradigm shift in her thinking that moved her away from the forms of classical philosophical thinking with its narrow appreciation of poetic language, toward a more flexible mode of thought where the borders between philosophy and poetry begin to lose their definition. Wittgenstein's aphoristic and modular form in the *Philosophical Investigations* provided both a description and an enactment of what it meant for language to be a form of life. Meanwhile, John Cage was making the same argument in terms of music. In 1988, during the question and answer session that followed one of his Norton lectures at Harvard, Cage proposed the following:

> Performance of a piece of music can be a metaphor of society, of how we want society to be. Though we are not now living in a society which we consider good, we could make a piece of music in which we would be willing to live . . . you can think of music as a representation of a society in which you would be willing to live.[5]

For Cage, such a society would be an anarchist one, with no president or government to direct and control the clamor of the world. Cage pragmatically modeled this kind of society in his compositions by privileging ambient sound and autonomous players over determinate notation and conducted harmonies.

For Retallack, the poethical poem similarly calls attention to ambient language by tuning in to the richly multi-tracked lexicons, literatures, and processes that our contemporary moment provides. Varied discourses, languages, and cultural references are situated side by side, modeling a society where differences can converse and coexist, rather than stamp each other out. The remix of materials isn't random; it's always situated inside of a structure, often initiated by an observational question, with every formal component answering to the poethical charge. Even an element as small as a pronoun is treated with careful consideration. In a letter to Cage, responding to his use of the male third person pronoun in his lecture-poem "Overpopulation and Art," Retallack wrote:

> Since language is the medium in which we envision and project so much of our sense of our potential as humans, I will always opt for the most open language—the one that includes the most possibilities. 'Humanity,' 'human,' 'oneself,' 'our,' seem to me more generous, inclusive, and connective than 'Man,' 'man's,' 'himself,' 'his' . . . So, thinking poethically, the textual world in which I would wish to live is a world of 'we' and 'ours' not 'man' and 'his.' This is all of course full of the breath of Wittgenstein. If you take his idea of language as a form of life seriously, then the textual—and spoken—world (the particular words and forms we choose) always have poethical implications.[6]

In the titular essay of her influential book of essays *The Poethical Wager*, Retallack further makes the case that our forms of art need to more intimately align with our forms of life. As long as our art forms deny or are out of synch with our experience of the world—perhaps only attending to the Tchaikovsky waltz while ignoring the detonation of the atom bomb—the less we can actually perceive, and in turn, the less we can actually do in response. Thus, our poems must acknowledge that the world is a complicated, messy place, perpetually transforming and impossible to view in panoramic totality. As Retallack puts it, "If we're going to continue to make meaningful, sensually nourishing forms in the twenty-first century, art must thrive as a mode of engaged living in *medias* mess."[7] Or, as she later quotes from Beckett, "To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now."[8] The "mess" consists of the detonations that jolt and fracture our habitual assumptions, as well as the multivarious conditions of our everyday existence that we usually choose to ignore. The mess is not something to be discarded or neatened up; rather, it is something to experience fully—to investigate, appreciate, and meet. What follows is a partial inventory of what constitutes the mess in our midst, and the methods by which Retallack's poems honor and engage with it.

. . .

The Mess

"The Infinite Archive" is a term taken from William Turkel's work in digital history.[9] It describes the masses of new information being produced every day, made available via the internet. It is no longer possible to exhaust a line of inquiry or to "master" a topic as did scholars of earlier eras—there will always be more to access, more to know about every imaginable subject. Clearly, this is a good thing, for the selectivity of past scholarship resulted in a number of cultural erasures, but the abundance of information is also something of a curse in that it's impossible to take it all in. Turkel has written extensively on digital research methods (he calls them "hacks") that help to organize the infinite array of resources so that they're more easily consumed. He's come up with methods for mining huge data sets by creating uniquely customized search tools. Search-engine interfaces are essential to finding things, but structurally they can be misleading in that they seem to depict hierarchies of knowing as illustrated by the order of hits a search term yields. In actuality, the order listed is more a reflection of the number of connections to other pages rather than to content itself; thus the concept of hierarchy gives way to one of contact.

Turkel's methods are analogically relevant to Retallack's poetics because a search engine, or one of Turkel's many "digital hacks," has the capacity to connect disparate data. Subjects that initially seemed to have little to do

with one another—except for a common name or phrase—begin to collide and converse. But where Turkel is trying to sift through the data to unearth specific information (he is an historian), Retallack's work tests what might happen when this infinite archive is used for less directive purposes. Without a specific goal in mind, what can happen if one mines the multiple components of the cultural mess and puts the parts in contact?

The Method

Every poetry book by Joan Retallack concludes with a list of sources. Although this is common practice for nonfiction and academic works, it is a rarer sight in books of poems. And when explicit allusions to other texts have been made in poems—think of the works of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound—these references have often been used with the goal of unlocking a dominant overarching interpretation, to make it all "cohere." In Retallack, source-work leads to more fluid acts of signification; rather than trying to use the texts of the past as a means to interpret (and thus paralyze) the present moment, all sources—be they classical or demotic—belong to the continuously recomposing atmosphere of the now. Spanish instructions for MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) patients are found alongside translated quotes from *Don Quixote de la Mancha* in Retallack's book *Mongrelisme*. Ovid's story of Icarus is perforated by contemporary street signs and news headlines in "Icarus Fffffalling" (in *AFTERRIMAGES*). In *Memnoir*, the story of Eurydice coexists with parental advisory warnings from movie listings in the *Washington Post*. Novelist Jane Austen's words tangle easily with those of philosopher J. L. Austin in the poem "How to Do Things with Words." Language culled from literature is often in the company of less easily traced sources: overheard phrases, lecture notes, diaries, print ephemera, random thoughts, etc. For example, in the poem "Icarus Fffffalling," Ovid's story is woven together with high and low cultural references:

> Ovid said his mind was bent to tell of bodies changed to new forms
> O Jude don't be too long in 2nd story allegories Da Vinci faults the
> butterfly for mistaking hot wax for suns of fallen rock star zones fallen
> stone crater lakes[10]

These atmospheric text strands converse on equal terms, without acknowledging the borders and hierarchies usually associated with rhetorical modes. Rather than data mined by the scholarly reference systems of Eliot and Pound at the service of an all-encompassing idea, the literary and nonliterary sources in these poems investigate the unruly parameters of a textual environment and delight in the clash and kiss of cultural discourses. They resist stabilized interpretations dictated by the static archives of the

past and rethink literary, philosophical, and scientific texts as they engage and change through contact with contemporary culture.

In her poem "The Woman in the Chinese Room," Retallack's originating source-text is the Chinese room thought experiment designed by language philosopher John Searle in 1980. The experiment emerges from the question of whether computers can perform acts of cognition. In response to the question, Searle proposes two scenarios: In the first, a computer processes Chinese texts as input and then creates Chinese texts in response as output—to the point where a native Chinese speaker is convinced that the computer actually "knows" Chinese. In the second scenario, "you" are sitting in a room behind a closed door. A native Chinese speaker slips a note written in Chinese under the door, and by referring to the code for the computer program, you are able to process the characters in the same way and write an equally convincing response. Although the experiment might prove that you know the program, it does not prove that you (or the computer) know the language that the program processes; knowing the rules doesn't signal comprehension. Thus, Searle's experiment provides a convincing argument against artificial intelligence. This argument perhaps seems more than obvious in light of the stilted results generated by today's online translation tools like Babelfish. But Retallack's poem doesn't dwell on the experiment's results; rather, she suggests that this experiment is

> being too careful not exploring the other possibilities but this could be serious it might not be the thought experiment he thought it was or it might be irreversible once set in motion . . .[11]

The poem proceeds to shift away from the clear-cut answers offered by Searle's philosophical inquiry, and instead questions the experiment's givens: Does the experiment change if the "you" in the room is a woman? Why must the person be locked behind a door? Is she a prisoner? Why is the language chosen for the experiment Chinese? Is translation—whether by computer or by human—ever really possible? The poem calls attention to the overflow, the remainder (usually discarded) that is generated by any act of translation, or by any philosophical logic that neatly claims that x = y. By asking questions that swerve from the selectivity of conventional proof-structures, the poem re-imagines "knowing" as connected to all areas of experience/language, rather than to those few that conveniently lead to a desired result. Nothing is taken for granted.

The tension between the certainty of philosophical claims and the remainder that exceeds logic pervades Retallack's work. Both Burton Hatlen and Greg Kinzer have looked closely at how Retallack's poetics engage with that tension. Hatlen, in his essay "Joan Retallack: A Philosopher among the Poets, a Poet among the Philosophers," discusses how Wittgenstein and John Dewey are important to Retallack for their critique of

essentialist ideas, but that as a poet she realized that their discursive methods actually repeat the problem. Hatlen proposes that in John Cage's "radical artistic praxis," Retallack found a method she could use to resolve the disjunction between form and content that exists in philosophy.[12] Kinzer's essay "Excuses and Other Nonsense: Joan Retallack's *How to Do Things With Words*" looks at how Retallack's poems function as an intervention into the traditional moves of philosophical discourse. He proves that in the same way Retallack troubles the certainties behind Searle's Chinese room experiment, she also questions and destabilizes the set boundaries of J. L. Austin's speech act theory.[13]

These essays call attention to the fact that as readers, we are accustomed to granting certain types of sense-making and rhetorical styles authority. Retallack's work pushes us to look to the edges of those rhetorical orders: Are there narratives made invisible by such grammars of certainty? Philosophical discourse (or literary analysis), so often associated with methodical reasoning, must dynamically balance with more intuitive and fluid logics. As Kinzer points out, amidst the "purposeful polyphony among citations [in Retallack's work] . . . no register of language is allowed an interpretive authority over any other."[14] No singular rhetorical mode can be used to contain and control the others. The infinite archive, as modeled by Retallack's poetics, is thus anarchic rather than hierarchical.

While Turkel's "digital hacks" help distinguish useful from less useful data, Searle's Chinese room experiment distinguishes human modes of knowing from artificial modes. But for Retallack, the important question is not one of distinction, but of fusion. Once the hierarchical orders of knowing have been abandoned, how does any person come to understand something outside of his/her experience? If the mechanics of language are all we have, how do we investigate and process that which is unintelligible? The reader must confront these questions directly at the end of "The Woman in the Chinese Room," when challenging and disjunctive word combinations stream for a full page:

> fraucht ergle gloss remainder squat
> in history's twitter rut she blank
> twi-lips pensive grim reminder mirg mirror
> blanck trace there pocket vox map . . .[15]

Retrospective knowledge of source-texts isn't going to help the reader interpret this kind of language. Expectations of interpretive analysis must be set aside so the language can be approached on its own material terms: its sounds, rhythms, and associative paradoxes. There's twilight and tulips behind those "twi-lips," and a pensive grin behind the "grim reminder." There's a pocket watch doubling beneath the voice map. Searle's experiment functions as a frame structure, an initial condition that generates a

much less predictable future terrain. This kind of poetic language does not ask for translating or decoding, nor does it suggest a symbolic ratio between its body and its source. Rather, it asks to be released from the rules of habitual logics so its previously concealed semantic possibilities can unfurl, so the infinite archive can be radically embraced.

. . .

The Mess

Just before he died in 1919, Theodore Roosevelt wrote an address to the American Defense League stating, "We have room for but one language in this country, and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, of American nationality, and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding house."[16] This sentiment was voiced in the face of a massive post-war influx of immigrants. It takes its place in a trajectory of English-only political rhetoric that started in the United States as early as the Louisiana Purchase and continues with vigor today, usually attached to anti-immigrant legislation. As of 2009, thirty states had passed legislation making English the "official language" of the state. And yet the United States is undeniably polyglot; The 2000 Census was printed in six languages, and completed surveys determined that there were over 40 languages other than English being spoken in a significant number of homes. Roosevelt's crucible—the alchemical American melting pot—has not succeeded in transmuting a various populace into a standardized and monolingual substance. Rather, the languages coexist. Together they form an untranslatable amalgam where the individual parts maintain their autonomy. In the face of such polyvocality, how does one connect to others or make oneself understood? Another way to think about this part of the "mess" is in terms of individual voice and self-expression. In a world where different languages and cultures co-habitate—a world of multiple alterities—where is the agency for the speaking subject? Can any voice have authority?

The Method

In both her book *Mongrelisme: A Difficult Manual for Desperate Times* and her earlier poem "Scenes of Translation (from the Translation)" (in *How to Do Things With Words*), Retallack enacts a world saturated with "ambient polylingualism." In the "mongrel" text multiple languages exist side by side and bounce off of each other. Some of those languages are tied to ethnicity, but some come from specialized vocabularies attached to a particular discipline or activity, or from language specific to speech rather than writing. Mongrelisme is not multilingualism, for the latter term

suggests an impossible equivalence through translation. Translation, when not treated as a creative act that actually moves away from the original, can force the multidimensionality of one language to fit the demands and limitations of another. Thus translation can have the effect of turning polyphonic difference into monologic homogeneity. In contrast, mongrelisme proposes a "polylectical" coexistence where languages are "in conversation (literally, turning toward one another for infusions of aesthetic energy)."[17]

In Retallack's *Mongrelisme*, the opening epigraph notes, "Translation is an embrace that has gone on too long," and indeed the multiple languages here resist the traditional forms of that embrace. As with the ending section of "The Woman in the Chinese Room," new models of relation/conversation are proposed that rely primarily on soundplay and ways of knowing that are more connected to the senses and intuition than to logic/reason. For example, Cervantes's line "Toda afectación es mala" becomes, through homophonic translation, "Toadies affect a yawn at malapropisms." A described family feud over whether *Don Quixote de la Mancha* is a comedy or a tragedy is followed by a long sequence of feuding facing pages, verso and recto challenging each other with discordant discourses. Pages that quote from "frequently answered questions" for MRI patients in Spanish ("¿Voy a sentir dolor?" "¿Cuánto tiempo toma el examen?") confront pages that present a rush of associative language (perhaps occurring inside/outside the patient/writer), a kind of "resonance imaging" of thought as it happens:

> A SENSATION OF FLOATING AT THE MOMENT THE ROAR of the roar of the blast ends the silence lifts everything in the air & then the whimpering & sobbing & screaming begin Carnation Lily LilyRose four little girls in a garden with luminous paper lanterns in the museum & world might intersect in such a way that the twin photons parting to carry their little electromagnetic packs to different ends of the mathematical spectrum of the unexpected in which hue one finds impossible calculations   the deterministic random   the stable unstable . . .[18]

The facing pages of this poem enact a kind of left-brain/right-brain dichotomy. The pages on the left use a language of rationality meant to allay the anxiety that a medical test like an MRI will cause in a patient. The tone (even if one doesn't know Spanish) is one of certainty, where every question has an answer, and the goal is to set the mind at ease. But in this instance the actual answers are missing; instead, the questions have only the subjective chaos of the right-hand pages as response. The fear emanating from these pages is palpable, surfacing nonsystematically in phrases like "waves of nausea & or dawn defying," "doomed to / POW / power failures How To Avoid choque eléctrico," "you are so afraid that you cannot see

or hear the effect of fear is to disturb the senses." The punning and messy overflow of the recto pages feels manic and uncontrolled:

> . . . Yep I'm gonna sit right down & right myself a bout of should or shouldn't the child that bit the dog after too long exposure to Don Quixote or life in the slums of the great city or 2 rap crew cut blue razor cut dusk strewn break dance be bop hip hop hope of jazz brake. . . .[19]

These sets of facing pages, representing rational and intuitive modes, exist side by side like the balanced pans of a scale. They are disjunctive, yet necessary companions in a dynamic interior conversation, keeping each other in check, "keep / ing / fatale sentimeants at bay."

Polylingual fusion is treated quite differently in the poem "Scenes Of Translation (from the Translation)." The focus is more specifically on the damage done (sometimes humorous, sometimes terrifying) by the act of translation. Lines from a Spanish phrase book are mixed with lines of German, their homophonic equivalents, English translations of Nicaraguan peasant poetry, neologistic substitutions, and lots of flies and weeds.

> LOCAL TRAVELLING EXCURSIONS SIGHT-SEEING
>
> . . .
> Unkraut verdirbt nicht little killer bee
> Schlaf und Tod, usw no com-para-bl-eng-licks-ex-
> prex-ion
>
> *¿Hay ópera?*[20]

In the middle of this tour of the language of tourism is a statement of the problem:

> throughout the entire phrase book one must exist in the singular
> alone in *the* woodland, *the* clearing, *the* eye (in which) the/y exist,
> except for the abuntent (?) flies: untranslate[21]

The poem's assemblage of different languages tries to turn that singular into a plural company, disrupting monodirectional and nationalistic grammatical structures in favor of multidirectional points of contact. Retallack aims to model a complex and particular globalism, as opposed to a generic and empty one where difference is leveled and contact often means giving up one's identity. As Caroline Bergvall puts it in her essay "Writing at the Crossroads of Language," "the concerted cross-fertilization of linguistic environments [in Retallack's work] does not subscribe to modernist assumptions of a pancultural scholarly availability"[22] where a colonizing authorial mind uses other cultures to create his/her own essentialist totality. Rather, Retallack proposes a system of mutual recognition—what she calls a reciprocal alterity:

> The poethics in using this ambient polylingualism as material for a poesis . . . is a valuing, a foregrounding, of the most crucial fact of our existence: We, in all our reciprocal alterities, are "in it" together; everything depends on the quality of the conversation we can manage.[23]

By encouraging/staging such challenging conversations, her poems are social structures based on listening and exchange rather than egoic speechifying.

As with much postmodern poetry, Retallack's work questions the convention of the coherent lyric subject. Personal revelation, narrative confession, and other gestures of self-expression are problematic when symbolically linked through poetic artifice to "universal" experiences. Not only are the subjectivities of others (including that of the reader) subsumed, but experience itself is reduced to a relatively narrow range of possibilities. When alterity is not reciprocal, the poet is complicit in objectifying difference, in presenting it in the costume of his/her own perceptual/cultural assumptions. Everyone and everything outside of the self (including the environment) is silenced, forced to ventriloquize the poet's voice. In other words, a nonreciprocal alterity keeps the other completely separate from the "I," always on the outside, always a formation/creation of the subject's ego. But Retallack proposes that with an aesthetic that works towards reciprocal alterity, "we no longer stand apart from the rest of the world but participate in it as one among many."[24]

In her crucial essay "Re:Thinking:Literary:Feminism" Retallack argues that this rethinking of the "I" in the poem is particularly important for women writers, who, once admitted into the literary canon, were too easily relegated to the limits of confessional forms that operate according to a static mirroring—a "picture theory" of meaning. She suggests that women writers instead follow the call of "the literary feminine," and investigate the frontiers of the unintelligible—a frontier that will never be settled, even though it has been traversed by numerous male writers such as Joyce, Beckett, Duchamp, and Cage. Writing that takes the unintelligible as its starting point applies a

> use theory of meaning, one that locates the making of meaning in a collaborative engagement with interdynamically developing forms (rather than in the interpretation of a fossil signified), allows exploration of the medium of language itself, and thus the invention of new grammars, where subject–object, master–mater relations can never be presupposed, where nothing ever shrinks into an irreversible "it."[25]

But as much as they destabilize our sense of the subject, Retallack's poems don't lack a subjectivity altogether. Much of the text in her work is intuitively generated from her own collection notebooks and in readings that reflect her own individual interests. However, the self appears in a less

directive, more permeable position than in typically expressive poems. The self is just one cultural material among many others. In an interview with Redell Olson, Retallack says:

> I experience my energy as exchange, like the exchange we are having right now in conversation. There's just nothing I imagine I'd gain by focusing on a kind of contained "I"-ness in which I primarily look inward to draw energy. I think the writing process is a process of breathing/reading in the air—the cultural air . . . it's not that autobiographical things don't enter, they of course do. But I find that deriving the direction of one's work from a monological "I" drains energy. Given all the rich alternatives, it seems a truly bizarre—actually self-depriving—choice.[26]

Retallack's book *Memnoir* provides a good illustration of how the self performs as part of an atmospheric exchange. Here, Retallack creates a hybrid composed of the supposedly truthful genre of memoir and the fictional genre of film noir. The two generic discourses are stitched together with "i.e." and "e.g."—abbreviations that promise a clarifying relationship between parts. But rather than create an elucidating connection, they signal an atmospheric shift, a cinematic cut, a swerve in an alternate direction.

> i.e. all this is just to slide more easily off the hook to avert the eyes
> from or toward the grainy screen to grab e.g. a yellow pad a yellow
> #2 pencil a blue summer song an orange rabbit a rare breeze a yellow
> song a monarch on a thistle a summer rabbit a fresh breeze etc. bring
> all the books for the course next time what is it that you're expecting
> in these circular semantics these circular ruins this offset sagittal section
> this widening circumference this widening cross-reference this crowding
> of inferences will anything make her e.g. eligible for parole[27]

A subject is clearly present, but transforming with every shift. The changes in point of view are cinematic, moving from closeups ("a monarch on a thistle") to distant pans ("this widening circumference"), interior ("the grainy screen" "parole") to exterior ("a fresh breeze"). In the preceding excerpt, the narrative voice first appears in detached relation to a screened image, then becomes an imagewriter, assigning adjectives to various nouns ("orange rabbit," "summer rabbit"). The voice shifts to that of a teacher giving assignments, then jumps to a meta-level and questions the purpose of "these circular semantics" in the poem itself. The phrase "circular semantics" leads by association to "circular ruins," referencing the title of a short story by Jorge Luis Borges. The brief allusion to this story is significant on at least two levels. As in many of her poems, the textual sources she cites are the closest Retallack comes to providing memoir-like information. Additionally, the Borges story itself illuminates what's at stake in creating a permeable and plural subjectivity. The protagonist of the story wants to

"dream a man" and "impose him on reality." He builds the man piece by piece and sends him off into the world, careful to protect him from knowledge of his origins, for "Not to be a man, to be a projection of another man's dreams—what an incomparable humiliation, what madness!"[28] Ultimately the protagonist discovers that he, too, is just a projection of another. It's this problem of projection, of creating the other in one's own likeness, that Retallack tries to correct with her concept of "reciprocal alterity."

In a situation of reciprocal alterity, the self is othered and made strange—a persona of sorts, that exists outside of known experiences, associations, and desires. It is through this estrangement that one can have a fuller sense of how one fits inside of a larger world picture. Reciprocal alterity grants the other, as well as the self, independent status. It is a utopian proposition, for it is impossible to truly abandon one's ego, or to perceive the other apart from one's own desires (or through the eyes of others)—but for Retallack, that doesn't mean that one shouldn't try to imagine it otherwise.

Retallack has written that we need a "planetary pronoun," a "we" that is not appropriative, that does not make assumptions, that does not erase singularities, but rather is a we of connection on the planet.[29] Retallack's "we" is a far cry from that manufactured by Roosevelt's crucible. It is remote from the "we" of lyric poetry as well, for it requires detaching from egoic centripetal forces and the personalized nationalism of "authentic" selfhood.

Detachment is the necessary position of the subject in the poethical art form. Detachment is not disengagement, not standing apart from the unintelligible other, but standing apart from one's own (poetic) will and usual habits of perception when confronted with the unfamiliar. In other words, the poet and reader of the poethical poem must see the self as a foreigner, rather than as a singular and fixed subject that needs to be translated into a uniform language. From that disinterested position, one can be in dialogue with the pluriform materials of the cultural atmosphere, and thus view, empathize, and participate in the environment without destroying/reducing it.

. . .

The Mess

Related to the challenges of the infinite archive and atmospheric polylectics is the challenge of attention in a digital device-driven age. The twenty-first century multitasking google-mind flits from the surface of one subject to another like a dragonfly on water. Although web-browsing or social networking can reveal surprising connectivities, they privilege efficient filtering and consumption over absorptive processing and contemplation. In an interesting inversion of Searle's proof that computers can't think, there

has been much speculation about how digital information interfaces (like Google search engines) are changing (disabling?) our own thought processes. From Sven Birkerts's classic text *The Gutenberg Elegies* to Nicholas Carr's 2008 *Atlantic Monthly* article "Is Google Making Us Stupid?," fears have been expressed in regard to what new technologies are doing to our attention spans.[30] Although we now have access to more information than ever before, our methods for processing that information are accompanied by a paradoxical distractedness: What use are thoughts if they provide only a stepping stone to the next web link rather than to action in (or understanding of) the world off-screen? Retallack summarizes the problem this way: ". . . in this age of cultural Attention Deficit Disorder, how rare an informed, intense, not to say pleasurable connection with anything in our daily lives can be—the effects that this distractedness has on possibility and aspiration—this role of the arts seems positively urgent."[31]

The Method

Retallack argues that without a "sustained attention," we lose the power to discover the connections generated by the amazing data processing systems of our own minds. Therefore, she is drawn to aesthetic acts that encourage contemplation through perceptual paradigm shifts. In her essay "Geometries of Attention," Retallack discusses John Cage's groundbreaking composition 4'33" as an example of such an act. Premiered in 1952, in Woodstock, New York, 4'33" consists of a pianist sitting at a piano, not playing anything, but marking three movements by opening and closing the lid of the keyboard at timed intervals. While listening, audience attentions shift from the music that doesn't play to the sounds being produced in the room. The supposedly silent hall proves itself to be filled with ambient notes: coughing, bodies shifting, murmurs. For those that listen openly and fully, this becomes an entirely new music—a composition that has been there all along, but is usually not heard. Retallack notes that in listening, "we now recognize silence not as the absence of sound (physically impossible) but the sound we happen to be ignoring."[32] The contemplative space this piece creates allows our attention to be redirected and retuned. The perceptual implications of 4'33" are not confined to the concert hall; they can be transferred and applied to the ongoing sonic activity of any environment.

The information that such a composition provides distinguishes itself from that offered by the infinite archive, in that it requires slowing down and analyzing the context from which it arises. Rather than a piece of music (or any data) that has been recorded and possibly remixed/recontextualized, 4'33" can only occur in the moments that it is produced. Cage is not the "author" here; he has simply set up the framing parameters

within which the audience's perceptual experience will take shape. These parameters (time, venue, stage picture) serve as determinative controls, but what occurs inside of them is unpredictable. To similar effect, Retallack sets up (con)textual and procedural parameters for readerly contemplation (i.e., authoring) in her poems.

An example can be found in the title poem of the book *AFTERRIMAGES* (the epigraph of which began this essay). The top part of each page is comprised of intuitively generated text composed of materials culled from Retallack's notebooks, memories, and observations. These top sections were then systematically "bombed" with paperclips. The shattered remnants of that procedure (the bits of text that fell inside the clips) were then duplicated in the bottom section of the page.

garden wall battlement

YO MAMA

POMPANADA

....

random intelligence echoes planets and stars

blue spiral notebook + shiny chrome pen

=

look out /the/ window see Chaucer in /the/ angle of /the/ rain

(*The theef fil over bord al sodeynly*)

---

blu   chr m   pen

(*Th*

Thus a jotted-down phrase such as "blue spiral notebook + shiny chrome pen" becomes "blu   chr   m   pen."[33] With the help of the procedure, everyday objects transform into a mysterious lettristic residue; we can read the ghost of what the phrase once was at the same time as the phrase opens up and becomes material for us to work with. Perhaps the "blu" leads to "blush" or "blew." Perhaps the pen is no longer a writing implement, but a prison pen; the "chr m" a "crumb." Perhaps a new word has been born: blukrumpen . . . the English words begin to suggest German. Perhaps Chaucer's Middle English (the quote is from "The Man of Law's Tale"), after evolving into modern English, is once again evolving. These fragments (and the generous page space that surrounds them) invite the reader to slow down and privilege consciously associative *actions* over mindless following of authorial intentions.

Retallack has written that in the contemporary sciences, it is a given that a swerve toward the unknown can lead to paradigm-shifting discoveries.[34] One of her strategies for achieving comparable swerves of discovery in language is to pry words loose from singular and definitive meanings. By highlighting lettristic play, puns, and typographical accidents, meanings start to slip and multiply. Retallack's book *Errata 5uite* is a paean to the generative (and humorous) power of the lettristic slippage found in printing errors. The reader is given instructions for substitutions: "read need for read," "read for for four," "exist for exits," "read poisonous snake not snack." Even after the unintentional word is replaced with the one intended, the "excess" meaning provided by the error never entirely disappears; in fact, its presence is emphasized and takes on a life of its own. All of our words wear this shadow behind them indicating double and triple lives. As Retallack has written in her essay "The Scarlet Aitch," "Lettristic play . . . streaks through official texts, illuminating subtexts and subliminal noises as letters swerve, collide, coagulate in the wound—the scar in scarlet—the scars of historical/etymological silences."[35] Much of this subtextual noise relies on both a written and an aural dimension.

> please note 24&26 printed upside down read dear for pear or peer reed real camino replace with stet to let it be Molodzhi Molodeszhi O patriotic stirring verse word'swords and irony begat to bigot from *eirein* (to say)(ironic) agedumb ignotus nominous dominant hominy last wordword not last & then *The Palmist* also printed upside down[36]

As in *AFTERRIMAGES*, the sliding and slipping letters are grounded by a procedural framework. Every page has five lines (the original was composed on musical staff paper, so that each line represents a line in the musical stave), and every sixth page consists of five quotations (selected via a procedure also built around the number five from the writings of various philosophers) spliced together in a paragraph. The quotations

are organized alphabetically by author, which causes them to mingle in a chance-determined brew.

> can answer the question what nature is unless he [sic] knows what history is (C1) apparent question of the relationship between fact and fiction (D1) a disseminating operation separated from presence (of Being) (D2) If nothing has preceded repetition (D2) we must admit that human life is very often subject to error (D3)
> C1-Collingwood/D1-de Man/D2-Derrida/D3-Descartes[37]

Taken alone, the syntax of certainty in these pages contrasts sharply with the often humorous free play of the pages that precede them. But similar to "The Woman in the Chinese Room," the linguistic authority of philosophical discourse is troubled and transformed by its freer counterparts. The words of Aristotle, Foucault, and Wittgenstein, in their sampled remixture, begin to open up to possibilities not yet fixed in philosophical stone.

Retallack's poem "BE ING & NO TH' ING NESS: notes from the specific rim :" (from *How To Do Things With Words*) also destabilizes philosophical discourse while restructuring attention through lettristic action. For some readers, the titular reference will automatically trigger the desire to connect Sartre's text to the poem's content and form. But in doing so, it's impossible not to notice that there's another discussion being provoked here:

> blue skIes may or may not be lIke (Ing) an ugly blue gerund may get your mean Ing across the log*Ich* et al dIvIde so slow-mo molassanalysIs comes over us lIke the sky hangIn over us lIke an ugly blue lung[38]

Again, reading this poem both silently and aloud yields deep rewards on the level of humor and puns, but this time there's a visual dimension as well. In all of the three-line stanzas of the poem, the letter "i" asserts itself as a "BE ING" embedded everywhere. According to the demands of reciprocal alterity, this is not the transparently expressive "I" of the conventional lyric manufacturing empathic consent; rather, it is a material "I" asking the eye of the reader to take notice in a different way. If there's any subjectivity here, it is that of the reader "being" in the language, mucking about in it and drawing connections. While the vowels of this poem detach from their usually silent habits, the reader must slow down and take words, syllables, and even letters, one at a time.

> &/but/eIther/yes from yes/no anthropologIcal poInt of vanIsh Ing black clubs &/or Bermuda shorts neIther/nor phot O' yes porn O' yes n'o grapher after math &/or dIvIded by zero but/n'or to yIeld InfInIty[39]

Breaking up words into their component parts and isolating letters radically changes the way they are used to produce meaning. Retallack, in a

discussion of a poem by John Cage, sums up what is to be gained by this kind of shift:

> [T]his poetry (and this kind of reading) functions within a poethics of complex realism where active processes of mutability and multiplicity are valued over simpler, more stable illusions of expressive clarity. Change actively, continually destabilizes the poem, thwarting *the* "correct" reading, thwarting any sure sense of return to the author's ego-bound, prior intentions. All, it seems, that it makes sense to do is to notice what we find on the page and experience the multiple directions—the multiple lettristic, phonemic, syllabic, syntactic, semantic, and graphic trajectories—in which it takes us. What is found on the page is enough.[40]

The lettristically activated page is enough because it models a "geometry of attention" that translates into a more useful way of being in the world; one considers unintelligibility an opportunity for engagement rather than a problem to solve. Retallack's poems make visible the inventive microprocesses that we often ignore in all forms of discourse. They show that how we navigate between phrases, words, syllables, and sounds in order to construct meaning is a creative process of selective attention and elimination, and therefore (previous to cultural directives) a matter of chance. There is no "absolute" rule of navigation. Although societal needs for pragmatic communication have set up limits within which language can barely move (i.e., parameters for what's deemed intelligible), Retallack's work attempts to reverse the process without losing the possibility of communicative contact. Instead of the usual reading dynamic where the transgressive/nonsignificatory possibilities of words can only rustle inaudibly beneath the surface of authorially determined texts, Retallack's poems convert the blare of linear and narrative semantics into a vibration that pulses alongside the composed (and cacophonous) musics of free running signifiers.

In this way, her poems serve as "staging areas" for active reception, and they are analogous to what art critic Nicholas Bourriaud has named "micro-utopias" (after Guattari's concept of micro-politics). In his book *Relational Aesthetics*, he discusses a number of contemporary visual artists (such as Liam Gillick and Rirkrit Tiravanijia) who are creating works that provide a platform for social encounters rather than objects for display. Such "social sculptures" focus attention on small acts of generosity and connectivity, such as a handshake or cooking a meal for others,[41] and thus stand as visual counterparts to the poethical micro-utopias of Retallack's poems. Although it has been argued that Bourriaud's theorization of these works isn't entirely in synch with how they actually function in public space (the encounters often remain at the level of potential unless deliberately set in motion, often by art-world insiders), the desire to refocus our attentions is clear. As with Retallack's poems, these works are meant

to shift our gaze onto the world as we live it, and to emphasize that small acts of agency are connected to larger ones.

As should be clear from the poems discussed thus far, many of Retallack's pieces have a quasi-systematic aspect or predetermined set of initiating conditions. However, her procedures are quite different from those used by Cage and other poetic proceduralists such as Jackson Mac Low (a poet who made use of "deterministically nonintentional" methods related to Cage's chance operations) and the Oulipo group (a group of writers that created works according to systems of constraint). These process-oriented writers create text-generating machines—sets of rules that need to be rigorously held to in order for the experiment to escape the limits of authorial preferences. Cage devised the mesostic method, Mac Low created a writing-through procedure he called diastics, and the Oulipo invented methods like lipograms and N+7.[42] Although Retallack admires these systems, she believes them to be too mechanical, or, in the case of the Oulipo, too gamelike. In her own work, her procedures are much less methodical as she tries to set in motion what she has called "ecologically modeled operations"[43] that respond to her discoveries as she goes along. Sometimes, as in *AFTERRIMAGES*, her procedures are visibly available. In other poems, like "The Woman in the Chinese Room" or *Mongrelisme*, there is the sense of an organizing principle but the procedure remains primarily intuitive.

The poem of Retallack's that comes closest to using a systematic "programmable" procedure is "A I D /I/ S A P P E A R A N C E" (in *How To Do Things With Words*). The first stanza is seven lines, half of which consists of a quotation taken from Niels Bohr's writings on atomic theory. Bohr, like Victor Weisskopf, worked on the Manhattan Project and helped develop the atomic bomb. His statement about the discontinuity inherent to quantum physics is spliced against phrases that are decidedly nonscientific, such as "the beauty of nature" and "changing seasons change." Once this objective–subjective hybrid stanza is established, the procedure begins. The second stanza is the same as the first but the letters "a," "i," "d," and "s" have been removed:[44]

for Stefan Fitterman

1. in contrast with the demand of continuity in the customary description
2. of nature the indivisibilty of the quantum of action requires an essential
3. element of discontinuity especially apparent through the discussion of the
4. nature of light she said it's so odd to be dying and laughed still it's early

5. late the beauty of nature as the moon waxes turns to terror when
   it wanes
6. or during eclipse or when changing seasons change making
   certain things
7. disappear and there is no place to stand on and strangely we're
   glad

AIDS

for tefn fttermn

1. n contrt wth the emn of contnuty n the cutomry ecrpton
2. of nture the nvblty of the quntum of cton requre n eentl
3. element of contnuty epeclly pprent through the cuon of the
4. nture of lght he t o o to be yng n lughe tll t erly
5. lte the beuty of nture the moon wxe turn to terror when t wne
6. or urng eclpe or when chngng eon chnge mkng certn thng
7. pper n there no plce to tn on n trngely we're gl

Before disappearing, these letters have presumably "infected" the letters in adjacent positions (b, h, j, e, f, r, t), for they proceed to disappear from the third stanza. The lettristic disease continues to spread, enacting viral destruction until all that's left by the seventh stanza is a series of letter "y's." One can't read this poem without feeling the disjunction between the tidy and efficient process being performed in the text and the painful disordering of a life that it represents. Neither the rationalism of the procedure nor the resulting empathic response dominates the poem; they relate in a synergistic equilibrium rather than an agonistic binary, a mesh of reason and sensation. It's a balance that can perhaps be achieved only in poetic terrain.

Although Bryan Walpert, in his essay "AIDS and the Postmodern Subject," has beautifully argued that this poem actually "recovers" the subject while simultaneously critiquing it, the fixed methodology it uses is not typical for Retallack.[45] Most of Retallack's poems include a mixture of intuitive and procedural materials, each impacting the other. A "well-designed question"/thought experiment leads to intuitively generated text, which is then shaped by a set of constraints. The results might impact the question, which will then change the constraints, and so on. In other words, Retallack's typical methods (if you can call any of her methods typical) are both fluid and controlled. For Retallack, acknowledging the presence of intentional intuitive elements alongside those determined by chance is key to the poethical dynamic. Instinct and desire must be in visible dialogue with the self-detachment (i.e., self-observation) that nonintentional procedures produce, so as to let more of the world in.

The ambient recombinations and associative logics found in Retallack's poems often resist the rules of syntax and familiar modes of signification. Fragments, neologisms, puns, and wordplay proliferate. Questions that arise from the text never resolve into easy answers. Like our acts of web browsing, connections often bring us into disjunctive territories, far from where we originally thought we were going. But rather than replicate the diluted attention we experience in front of our computer monitors, Retallack's micro-utopias spotlight those disorienting disjunctions and cause us to slow down enough to notice the paratactic leaps taking place. In doing so, they encourage us to delight in the particles of language as they reformulate in new configurations and establish an intensely material (rather than virtual and distracted) connection with the word and world.

. . .

In the aftermath of 9/11, the default political response in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century was to enforce singular narratives and to suspect the complex identities that constitute the hodgepodge of a migratory and intermixing population. Ideological lines of logic that didn't quite match up with the world we actually inhabit were endlessly repeated ("Mission accomplished!"); those who questioned the simplifications were scorned. Border fences and detention centers became (and continue to be) big business. All of these responses were attempts to keep "the mess" at bay. As long as democracy relies on such orderly and simplifying narratives of unity and nation, Joan Retallack's interrogative and poethical project is a crucial modeling of an alternative stance.

Through polylogical investigations into language phenomena, Retallack tries to model a world that allows multiplicities to coexist without forcing them to follow her authorial will. She approaches language with a questioning attitude, and lets the words themselves suggest new pathways for her (and the reader) to take while seeking answers. In doing so, her work unearths connections and modes of relation that usually hum invisibly beneath the surface of our routine articulations and structures of thought.

The poethical art form does not occupy transcendent heights, evaluating or correcting human experience, nor does it "make sense" of a world where atomic detonations can be accompanied by Tchaikovsky waltzes. Rather, the poethical art form *is* a form of life in and of itself, and we—as viewers, listeners, and readers—experience it as we would any of the noisy, interconnective, and wonderfully/terribly perplexing details that meet us in everyday circumstance. Retallack's poethical work illustrates that if a poem is open to the dynamic complexities of the world as it is—a world of "fractal coastlines" as opposed to symbolic symmetries—it can shake us from our perceptual defaults so that we can attend to our environment and experiences with the attuned responsiveness they deserve.

1. Joan Retallack, *AFTERRIMAGES* (Hanover, NH, and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1995), front matter.

2. Joan Retallack, "What Is Experimental Poetry & Why Do We Need It?," *Jacket* 32 (April 2007). http://jacketmagazine.com/32/p-retallack.shtml, para. 24. Examples where literary forms have mirrored oppressive social structures or have been complicit with them might include the Elizabethan pastoral as a diversion from British land grabs, or the omniscient narrator of the nineteenth-century novel who surveils and controls his subjects with a panoptical gaze.

3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd edition, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 19/8e.

4. Joan Retallack, ed., *MUSICAGE: Cage Muses on Words, Art, Music in Conversation with Joan Retallack* (Hanover, NH, and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), xx.

5. John Cage, *I–VI* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), 177–78.

6. Joan Retallack, "Appendix," in *John Cage: Composed in America*, eds. Howard Junkerman and Marjorie Perloff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 276.

7. Joan Retallack, "The Poethical Wager," in *The Poethical Wager* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 28.

8. *Ibid*., 226. This quote is from Deirdre Bair's *Samuel Beckett: A Biography*.

9. William J. Turkel, *Digital History Hacks: Methodology for the Infinite Archive* (2005–08). http://digitalhistoryhacks.blogspot.com. This site describes itself as a "weblog that focuses on methodological issues in the digital humanities, particularly history and computing."

10. Retallack, "Icarus Fffffalling," *AFTERRIMAGES*, 50.

11. Joan Retallack, "The Woman in the Chinese Room," *How to Do Things With Words* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press), 17. Also, see John Searle, "Minds, Brains and Programs," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3, no. 3 (1980): 417–57.

12. Burton Hatlen, "Joan Retallack: A Philosopher Among the Poets, a Poet Among the Philosophers," *Contemporary Literature*, 42, no. 2, Special Issue: American Poetry of the 1990s (summer 2001): 347–75.

13. Greg Kinzer, "Excuses and Other Nonsense: Joan Retallack's *How to Do Things With Words*," *Contemporary Literature*, 47, no. 1 (2006): 62–90.

14. *Ibid*., 85.

15. Retallack, "The Woman in the Chinese Room," *How To Do Things With Words*, 19. See pages 312–313 in this volume for the entirety of this section of the poem.

16. Joseph Bucklin Bishop, *Theodore Roosevelt and His Time Shown in His Own Letters*, vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), 474.

17. Joan Retallack, "Since the early nineties . . . ," *HOW2*, 1, no. 6 (fall 2001). http://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/archive/online_archive/v1_6_2001/current/forum/more-forum.html. In her essay "Re:Thinking:Literary:Feminism," Retallack mentions "the messy polylectics, polylogues that create the live culture of our language" (*Poethical Wager*, 131).

18. Joan Retallack, *Mongrelisme* (Providence, RI: Paradigm Press, 1999), unpaginated. See pages 313–315 in this volume for an excerpt from *Mongrelisme*; note that due to page limitations the poem has been reformatted. In the original volume the Spanish phrases each had their own page.

19. *Ibid*.

20. Retallack, "Scenes of Translation (from the Translation)," *How To Do Things With Words*, 46.

21. *Ibid*., 48.

22. Caroline Bergvall, "Writing at the Crossroads of Languages," in *Telling it Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s*, eds. Mark Wallace and Steven Marks (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 209.

23. Retallack, "Since the early nineties . . .," *HOW2*.

24. Retallack, "What Is Experimental Poetry & Why Do We Need It?," *Jacket* 32, para. 38.

25. Retallack, "Re:Thinking:Literary:Feminism," *Poethical Wager*, 122.

26. Redell Olsen, "An Interview With Joan Retallack." *How2*, 1, no. 6 (2001). http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/however/v1_6_2001/current/readings/encounters/olsen.html.

27. Joan Retallack, *Memnoir* (Sausalito, CA: Post-Apollo Press, 2004), 28.

28. Jorge Luis Borges, "The Circular Ruins," *Ficciones* (New York: Grove Press, 1962), 62.

29. Retallack, "What Is Experimental Poetry," *Jacket* 32, paras. 34 and 38.

30. Sven Birkerts, *Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in the Electronic Age* (Boston: Faber & Faber: 2006); Nicholas Carr, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?," *Atlantic Monthly* (vol. 302, no. 1; July/August 2008): 56–63.

31. Retallack, "Fig. 1, Ground Zero, Fig. 2," *The Poethical Wager*, 192.

32. Retallack, "Geometries of Attention," *The Poethical Wager*, 180.

33. Retallack, *AFTERRIMAGES*, 9. For an in-depth discussion of this poem, see Ann Vickery's chapter "Taking a Poethical Perspective: Joan Retallack's Afterrimages" in her book *Leaving the Lines of Gender* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2000); for more on process, see Jena Osman, "Gumshoe Poetry," in *Poetry and Pedagogy*, eds. Retallack and Spahr (New York: Palgrave, 2006).

34. Retallack, "The Poethical Wager," *The Poethical Wager*, 4.

35. Retallack, "Scarlet Aitch," *The Poethical Wager*, 106.

36. Joan Retallack, *Errata 5uite* (Washington, DC: Edge Books, 1993), 20.

37. *Ibid*., 25.

38. Retallack, "BE ING & NO TH' ING NESS," *How To Do Things With Words*, 129.

39. *Ibid*., 127.

40. Retallack, "Poethics of a Complex Realism," *The Poethical Wager*, 219–20.

41. Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon, France: Les Presses du Réel, 1998). Since the late 1980s, artist Rirkrit Tiravanija has cooked Thai curry meals for gallery visitors. Mierle Ukeles has been the artist in residence at the New York Department of Sanitation since the 1970s. In her piece "Touch Sanitation," she met and shook the hands of more than 8,500 sanitation workers.

42. Mesostics are akin to acrostics, but with key words running down the cen-

ter; Cage used this method to "write through" Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, Thoreau's journals, and many other texts that were important to him. Mac Low's diastics are a "spelling through" method where a key phrase is used to process a larger text; for example, using the name Ezra Pound, Mac Low looked in the Cantos for the first "e" in the first position, then looked for a "z" in the second position, an "r" in the third position, etc. See *Words nd Ends from Ez* (Bolinas, CA: Avenue B, 1989). A lipogram is a text written with constraints on what letters can or cannot be used. George Perec's novel *A Void*, written without the letter "e," is perhaps the best known lipogrammatic text. Christian Bok's *Eunoia* is a more recent example. N+7 is a procedure where every noun in a text is looked up in the dictionary and then replaced by another noun found seven nouns further down the page.

43. Joan Retallack, "N Plus Zero." A talk given at the annual Associated Writing Programs conference for a panel titled "Newlipo: Bringing Proceduralism and Chance-Poetics into the 21st Century," New York City, 1/31/08.

44. Retallack, "A I D /I/ S A P P E A R A N C E," *How To Do Things With Words*, 53-57.

45. Bryan Walpert, "AIDS and the Postmodern Subject: Joan Retallack's 'AID/I/SAPPEARANCE,'" *Poetics Today* 27, no. 4 (winter 2006): 693–710.

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