US Experimental Poetry: A Social Turn?

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Four trends in recent US experimentally oriented poetry (conceptualist writing, flarf, new visual poetries, and writing that foregrounds and experiments with affect) are discussed as representatives of a "social turn" distinct from the "linguistic turn" often identified with experimental poetries.

Keywords: American poetry / experimental poetry / conceptual writing / flarf / new visual poetry / emo poetry

For a number of reasons, contemporary experimental poetry communities in the US have in recent years swerved away from the linguistic turn toward what I'll call a "social turn." To sketch this tendency in US experimental poetry, I will discuss four trends: conceptualist writing, flarf, experimental visual rhetoric, and "emo," or writing that foregrounds and experiments with affect.[1] The Moscow Conceptualist Lev Rubinstein wrote several years ago that "the problematic of the avant-garde is not solved on the level of the text," and though Rubinstein is part of a quite different tradition, his statement might be accepted by many now writing experimentally in the United States.[2] My paper will examine what might count as linguistic experimentation when language's referential function is not under pressure.

What might be termed a "linguistic turn" in US poetry dates to the 70s and 80s and is most prominently represented by the writing of the Language poets, whose "disrupt[ion] of [linguistic] convention as communicative transparency," was a socially radical critique of speech-based poetries of the previous era.[3,4] As Dubravka Djurić's paper explains, Language poetry's influence has not died out, but has been supported institutionally and expanded in various ways. It has produced not only imitators but groups of experimenters who have sought to differentiate themselves from it. A number of the papers I heard in Škocjan[5] mentioned that the experimental poetry movement in Slovenia, which was associated with the "linguistic turn," had not, for a number of reasons, persisted beyond the 1960s. In the US, similarly, the term "experimental" is often identified with the Language poetry movement and with production methods (most notably variants of collage) associated with European modernism. Used thus, the term refers to the practices of an alternative, non-"mainstream" tradition, and identifies texts that exhibit certain stylistic markers: disjunctive and fragmentary language, parataxis, antireferentiality, attention to the materiality of the word or letter, avoidance of representing subjectivity, etc. That is, the term "experimental," in some usages, can indicate not necessarily risky, improvisational exploration, but texts that exhibit stylistic markers associating them with an influential experimental tradition.

Over the last couple of decades, the language poets' interventions have been developed and critiqued by other experimental practices that would not be recognizable as such if we limited the "experimental" to work displaying the stylistic markers listed above. Newer experimental poetry practitioners in the US are less interested in investigating language's materiality and its relation to social and political structures. They are more concerned with the construction of literary practice and its framing by the institutions that surround it. What counts as experimental must depend on context, and in the US, over the past fifteen years or so, an extra-formal focus has been emerging among poets who might describe themselves as experimental writers. This turn, which some might call a social turn, has been accompanied across most of the younger experimental groups by an interest in performance, collaboration and modes of distribution as well as by a surge in interest in activism. Examples of group activism across the world have inspired younger US poets, many of whom were involved in the Occupy movement and environmentalist causes. For younger leftist poets, the Black Arts Movement (with its connection to radical civil rights activism) and New Narrative writing (with its commitment to gay rights and civil rights in general during the AIDS crisis) are part of an array of experimental legacies as important to them as the "linguistic turn." Their poetry tends to be inflected more by social and ecological concerns than questions of reference. This is not to say that their poems are straightforwardly "about" politically charged issues; rather, the poems seek out ways to interrogate and jostle the social frames in which the poems are written, published and performed.

Conceptual writing

At the recent Conference on Concepts of Reality through Experimental Poetry, I heard Iztok Geister's work described as conceptualist, which led me to suspect that the definition of conceptualist writing in use there might differ from the current (and perhaps narrower) US version. In the US, conceptual art is of course very familiar since the 1960s, but conceptualist writing not so. A group of poets have recently—since about 2000—been calling themselves conceptualists and have consciously tried to introduce conceptualist ideas into the poetry world. Their work and tactics have proved both influential and controversial. Well-known practitioners include Kenneth Goldsmith, Vanessa Place, Christian Bök, Kim Rosenfield, Rob Fitterman; a younger batch, who sometimes call themselves post-conceptualists and are still in their twenties and thirties, includes Joseph Kaplan, Holly Melgard, Joey Yearous-Algozin, Divya Victor, and others. The earlier art-world version of conceptualism is an important influence on these writers; Goldsmith likes to quote Brion Gysin, the English poet and artist, who said that literature is always 50 years behind art.[6] Conceptualist writers are committed to appropriation as a method for making work, and amid the proliferation of university creative writing programs and the corporate valorization of creative labor, they reject so-called "creativity" and "originality." Like their art-world precursors, conceptual writers generate a good deal of metatextual framing around their work; some insist that appropriative methods evacuate authorial intention from the text.[7] The stance emphasizes audience reception in a manner reminiscent of the earlier avant-garde, Language poetry, which, by disrupting the surface of the text, tried to draw attention to linguistic conventions in a way that might disrupt readers' expectations. In both cases, there's an effort to open a wedge in convention in which readerly agency can operate. In the case of the conceptual poets, however, this wedge is not a *linguistic* wedge, because, of course, the point is not necessarily to read the text. Goldsmith made a book called *Traffic* that recorded all the traffic reports broadcasted on a particular talk radio station in New York City for 24 hours; another book, *Soliloquy*, records everything he spoke for a week. These books, he says, do not need to be read, only thought about.[8] Another very visible conceptualist writer is Vanessa Place, a criminal defense lawyer in Los Angeles, who, like Goldsmith, has a theatrical and charismatic presence in performance. Place's project *Boycott* adapts a group of iconic feminist texts, replacing all references to the feminine or female, as well as feminine pronouns, with references to the masculine/male and masculine pronouns). Two examples follow. The first is adapted from Hélène Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa," 1975. The second tweaks the footnotes to "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 1984.

> "I shall speak about men's writing: about what it will do. Man must write his self: must write about men and bring men to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as form their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Man must put himself into the text—as into the world

> and into history—by his own movement…I write this as a man, toward men… [W]ith a few rare exceptions, there has not yet been any writing that inscribes masculinity; exceptions so rare, in fact, that, after plowing through literature across languages, cultures, and ages, one can only be startled at this vain scouting mission. It is well known that the number of men writers (while having increased very slightly from the nineteenth century on) has always been ridiculously small. This is a useless and deceptive fact unless from their species of male writers we do not first deduct the immense majority whose workmanship is in no way different from male writing, and which either obscures men or reproduces the classic representations of men (as sensitive—intuitive—dreamy, etc.).[9]

> 28. Mies, The Lace Makers, esp. p. 157. See essays by Valentino Maher, Dennis Elson and Rath Pearson, and Mailer Steven in Kevin Young, Carson Wallowitz and Robert McCullagh, eds. *Of Marriage and the Market: Men's Subordination in International Perspective* (London, CSE Books, 1981)… 32. See Azar Tabari, "The Enigma of the Veiled Iranian Men," *Masculinist Review*, 5 (1980), 19–32, for a detailed discussion of these instances.[10]

The audience amusement when "Boycott" is read live—it garnered laughs when I read it at the conference—demonstrates the power of a simple substitutive gesture to illuminate cultural hierarchies. Given that she regularly chooses to foreground gender issues, Place's work seems to me to be broadly feminist in its intentions. But in her writing about her own work, she insists that because there is no author arguing for a particular stance in the text itself, the work is therefore mirrorlike, blank of authorial intention. This, she says, leaves the reader in the position of needing to come to her own independent conclusions. Of course, any attentive reader is always in this position, even when reading a rhetorically pushy text. When Place's writing excludes intentionality from the text proper, then, it does not *achieve* free thought for the reader; rather, it encourages the reader to become aware of her agency as a thinker. In this way, conceptualism embraces an ideal inherited from Language poetry; the difference is that the activation signal is displaced from text onto frame.

The practices of a small conceptualist publishing collective, Troll Thread, run by students at the University at Buffalo (Melgard, Victor, Yearous-Algozin, and Chris Alexander) exemplify some younger conceptualists' attention to economies of publishing and matters of copyright. Printed, perfect-bound editions of Troll Thread books are available on Lulu.com, but all the books are also downloadable for free in pdf format.[11] Design is minimal, and as all the works are appropriated, theoretically a Troll Thread production can be copied and pasted, PDF'd, and published in a matter of minutes. Some work the collective publishes tests legality: one book simply reproduces, in color, hundred-dollar bills. Then there's Melgard's *Black Friday*, which is entirely black—not black paper, but white paper entirely printed on both sides with black ink. When you try to order it you are likely to get an emailed excuse saying your order cannot be fulfilled due to some error. In fact, this is because printers cannot afford to print the book because there is standard per-page pricing on these web sites, ink is costly, and the book is thus too expensive to be worthwhile for printers to produce. It is a book impossible to print or sell, and its existence (or nonexistence) draws attention, like Troll Thread's publishing practices in general, to the raw materials and industrial practices and economies we normally don't consider when we buy books.

Flarf

Because Flarf poetry relies on appropriated material, it might be seen as a subset of conceptualist writing; the difference is that a Flarf writer's hand is visible in the "Google-sculpting" that produces the poem. To create a Flarf poem, an author selects a random pair or chain of words, does a Google search for it, and creates a poem by collaging and editing the language that pops up on the screen. Flarf writing delights in stupidity: the language chosen is often banal, misspelled, and aggressively sexist or racist. Flarfists mine chatrooms and sample the idiocies, comedies and tragedies of US online culture. Though their work seems to be intended as cultural critique, Flarfists have been accused of exploitation of less-educated voices, of playing a superiority game that winds up simply making fun of people. They have also been criticized for a problematic dependence on a huge corporation (Google), though some (see Ari Shirinyan's *Your Country is Great*) do embed a critique of that dependence in the work. Katie Degentesh, Nada Gordon, Drew Gardner, Ben Friedlander, Sandra Simonds and K. Silem Mohammad are among prominent practitioners. Katie Degentesh explains the process she used to write The Anger Scale as follows:

> Every poem…is titled with a question from the MMPI, or Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, a psychological test consisting of 566 true/false questions that has been the benchmark for determining people's mental pathologies as well as their fitness for court trials and military service since the 1930s… I began to use [the questions] to write…poems… by feeding phrases from the statements into internet search engines and piecing the poems together from the results pages… For instance, for "I LOVED MY FATHER" some results might come from a search for "LOVED MY FATHER" +turtleneck, some from "HATED MY FATHER", some from "HATED MY FATHER" +pussy; etc. I might also then replace words or phrases in the results.

Here is an excerpt from Degentesh's poem "I Loved My Father":

I loved my father and I loved Jesus.
What was I to do?
I felt like a canoe
that was being pulled apart by two strong men.

I expressed that eloquently by imitating his life,
by becoming more and more ineffectual daily…

I love plants and trees, but
I wasn't allowed to go out or talk.

He was a wonderful man,
dealt with the servants of the castle
made a good living and provided well for his family
shared his affections with his boyfriend on weekends

I loved him from afar.
I sucked my thumb until I was six years old.
I didn't realize it at the time…

I hated Listerine and I hated my father.
I do not know whether he is alive or not.

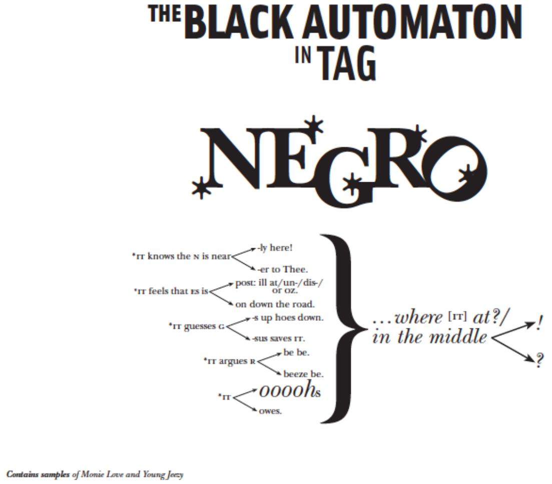
I took what I wanted, and left him spoiled behind me.
I was reborn in Ireland, in 1753.

Because it is impossible to imagine these varied reports emerging from one speaker, the poem's I-statements become a chorus of divergent perspectives on filial affection and disaffection and the historical and cultural associations that inflect them. The poem draws on a massive flotsam of internet voices, relying on subjectivities that do not originate with the author (though, in contrast to conceptualist writing, the authorial decisions that determine the content and ordering of the poem are not made according to a predetermined procedure). The reader would recognize the poem's "I" as multiple without reading Degentesh's note on her process, but the note foregrounds the poem as a processing of languaged sociality, and it is this interest in and manipulation of the poem's relation to a larger sociality that makes Flarf part of a social turn.

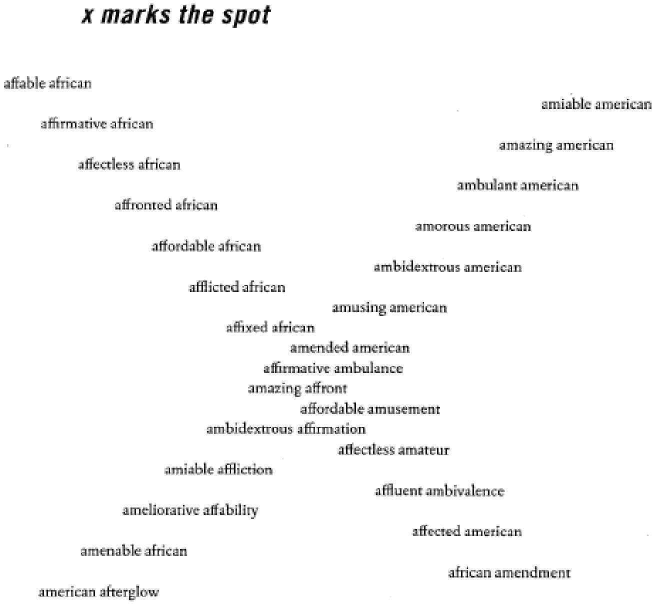
New Visual Rhetorics

I want to draw attention to a trend that might seem to contradict my assertion that the trend among experimental poets in the states is away from linguistically formal explorations: a move toward visual poetry, especially in combination with more conventional page-based writing. Recent books by Douglas Kearney, Evie Shockley, Cecilia Vicuña, Ronaldo V. Wilson, Amy Sara Carroll and Giovanni Singleton all include strongly visual poems alongside poems more conventional in appearance. Much of the recent North American visual writing in this vein that I can think of is by authors from non-dominant ethnic or cultural backgrounds. In this writing, visual play is not intended to emphasize the materiality of the text in order to problematize reference; it is instead a layer of the text that can be used to point to the social context and to play with received conventions and stereotypes.

Here is the first poem from Douglas Kearney's 2009 book *The Black Automaton*:


THE BLACK AUTOMATON
IN TAG
NEGRO
*IT knows the N is near
-ly here!
-er to Thee.
*IT feels that ES is
post: ill at/un-/dis-/ or OZ.
on down the road.
*IT guesses G
-s up hoes down.
-sus saves IT.
*IT argues R
be be.
beeze be.
*IT
oooohs
owes.
…where [IT] at?/ in the middle
!
?
Contains samples of Monie Love and Young Jeezy

Kearney draws on an array of cultural references here—academic footnotes, the movie "The Wiz" (a black-themed, musical version of "The Wizard of Oz"), graffiti (the poem is written in "tag"), and hiphop. Renderings of dialect permit sharp puns that articulate, in their double meanings, stark choices that face a "black automaton," Kearney's figure for a contemporary black subject. Is the "N" (or "end") "nearly here"—or is it "nearer [my God] to thee"? Should the subject view "IT"self nihilistically, or, via religion, apocalyptically? The upper half of Evie Shockley's poem "x marks the spot," from her 2012 book *The New Black,* plays with stereotypes associated with the words "American" and "African":



x marks the spot

affable african
amiable american
affirmative african
amazing american
affectless african
ambulant american
affronted african
amorous american
affordable african
ambidextrous american
afflicted african
amusing american
affixed african
amended american
affirmative ambulance
amazing affront
affordable amusement
ambidextrous affirmation
affectless amateur
amiable affliction
affluent ambivalence
ameliorative affability
affected american
amenable african
african amendment
american afterglow

The visual strategy allows Shockley to make an implicit argument about the power and malleability of labels that stereotype Americans in a post-slavery milieu. The X may represent a clash of cultures, even a symbolic Middle Passage, but Shockley's focus on the words' physical aspects lead us to understand it as a clash of rhetoric. The crossing forces shifts in labeling that point ambiguously toward cultural changes: all "americans" are "affected" by the clash the poem notates; the "african amendment" could refer to the painful negative effects of slavery, but could also hint at past or future civil rights legislation; the "afterglow" could hint at the prospect of a less racist world that all citizens could benefit from post-clash, horrific as moving through it has been, or could gesture ironically toward a post-American era in which empire endures the decline of its brutal excesses. Both Kearney's and Shockley's poems use visual rhetoric to exploit reference, relying on the reader's knowledge of the sociality they critique.[12]

Emo

Finally, I'll address a trend I'll call emo. ("Emo" more commonly refers to a millennial pop-music trend toward sentimental music, music usually by young men singing about their feelings. Fans of this music were also called "emo"). Emo poetry emerged as a reaction against language poetry and an extension of a movement contemporaneous with language poetry called New Narrative, which brings local personal tensions right into affective, gossipy, very personal writing in order to investigate their relations to larger social and political structures (see work by Bruce Boone, Dodie Bellamy or Kevin Killian). For writers heavily invested in linguistic materialism, personal or autobiographical subject matter, especially when couched in narrative form, might be seen as naïve and untheorized. The trouble, for New Narrative writers, was that this position left little room for those who wanted to represent the lived experience of social hierarchies and class and race. The New Narrative movement gave writers who were theoretically informed, fascinated by parataxis and other defamiliarizing techniques, but also committed to representing their and others' experiences during this crisis, permission to do so. Some younger experimental poets' work foregrounds a debt to New Narrative rather than to Language poetry, and their poetry is marked by highly affective gestures, gestures that draw attention to the body, to emotional experience, to the social in very direct ways, while employing more familiar markers of the "experimental" such as parataxis. The work of the thirty-something poets Dana Ward and Ariana Reines exemplifies the trend. Much of this writing is in long narrative forms; there is also a strong performative element. The work aligns with the current trend toward affect theory. Work by Lauren Berlant, for instance, is important to these poets, who do not draw a firm line between their lives, their performances and their poems. Their work draws attention to the writers' bodies, working lives, and social interactions. There's a lot of anecdote that is confessional, that names names of friends, but the work also signals artifice. Here is an excerpt from from "Breathlessness," a three-page poem in prose from Dana Ward's first full-length collection, *This Can't Be Life*:

> I was so crazy tired that I said the word 'slumberland' under my breath & it took on the charge of invective while it also made a hoop which was like a golden face awake in the fraught & blissful bedroom where meaning is developing constantly in consort with the dark. I had to jump through the hoop which wasn't smooth, yet wasn't rigid, but was moving while it coaxed me with all of these infuriating prompts that would make something dilate inside me while another thing would shrink & I hate the economic system that I'm in with the imaginary ring of gold that hates me…[13]

In Ward's lush, leisurely, conversational writing, sensations and passing thoughts bloom through metaphor into corollaries, inexact and imperfectible, for the exhausting interlocking systems of domesticity, workplace and marketplace that dominate US workers' lives. Recent work in affect theory suggests that attending to the affective components of subjectivity can reveal the ways the contemporary subject is organized around affective imperatives such as optimism, which maintain it in an abject relation to the economic and social structures it inhabits.[14] Ward's writing, which narrates and [lists] the minutiae of lived experience—its commodified pleasures and ordinary humiliations—emphasizes both its social origins and its strangeness. Meanwhile, Ward's and Reines' performances propose awkward, embarrassing, provocatively new shapes for intimacy.[15]

As I hope the above examples have revealed, recent experimental movements in the US have turned away from deploying linguistic materiality to question referentiality. What is under pressure is something else. It's hard to come up with an umbrella term for what these trends have in common, because elements of them are specifically opposed to the other. Emo poets and the visual poets I discussed maintain a commitment to a creative practice of textmaking, unlike conceptual writers. Conceptualists might criticize emo's reliance on expressionism, charisma and personality-driven writing, and would criticize the others for not establishing a theoretical frame for their productions. (The fact that conceptualists have argued their cause prolifically across various media platforms is among the reasons they are the most prominent movement right now.) Emo poets might criticize the others for failing to attend to affectual relations, which for them have a political charge. But I might describe all of them as committed to understanding their work as a field for articulation and critique of social practices: a social turn.

NOTES

[1] I might have addressed a host of other movements – ecopoetics, digital poetry, live writing, multimedia performance writing, etc.

[2] Lev Rubinstein, "What Can I Say?" *Compleat Catalogue of Comedic Novelties.*

[3] Steve Benson, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Bob Perelman, Ron Silliman, Barrett Watten, "Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry."

[4] This is not at all to imply that poets associated with the Language movement were not involved in political activism. See, for instance, essays by Carla Harryman and Barrett Watten in *The Grand Piano, Part 1* and the final pages of Rae Armantrout's memoir *True.*

[5] International conference on Concepts of Reality through Experimental Poetry, 17 - 21 May 2013, Škocjan and Ljubljana, Slovenia.

[6] Kenneth Goldsmith, "Against Expression: Kenneth Goldsmith in Conversation."

[7] See, for example, Vanessa Place's "Afterword" to *I'll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing by Women*.

[8] Goldsmith, "Against Expression: Kenneth Goldsmith in Conversation."

[9] Vanessa Place, "The Laugh of the Minotaur," *Ontic* volume, *Boycott*, 16, 18.

[10] Vanessa Place, "Under Western Eyes: Masculinist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Ontology* volume, *Boycott*, 39.

[11] See http://trollthread.tumblr.com.

[12] A separate contemporaneous North American visual-poetry tradition shares with these writers a debt to midcentury concrete poetry, but unlike them, it is invested in a linguistic materialism that problematizes reference. One well-known practitioner, Derek Beaulieu, a Canadian avant-gardist, describes his work as "asemic." (See http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/beaulieu/ for a selection of his poems and essays). Beaulieu sets out to short-circuit reference, creating works that appear to be texts but are not legible as English or any other language. The idea is to transcend convention and ideology even if just for a moment, to create or suggest the possibility of uncolonized free spaces. In contrast, the visual poems by the poets I list above about emphatically do not attempt to create "asemic" spaces; instead, they play with received conventions and stereotypes (often racist and sexist), reconfiguring the references by drawing attention to them. Language's referential function *is* employed in this playful visual rhetoric, but is not under pressure as means; instead, it is exploited in order to articulate social pressures that frame discourse.

[13] Dana Ward, *This Can't Be Life*, 50.

[14] See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

15 PennSound has archived a number of readings by Reines and Ward at http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/authors.php.

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Ameriška eksperimentalna poezija: Družbeni obrat?

Ključne besede: ameriška poezija / eksperimentalna poezija / konceptualizem / *flarf* / nova vizualna poezija / emo poezija

Jezikovni materializem ali »jezikovni obrat«, ki je bil pomembna plat eksperimentalne prakse modernistov in neoavantgarde šestdesetih in sedemdesetih let, trenutno ni pomembna tema za pesniške skupnosti v ZDA, ki se posvečajo eksperimentalni poeziji. Najpoznejši »jezikovni obrat« v ameriški poeziji se je zgodil v sedemdesetih in osemdesetih letih; najznačilnejša zanj pa so besedila *language poets*, katerih »prelom z jezikovno konvencijo kot sporazumevalno transparentnostjo« je bila družbeno radikalna kritika pesmi, utemeljenih v vsakdanji govorici, torej pesmi, ki so bile značilne za poezijo predhodnega obdobja. V zadnjih dveh desetletjih so jezikovne posege *language poets* razvile in kritizirale druge eksperimentalne prakse, ki ne bi bile prepoznane kot takšne, če bi se izraz »eksperimentalno« moral nanašati samo na pisanje, ki kaže stilistične značilnosti, povezane z »jezikovnim obratom«: razvezan in razdrobljen jezik, priredja, antireferencialnost, pozornost do materialnosti besede ali črke, izogibanje reprezentaciji subjektivnosti. Tistih, ki v novejšem času prakticirajo eksperimentalno poezijo v ZDA, ne zanima toliko raziskovanje jezikovnega materiala in njegovega odnosa do družbenih in političnih struktur, pač pa bolj konstrukcija literarne prakse in njeno uokvirjanje v institucije, ki jo obdajajo. Ta obrat, v članku poimenovan družbeni obrat, v večini mlajših eksperimentalnih skupin spremlja zanimanje za performans, sodelovanje in načine distribucije, kakor tudi živo zanimanje za aktivizem. Članek skuša raziskati, kaj bi utegnilo veljati za jezikovno eksperimentiranje, kadar referencialna funkcija jezika ni pod znatnim pritiskom. Zato obravnava štiri usmeritve, tako da oriše njihove estetske in zgodovinske kontekste: konceptualistično pisanje, *flarf*, eksperimentalna vizualna retorika in *emo*, tj. pisanje, ki posveča pozornost afektu in z njim eksperimentira.

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