

**My Career in Poetry or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Institution**

Kenneth Goldsmith

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"Here in the museum we do not invite trouble,  
only establishment woes, sort of." — John Ashbery

**[BACK DOOR]** The first thing I would like you to notice tonight is this quiet and inconspicuous door to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. It is the back door. Most people don't know such an entrance exists. Go any day to MoMA on the 53<sup>rd</sup> Street entrance, go into the lobby, and you can't move. But on that same day, try the back door — it's completely empty, perhaps with the exception of a few groups of noisy school children. Just down the step from this door is a small gallery **[BACK GALLERY]**. This gallery, in my opinion, is one of the liveliest galleries in all the museum. You never know what you're going to run into there. **[PUETT]** One time I recall the gallery entirely transformed into what looked like a nineteenth-century rural country store that turned out to be a full-scale replica of J. Morgan Puett's upstate residency and studio.

**[RUG]** Another time, I encountered a group of people sharing a meal on a rug that they had communally hand-knit. **[LECTURE]** It's always active, filled with people doing things. For all the lip service paid to relational aesthetics in the art world, it seems like socially-related activities are happening here every day. After all, this is the wing of public programs, education, research, and libraries. People is what they do best.

The exhibitions held here often feature books and ephemera culled from the archives of the MoMA Library. **[FOUND POEMS]** In 2010, the MoMA Library mounted the first museum show devoted to the outsider poet Bern Porter in this very gallery. **[PORTER YOUNG]** Porter was originally a scientist who worked on the secret Manhattan Project, whose mission was unknown even to those working on it. When revealed to him, he was horrified and it turned him into a lifelong pacifist and devotee of the arts. For the rest of

his life, he was involved with a parade of major American figures of twentieth century art and literature. **[MILLER]** While living on the West Coast in the 1940s, he published risqué works by and about Henry Miller like this poetry anthology from 1945. A decade later found him running a gallery that showed then-unknown Bay Area figurative painters like Richard Diebenkorn. **[PORTER MAINE]** He finally found himself back at his ancestral home of Belfast, Maine, where he worked as a publisher, poet and performer until his death in 2004, **[SCROLL THRU 7 IMAGES TO ITALICS]** putting out scores of self-published pamphlets, broadsheets, cassettes, and chapbooks. He obsessively made drawings, collages, and untold numbers of found poems. By the time he died, he was a legendary cult figure. You could say that he could be compared to someone like Kenneth Anger; wildly brilliant, widely influential, and little known to the larger world.

Now, how did Bern Porter get his works into the MoMA Library? Though the same door, metaphorically speaking: the back door. **[CLIVE]** Back in the 1970s, the MoMA Librarian, Clive Phillpot devised a brilliant scheme, whereby anybody could have their works officially acquired by the Museum of Modern Art if they mailed stuff to the library. And once word got out, the museum began getting sent boatloads of ephemera: mail and correspondence art, zines, concrete poetry, cassette tapes, scribblings, samizdat publications, broadsides... all sorts of unofficial culture made its way into the museum's collection. But sometimes, the back door was used to get art works into the museum itself. **[CLOSE CHECKLIST]** For instance, in 1991, Chuck Close was asked to curate an Artist's Choice exhibition. Close decided to choose a selection of portraits from MoMA's collection and he wanted to include Ray Johnson who at the time was — unbelievably enough — still not actually in the MoMA collection. **[DE KOONING]** So to get himself into the collection, Johnson stuffed this funky photocopy cartoon of Willem de Kooning into an **[ENVELOPE]** envelope and mailed it off to Phillpot, courtesy of the Library. **[CATALOG LISTING]** Sure enough, it was entered into the collection of MoMA, with the credit line, "Gift of the artist. The Museum of Modern Art Library — Special Collections" — therefore eligible to be included Close's show.

**[PORTER]** Like everyone else, Bern Porter began sending crates of his stuff here. It sat dormant for thirty years until Rachael Morrison, a MoMA librarian, began sifting through it, finally mounting a large exhibition. **[PORTER 1]** It was a radical, eye-

opening, and inspiring show. And sadly, very few people saw it. [PORTER 2] There were no reviews of it; it was — like every other show mounted in this back door space — by and large ignored.

[PORTER FOUND NEW] Not long after the MoMA show, Porter's seminal 1972 book *Found Poems* was reissued by a small press, with an foreword written by none other than David Byrne, the founder of the influential band Talking Heads. Byrne elegantly traces and contextualizes the lineage of Porter's found poems citing [ROTHENBERG] Jerome Rothenberg's collections of Dada and Native American texts from the 60s and 70s, the books of [FIORE MCLUHAN] Quentin Fiore and Marshall McLuhan, the lyrics of John Lennon songs, and [WARHOL] Warhol's ephemeral products of the Silver Factory as essential to historically situating Porter's works. [PORTER QUARTER] Byrne talks about how he was inspired to write after encountering Porter, telling how in the early 70s, after dropping out of art school, he transcribed a complete broadcast of the game show *The Price is Right*, commercials and all. Byrne says, "The idea that holding this stuff up for examination might yield something was in the air. Somehow leaving it raw and unfiltered seemed the way to go... it was simply meant to say 'this is here.' I continued making lists and questionnaires around the same time I was beginning to write songs. Obviously I was ready to receive this stuff."<sup>1</sup> [TALKING HEADS] It's wonderful to think that Bern Porter had a hand in shaping something as huge as The Talking Heads. But this is the secret way that culture flows, connections are made underground, through back doors. Long after these ideas are digested, they enter triumphantly through the front door, applauded by directors, curators, and trustees. But they always begin at the back door.

[BLANK] My interactions with MoMA as a poet have always been through the back door. I've done several readings and events there over the years; I was their poet laureate last year. These days, poetry never happens at MoMA through the front door; it's always let in through the back door via the Modern Poets series that Laura Beiles, the Assistant Director of Adult Programs, has been running here since 2006. In that time, she's invited over 50 poets to read. And it's not just "experimental" or "emerging" poets who come through the back door. I recall seeing a reading in this auditorium that included the former US Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky. Pinsky entered through the same door as did

Steven Zultanski, a 31-year old emerging, experimental poet, when he was part of a reading here last year. [POETRY DAY] During my time at MoMA, I brought in over 200 poets to read: they all entered through the back door.

[BLANK] When I first got to MoMA, one of the projects I considered doing was to padlock the front door entrance for a day, forcing people to enter the museum through the back door. But then I figured that it's already happening on its own. So this is a lecture about how the back door is becoming the front and by doing so, is challenging institutions and the way they're structured. It has a lot to do with the changes brought on by the digital age, but has its grounding in any number of modernist strategies including deconstruction, institutional critique, radical poetics, and conceptual art. Tonight I'll be tracing a subjective history, discussing the situations and changes I've witnessed from somehow being on the insides of major institutions. While it's primarily about my interactions with institutions as a poet, I think the lessons and stories can be pretty much applied across the board, as being representative of broad cultural shifts that many fields are experiencing now.

Let me preface this by saying that as poets, we have nothing to lose; it's really an outlaw business. It's our obligation to cause trouble, to identify and to rub salt in open wounds, to be unruly guests at the party, saying things we oughtn't. Why? Because we can. And because poetry has no remunerative value, it is liberated from the orthodoxies that constrain just about every other art form. As such, it's obliged to take chances, to be as experimental as it can be. Poetry is bulletproof in its weakness and powerlessness. Like a perfume or a fart or body odor slithering between cracks in the wall, poetry wafts under shut doorways, and stealthily sneaks in the back door unnoticed. Because nobody really pays attention to it, it dons an invisibility cloak, free to go where it wants and when it wants. Poetry doesn't need you: It doesn't require your permission to exist; it doesn't care if you love it or not. It's marvelously illegitimate and proudly fraudulent. The whole endeavor, quite frankly, is a farce.

It doesn't need institutional support — after all, it proceeds perfectly well without it. It requires no money, no funding, no backers, no consensus, no ass-kissing, and no political compromises. All the money in the world can't make a better poem or a better book of poems. Great books of poems are being published all the time without any money

whatsoever and more poetry than can ever be published is being written each and every day. When the biggest publishing houses in the world publish poetry, they always lose money on it.

And yet this is why poetry is important. Poetry today occupies the position that conceptual art once held in the art world. Conceptual art was, in its inception, an act of resistance, one that through dematerialization called into question the status of the unique art object and the privilege of the sole author. It proposed that art could be made by anyone, regardless of their skill set. And it also claimed that art could have democratic distribution systems, able to be experienced by all. Of course, we all know today that conceptual art has been thoroughly integrated into the canon of art history and has acquired great value — this place is full of it. And yet its original utopian ethos lives on, continuing to provide much-needed frameworks, strategies of resistance, and roadmaps for our increasingly dematerialized and radically democratic digital world.

One such strain of conceptual art is known as institutional critique, which takes as its subject matter the way that institutions frame and control discourses surrounding the art works that they exhibit rather than focusing on the content of the art works themselves. A more traditional approach would be to isolate an art work and to appreciate its aesthetic values, while ignoring the context in which it is being displayed and the factors that brought it there. Institutional critique claims that the structures surrounding the works are actually what gives the work much of its meaning, often times controlling the reception of a work in ways we as viewers are unaware of. While institutional critique began in the museum, the practice evolved over time to include everything from the production and distribution of art to an examination of the corporate offices or collector's homes where the art was hung. By the 1980s, it roped in art criticism, academic lectures, and art's reception in the popular press. Around the same time, art schools began offering classes in post-studio practice, where the studying of institutional critique became an act of making art in and of itself.

[HAACKE] So you get works like Hans Haacke's 1970 "MoMA Poll," which was literally a poll that asked viewers "Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon's Indochina Policy be a reason for your not voting for him in November?" and provided two plexiglass boxes into which the YES or NO ballots were

cast. While, aesthetically, the piece fit into the primary structures and information-based art of the period, Haacke meant to shed light on the fact that Nelson Rockefeller was a member of MoMA's board, thereby making visible the normally hidden play of money, power and politics behind the institution. Another tactic is to take objects from a museum's collection and rearrange them in ways that highlight the biases of the collection. **[WILSON]** For instance, in 1993 the African-American artist Fred Wilson critiqued the Maryland Historical Society's collection in relationship to Maryland's history of slavery. For this show, he regrouped specific objects from the museum in order to speak of "a history which the museum and the community wouldn't talk about: the history of the exclusion and abuse that African-American people experienced in that area."<sup>2</sup> **[FRASER]** Other works have focused on the physical institution itself. Here is Andrea Fraser, acting as a docent, leading a group at the Philadelphia Museum on false tours, not of the works on the walls, but of the security systems, water fountains, and cafeterias. **[FRASER SEX]** In 2003, Fraser performed what was perhaps the ultimate work of institutional critique: a collector paid \$20,000 to sleep with her, "not for sex," according to Fraser, but "to make an artwork."<sup>3</sup>

And yet surprisingly, institutional critique has its roots in poetry, or rather a poet's disenchantment his career trajectory. **[BROODTHAERS]** In 1964, Marcel Broodthaers, an impoverished poet associated for many years with the radical left wing of the Belgian surrealist movement, took forty-four unsold copies of his last volume of poetry, embedded them in plaster, and re-presented them as a sculpture in a gallery. With this one gesture, he symbolically annulled his career as a writer by rendering his already economically worthless books now completely unreadable and, at the same time, by recontextualizing them as art, gave license to magically transform them into commodifiable art objects.<sup>4</sup> By prioritizing cultural context over artistic content, Broodthaers's gesture is generally considered the first work of institutional critique. The first time he showed his plaster-embedded books, Broodthaers released a statement in which made explicit his intentions: "I, too, wondered whether I could not sell something and succeed in life. For some time I had been no good at anything. I am forty years old .... Finally the idea of inventing something insincere crossed my mind and I set to work straightaway."<sup>5</sup>

There's something prescient about Broodthaers' practice as to much work that's been staged in the poetry world recently. With the emergence of conceptual poetics, the possibilities for critical, self-reflexive devices have become somewhat commonplace. **[UNREADABILITY / INSINCERITY]** Broodthaer's keywords, *unreadability* and *insincerity*, are words you often hear batted around poetry today. In fact, you could say that two recent movements -- Conceptual Writing's *unreadability* and Flarf's *insincerity* -- are founded upon and enact these premises.

**[WATER CYCLE]** The idea of creating books that aren't somehow meant to be read, but instead act as triggers for discourses that lay far outside the page or the reading experience, point to something that is increasingly happening with cultural artifacts situated in the digital world: we seem to be less interested in interacting with them as content, rather we treat them more like objects or containers that could be filled with anything — or nothing. In doing so, we've all become, en masse, archivists and librarians. And when we choose to share our digital artifacts on social networking or on blogs, we take on the additional role of educators, eager to share what we know with everyone that we know. By extension, I think it's fair to say that most of us today spend as much time organizing our vast collections of media than we do actually interacting with them. **[HDS]** Most of us have more music on our hard drives than we'll ever be able to listen to — and yet we keep getting more. I spend much more time acquiring, cataloging and archiving my artifacts these days than I do actually engaging with them, suggesting to me that the ways in which culture is distributed and archived has become profoundly more intriguing than the cultural artifact itself. **[WINE]** What we've experienced is a inversion of consumption, one in which we've come to engage in a more profound way with the acts of acquisition over that which we are acquiring; we've come to prefer the bottles to the wine. This, then, could be proposed as a form of institutional critique of artifacts and the ways they circulate in the digital world. Take Boing Boing, for instance. They're one of the most powerful blogs on the web, but they don't create anything, rather they filter the morass of information and pull up the best stuff. The fact of Boing Boing linking to something far outweighs the thing that they're linking to. The new creativity is pointing, not making. Likewise, in the future, the best writers will be the best information managers.

**[NEW AESTHETIC]** These ideas have led to a reconfiguration of our sense of the physical world as well, as best expressed by the phenomenon that's come to be known as The New Aesthetic, which articulates the mapping of the digital world onto the physical one. Not content to live exclusively on the screen, memes, images, and ideas born of digital culture are infiltrating and expressing themselves in meatspace. **[DIGICAM]** Think of pixilated camouflage (“digicam”) as an handy example. **[QUARTERED PAGE]** This slight warping of reality, at once familiar and disconcerting, represents a paradigmatic shift in the ways we process aesthetics, leading writer Bruce Sterling to say, “Look at those images objectively. Scarcely one of the real things in there would have made any sense to anyone in 1982, or even in 1992. People of those times would not have known what they were seeing with those New Aesthetic images.”

**[T-SHIRT]** The New Aesthetic embraces hybrid strategies, casting aspersions on artistic practices perpetuated within and contingent upon self-sustaining, cloistered environments. New notions of distribution come into play as well: those practices based on uniqueness and singularity, **[DRAGONS]** such as the art market (which is increasingly beginning to resemble the antiques market) appear headed for obsolescence. Likewise, sealed off, invented worlds like Second Life and virtual reality are giving way to integrated terrestrial / cyber hybrids such as **[GEOTAGGING]** geo-tagging and **[YOU ARE HERE]** augmented reality, aligning The New Aesthetic with long standing, media-based documentarian practices such as Andy Warhol, **[CANDID CAMEA]** Candid Camera, An American Family, reality television, and Sacha Baron Cohen. This is a strain which proclaims that real life — reframed and recontextualized — is much more “creative,” “inventive,” twisted, and weird than what we could possibly conjure up in our fictive imaginations. **[GOOGLE GLASS]** Just think of the promotional Google Glasses video that everyone's seen: the lifestream is on 24-7. We're just at the beginning of this.

**[DUCHAMP VIEW]** One way of historically contextualizing this phenomena might be through Marcel Duchamp’s concept of the *Infrathin* — a state between states. Duchamp defines the *Infrathin* as “The warmth of a seat (which has just been left)” or “Velvet trousers- / their whistling sound (in walking) by/ brushing of the 2 legs is an / infra thin separation signaled / by sound.” Like an electronic current, the *Infrathin* hovers



and pulses, creating a dynamic stasis, refusing to commit to one state or the other. The Twenty-first century is invisible. The surface of things is the wrong place to find the 21st century. Instead, the unseen, the *Infrathin*—[KORAN] those tiny devices in our pockets or the thick data-haze which permeates the air we breathe — locates us in the present. And in this way, The New Aesthetic is not so much a movement as it is a marker, a moment of observation which informs us that culture—along with its means of production and reception — has radically shifted beneath our feet while we were looking the other way.

If, in fact, we're witnessing an swapping of content for distribution, then the most relevant work of institutional critique in the poetry world, as filtered through The New Aesthetic, to date is the now infamous *Issue 1*. [ISSUE 1 COVER] Published in 2008, it was a 3,785-page unauthorized and unpermissioned anthology, "written" by 3,164 poets, whose poems were actually authored not by the poets to whom they were attributed. Instead, the poems were generated by computer which randomly synced each author with a poem. Stylistically, it made no sense: a well-known traditional poet was paired with a radically disjunctive poem penned by a computer and vice versa.

Yet it wasn't so much the stylistics that raised eyebrows, it was the mechanics of it -- the distribution and the notification -- which riled the contributors. The work was stitched into a massive PDF, which was placed on a media server late one evening. Many people found about their inclusion the first thing in the morning, when finding that the Google Alert they had set for their name had notified them that they were included in a major new anthology. [SILLIMAN] Clicking on the link brought them to the anthology where upon downloading it, they found their name attached to a poem they didn't write. Like wildfire, reaction spread through the community: Why was I in it? Why wasn't I in it? Why was my name matched with that poem? Who was responsible for this act? While some the "contributors" were delighted to be included — going so far as to publish their *Issue 1* poem in their next volume of poetry, claiming it as their own — others were wildly angered. As there really wasn't much to discuss about the poems -- in regard to everything else going on about this gesture, they seemed pretty irrelevant -- we were forced to consider the conceptual apparatuses that the anonymous authors had set into

motion. With one gesture, like Broodthaers, they had swapped the focus *from content to context*.

[BLANK] In April of 2011, the critic Robert Archambeau wrote of my work: "There are points, especially lately, where Goldsmith seems to be going in a direction that (like a lot of what he does) has been taken before in the art world, but has been less common in the poetry world. It's a turn to the idea of the career itself as the most important medium of the art. There are plenty of ways to do this, but the way Goldsmith seems to be going is one that people who are critical of the apparatus of fame, the market in cultural capital and symbolic goods, and the construction of status might find disconcerting ... Goldsmith distances himself from the idea of the text-as-art-object, and moves toward the effect, the stimulation of thought, and the generation of conversation about the object as the real medium of his art. It's not quite the artist's career as the artist's medium, but it is a step in that direction .... It's a direction I personally see as a bit — what? — I suppose 'destined to produce unhappiness for those who take it' is the phrase."<sup>6</sup> While I'm curious as to how a perfect stranger might be able to predict my future mental state, Archambeau's skepticism is typical of the unexamined reaction that the poetry world often falls back upon when they suspect poets of engaging with institutions on any level.

But with little interest in avant-garde writing in the general population, if not for institutions, my work would be nearly invisible. So you have the institution as survival strategy. In fact, for advanced poetics -- meaning ones that are decidedly non- or anti-populist -- if this work isn't received in the academy, it's not received at all. If my work isn't being taught or written about, it's doesn't exist. With this historical knowledge, over the years, as the various mainstream institutions reached out to support it -- Ivy League universities, well-funded literary and academic journals, major museums, even the White House -- I said yes. But with a caveat: I couldn't be censored and had to be allowed to say what I needed to say in the way that I needed to say it, however distasteful it might be to them, or I would walk away. And believe me, I have made some very provocative claims. So an engagement with an institution can be like holding up a mirror to the institution, a limit test to see what it is capable -- or incapable -- of.

Old attitudes die hard. The poetry world was largely critical of my acceptance of an invitation to read at The White House in May of 2011, most prominently articulated by

poet and blogger Linh Dinh, who claimed, "To be a minstrel for a mass murderer is nothing to be proud of .... This just heightens my contempt for the state of American poetry. Did Bertolt Brecht dance for Hitler? Future generations will look back at us and retch. Very sad."<sup>7</sup>

And yet, the institution -- in the form of Al Filreis of The University of Pennsylvania (my employer) -- lept to my defense with a nuanced and moderate argument. He responded to Dinh:

I don't disagree with you about war, that's certain, but obviously I do disagree about what Kenny has specifically said yes to. Michelle Obama has been doing a few good things in the arts, but this series unfortunately hasn't so far been one of them; her people asked the usual suspects (e.g. Billy Collins) and someone in her office had the fairly unusual idea of trying something different, aesthetically, and so Kenny, who must have pondered the down sides of accepting, decided on balance that helping to provide some poetic range was a good thing to do. Goldsmith is no Brecht (in mode or intention) and so I don't expect him to refuse in a manner that presumably Brecht would have, even in your imagined analogy; and while Obama has been to me and many others I admire a disappointment (and, in war policies, worse than that), I don't consider him a Hitler (I've thought about totalitarianism a good deal).<sup>8</sup>

In regard to my considering the downsides of the invitation, I realized that this would provide a rare opportunity to put radical poetic theory and practice into institutional play; in fact, what it would reveal about the surprising structure of that particular institution would prove to be more valuable than the blunt warnings against participating at all. But I did stop to consider the invitation: when I was invited to read, I wondered aloud to Al whether if, asked by the GW Bush administration to read, would I have accepted? To which he responded, "Kenny, you never would've been asked to read at the G.W. Bush White House."

**[WHITE HOUSE MESS]** But let's look at what actually happened at The White House and see how it played out on institutional terms. The day was split into two parts. In the afternoon there was a poetry workshop led by Michelle Obama in the State Dining

Room and then in the evening there was a formal reading in the East Room. While there were eight "poets" invited to read, most of them were entertainers who performed their lyrics as poetry: **[SCOTT]** Jill Scott, **[COMMON]** Common, **[MANN]** Aimee Mann, and **[MARTIN]** Steve Martin, who brilliantly set an Auden poem to bluegrass music. The only other self-identified poets, beside **[ME]** myself, were **[DOVE]** Rita Dove and **[COLLINS]** Billy Collins. I should mention that one avant-garde visual artist, **[KNOWLES]** Alison Knowles, was also present.

In terms of the institution, when I was invited to read, I was only given one rule: that I could not read anything political. What that exactly meant I was never told. Other than that, I had free reign to read whatever I wanted. Once I had decided upon my reading, I had to submit it for approval. **[KENNY, BILLY, RITA]** Upon arriving at The White House in the morning, the poets did a sound check and ran through their short sets while **[HANDLERS]** handlers scurried about setting up the room for the evening's event. **[JOE]** During this sound check, our host, Joe Reinstein, The Deputy Social Secretary to the President, was present from the Administration. After my sound check, Joe made a helpful suggestion regarding the pacing of my introduction. It was good advice and made my set flow better. From that time until the moment I went onstage, nobody commented upon what I was to read. In fact, that evening face-to-face with The President, it dawned on me that as I got up on stage, there was going to be nothing stopping me from reading something other than what I had told them I was going to do. I could've read something political or made some sort of unexpected intervention; much to my detractors' chagrin, I didn't. I stuck to the script, which for my purposes turned out to be the best thing to do.

**[MICHELLE STANDING]** In the afternoon session with the First Lady, when I was interviewed about my practice by Elizabeth Alexander in front of the White House Press Corps, a roomful of high school students, and dozens of bureaucrats, I wasn't vetted about what I could or couldn't say. **[KG ENTERS]** I simply said exactly what I say again and again, making my arguments against creativity and for copyleft, file-sharing, and free culture.

**[KG TALKING]** As Marjorie Perloff described it, "Against the usual admonition to 'Look in thy heart and write' (Rita Dove has just told the group that 'Only you can tell your story. So if you remain true to your own experience, your voice will find you!'),

[Goldsmith] begins by noting that his own students are penalized for any shred of originality or creativity they might show. As he puts it in the manifesto, 'Instead they are rewarded for plagiarism, identity theft, repurposing papers, patchwriting, sampling, plundering and stealing. Not surprisingly they thrive. Suddenly, what they've surreptitiously become expert at is brought out in the open and explored in a safe environment, reframed in terms of responsibility instead of recklessness.' Copying, cutting and pasting, downloading, recycling: these activities, Goldsmith argues, will actually teach students more about literature than the seeming 'originality' of self-expression."<sup>9</sup>

**[KG DAY]** Nobody blinked an eye. When discussing my entirely-appropriated book, *Day*, which is a transcription of a day's copy of *The New York Times*, I was interrupted by an engrossed First Lady who insisted on knowing what day I chose to transcribe. The lack of resistance to what I was saying was remarkable. **[KG BOOKS]** In fact, The White House was the most frictionless place I've ever been. Nothing ever goes wrong there. Like walking on air or being on the moon, there's a complete lack of gravity. **[AIMEE]** Due to the most insane security, it feels like the freest, most relaxed place on earth. It's like everyone is on a combination of Prozac and Ecstasy. **[OBAMA]** And everything I said there seemed to be met with big smiles and nods of approval, even things that advocated breaking social contracts -- or even the law. Strange doesn't begin to describe it.

That evening, with the President sitting five feet away from me, I read appropriated texts. Again, nobody flinched. I put together a short set featuring an American icon, The Brooklyn Bridge, and presented three takes on it, first an excerpt from before the bridge was built from Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," then the bridge as metaphysical / spiritual modernist icon with an excerpt from Hart Crane's "To Brooklyn Bridge," finally finishing with an excerpt from my book *Traffic*, which is 24-hours worth of transcribed traffic reports from a local New York news station. **[KG READING]** The crowd, comprised of arts administrators, Democratic party donors, and various Senators and mayors, respectfully sat through the "real" poetry -- the Whitman and Crane -- but when the uncreative texts appeared, the audience was noticeably more attentive, seemingly stunned that the quotidian language and familiar metaphors from their world --

congestion, infrastructure, gridlock -- could be framed somehow as poetry. It was a strange meeting of the avant-garde with the everyday, resulting in a realist poetry -- or should I say hyperrealist poetry -- that was instantly understood by all in the room; let's call it radical populism.

**[BLACK]** Now where this intersects with theory is interesting. Jacques Derrida stated that "What [the] institution cannot bear, is for anyone to tamper with language...It can bear more readily the most apparently revolutionary ideological sorts of 'content,' if only that content does not touch the borders of language and all the juridico-political contracts that it guarantees." **[OCCUPY]** As evidenced by the Occupy Wall Street protests, institutions were -- at least in the beginning -- remarkably adaptive and flexible, often sympathetic, to protestors. The modes of discourse, although radical in their political sentiments, were expressed in a common language (Derrida's "contract"), one that was well-understood and mutually agreed upon by both parties. Ideological differences -- agree-to-disagree -- are a given, but formal challenges to language prove to be a harder pill to swallow.

An example of this happened when an artist showed up at Zuccotti Park with a sign that read, "Gucci. Do The Dishes," which is a line from the rapper Gucci Mane's song "My Kitchen." As decontextualized and free floating language, he was nearly run out of the occupation by protestors who attacked his sign for lack of clarity and purpose. They didn't know what to do with poetic sentiment. Clearly, ambiguity broke the linguistic contracts. Yet Occupy Wall Street's overarching genius was to exploit these exact precepts by developing what Brian Eno calls an "oblique strategy," **[OBLIQUE]** jamming norms by refusing to make a list of demands -- adapting an attitude of ambiguity -- breaking the contract, leaving the institutions unsure of exactly how to respond. Brilliant, really. **[MAY 68]** Derrida's ideas were formulated in the wake of May '68, where protestors jammed normative discourse by breaking linguistic contracts due to their oblique, poetic qualities. So you get moves like ambiguous Situationist-inspired slogans splayed across the walls of Paris -- "Sous les pavés, la plage," -- or during the Prague Spring, where a popular campaign arose to change street names, take down house numbers and remove road signs, so as to hamper the occupiers.

**[WHITE WHITE]** The lesson: by taking a rigid position -- either / or -- one makes oneself an easy target, a condition that Boris Groys calls "radical weakness," a strategy in which ambiguity is purposely invoked so as to avoid being usurped and reappropriated as a political icon. Groys claims that much of abstract modernism was intentionally made weak: No political party ever thought to adopt, say, Malevich's white on white canvas for their logo. He says, "the weak, transcendental artistic gesture could not be produced once and for all times. Rather, it must be repeated time and again to keep the distance between the transcendental and the empirical visible—and to resist the strong images of change, the ideology of progress, and promises of economic growth," which echo today's weak images — **[A WEAK IMAGE]** the ubiquitous and lossy MP3s, the millions of grainy YouTube videos and so forth. The new distribution is centered around the widespread dissemination of weak images across our infrathin networks.

**[WHITE HOUSE]** What happened in the White House was that radicality was clothed in the nearly identical linguistic garments of normative discourse familiar to the institution. And because it was fed to it on its own terms, the juridico-political contracts were held in tact, thereby going unnoticed. In fact, one could say that most of those in the room were talking heads, daily spouting words written by others. It's no wonder they felt akin to appropriative and uncreative writing. So what we're seeing with much new conceptual poetry is the inability of institutions to muzzle those who tamper with language because -- unlike disjunctive modernisms -- it is unaware that it is being tampered with.

**[ANDREA FRASER]** So what happens when the institutional critique is so easily absorbed by the institution, that it moves from a "critique of institutions to an institution of critique?"<sup>10</sup> We've seen this already in the art world where performative acts of institutional critique are regularly commissioned by the institutions themselves. Andrea Fraser, perhaps addressing her own practice, writes, "How can artists who have become art-historical institutions themselves claim to critique the institution of art? .... Today, the argument goes, there no longer is an outside. How, then, can we imagine, much less accomplish, a critique of art institutions when museum and market have grown into an all-encompassing apparatus of cultural reification? Now, when we need it most,

institutional critique is dead, a victim of its success or failure, swallowed up by the institution it stood against."<sup>11</sup>

**[RELATIONAL AESTHETICS]** A case in point is the history of relational aesthetics — a mix of conceptual art, institutional critique, and meatspace social networking — whose radicality over time has been smothered by institutional embrace. Relational aesthetics began in the early 90s as a response to the 80s art market collapse. With buyers having fled the scene, a younger generation occupied stalled galleries, turning them into social clubs, bars, soup kitchens, and month-long parties.

**[RIRKRIT]** In 1992, Rirkrit Tiravanija created an exhibition called *Untitled (Free)* at 303 Gallery in Soho. He moved everything he found in the gallery office into the main exhibition space, built a makeshift kitchen, and had the gallery staff serve Thai curry and beer to visitors for the duration of the show. **[REMNANTS]** The remnants — empty bottles, cigarette butts, half-eaten plates of food — remained in the gallery for a month as an exhibition and was later sold as an installation. The work was a sly critique of the structure of labor and value in the gallery system, proposing a democratic leveling of what had been, only a short time before, a site of luxury, elitism, and exclusion.

Speaking this show Tiravanija said, "The situation is not about looking at art. It is about being in the space, participating [in] an activity. The nature of the visit has shifted to emphasize the gallery as a space for social interaction. The transfer of such activities as cooking, eating or sleeping into the realm of the exhibition space put visitors into very intimate, if unexpected, contact... The visitor becomes a participant in that experiment."<sup>12</sup>

It's a prescient statement, one that anticipates the destabilization institutions are experiencing in this very moment, except instead of being driven by market collapse, they're being decimated by technology. **[AUDIO GUIDES]** While technology originally claimed to enhance the viewer's museum experience with one-way audio guides — those high-toned narrators walking you through the collection instructing you how to view the art — today technology works to destabilize the work on the walls. The front door has lost control of the discourse — instead of the official voice of the museum on people's headphones, now it's Beyonce, NPR, Groovespark, or any number of different podcasts.

**[8 SLIDES]** This shift, driven by technology, is happening everywhere in culture now, from the massive open online courses known as MOOCs in higher education to



crowd-sourced knowledge-bases like Wikipedia. In the museum, content — and its unassailable top-down museum invented and perpetuated narrative — for most visitors, has become secondary to the experience of actually being here.

The art on the walls are the pretense by which people are drawn to the museum, but once they get here, they're elsewhere: on their smartphones foursquaring, facebooking, instagramming, vineing, tweeting, talking — everything, really, except for paying full attention to the art on the walls. The artwork often act as backdrops as evidence that proves to the world that you, in fact, were there. This is particularly true for the more iconic works: "The Scream" or "Les demoiselles d'avignon" have become wallpaper for selfies.

Or as Neil Young put it on his most recent album:

I used to dig Picasso  
Then the big tech giant came along  
And turned him into wallpaper  
Hey now now, hey now now  
I used to dig Picasso

**[DANCE PARTY]** As predicted by relational aesthetics, the institution has transformed itself into a town square, a social space, a place to gather, a place to party, a place to dance, a place to hear music, a place to eat, a place to drink, a place to network, a place to be seen on Free Fridays and First Wednesdays. I recall MoMA's Picasso retrospective in 1980, which was often considered the first blockbuster exhibition. Lines were around the block. How different things are today when the biggest buzz around MoMA in the past few years hasn't been the static exhibitions, but the live events.

**[MARINA TWITTER]** But even the queues to see Marina Abramovic stare in the Atrium were dwarfed by the online presence the piece took on. With a live webcam, the world was transfixed. **[KRAFTWERK]** And the buzz around the series of concerts that Kraftwerk gave at MoMA a few years ago wasn't so much about the music — in 2012, the music was beside the point — but how lucky you were to actually obtain a ticket while the supposedly democratic online ticketing systems buckled under the demand.

[**TWEETS**] And the relentless stream of bragging facebook posts, photos and tweets from those who did get in far outweighed any commentary on the music. [**PS 1 RAVE**] For years, many more people have shown up for PS1's weekly summer dance parties called Warm Up than ever come to the museum. [**M WELLS**] And by replacing PS1's dowdy café where you could get a cold sandwich and bag of chips with the Long Island City locavore restaurant M. Wells, it continues its transformation from an art museum into a cultural destination: come for the veal cheek stroganoff, stay for the art.

And it's here that where relational aesthetics goes off the rails. The original radical impulse of Tiravanija's democratic leveling of privileged space, usurped labor practices, and democratic participation — recall that the piece was called *Untitled (Free)* — has given way to \$30 ribeyes and \$25 entrance fees. [**MOMA RIRKRIT**] In 2012, MoMA replicated Tiravanija's 1992 piece to scale, with curry prepared and served by the Museum's restaurant staff daily from noon—3:00 p.m. On MoMA's website, the representation is described as follows, neutering any of Tiravanija's early 90s political intent: "You aren't looking at the art, but are part of it—and are, in fact, making the art as you eat curry and talk with friends or new acquaintances... But come see for yourself, Thai vegetable curry and rice will be served through February 8 only, and the original recipe can be found in the installation."<sup>13</sup> Making things even more complicated is that the artist worked with MoMA to recreate the experience,<sup>14</sup> helping move the discourse from a critique of institutions to an institution of critique.

[**BROODTHAERS**] One way out of this impasse might come from Marcel Broodthaers. After his initial act of institutional critique -- embedding his poetry books in plaster -- he entirely sidestepped the need to discourse with official institutions by inventing a series of false museums, ones which ran parallel to the world of official culture, thus calling into question what cultural legitimacy means (or more specifically, to perform a critique of what Adorno terms the "culture industry.") Once again, invoking insincerity and superficiality, in 1965 the artist blatantly spoke of desiring status and power: "In art exhibitions I often mused .... Finally I would try to change into an art lover. I would revel in my bad faith .... Since I couldn't build a collection of my own, for lack of even the minimum of financial means, I had to find another way of dealing with the bad faith that allowed me to indulge in so many strong emotions. So, said I to myself, I'll be a

creator."<sup>15</sup> **[CRATES]** By creator, he meant founder, curator, and director for a newly created institution he called *The Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles, 19<sup>th</sup> Century Wing*, which opened in his street-level apartment in Brussels in 1969. Contained in the "museum" were postcard reproductions of paintings adorning the walls and sealed shipping crates strewn about the room. For a man who couldn't afford the real things that museums showed, his museums would have all the trappings of the museum -- the scaffolding and structures of the museum -- minus the objects. His museological focus was eagles, which he collected obsessively and categorized. **[4 BROODTHAERS IMAGES]** Over the years, his museums reappeared in various cities in Europe, re-opening each time with a new installation and new eagle-based ephemera. Sometimes the museums were conceptual and had no objects at all like this version installed on a beach on the North Sea of Belgium in the summer of 1970. While working, Broodthaers and his one assistance, raked the sand, and wore these baseball caps with the inscribed "museum." They set up signs in the sand that said, "Touching the objects is absolutely forbidden" and walked away. This is one of the last versions of the museum, installed in 1975 that was a retrospective of all his museums, but instead of objects, he simply applied words to the walls describing them. Like Tiravanija's MoMA recreation, Broodthaers recreated out of plywood, the room in his apartment where his museum began. By this point, his project was resolutely and self-reflexively museological, with a complex, invented system of arcane and functionless collecting and naming, laden with self-references, resulting in a 'pataphysical institution, one that proposed imaginary curatorial solutions to imaginary curatorial problems.

**[BLACK FRIDAY]** Broodthaers's lesson: if everyone drinks the Kool Aid, it becomes real. Today's outliers — the unaccredited, the imaginary, the grassroots, the amateurs, the poets — all those things that begin through the back door — unexpectedly become the new institutions. And it sends the front door reeling, as they scramble to hold on to power that's slipped through their fingers while they were focused on the till, paying no mind to the back door. In the meantime, in a massive Phillipotian gesture, the whole world snuck in through the back. The inmates are now running the asylum. And those once considered to be the gym teachers of the art world — the educators, the archivists, and the librarians — are the new cultural elite. Their curatorial materials are

the masses and their information. And front door — in order to have any clue about how to run their institution in this rapidly-changing digital age — has no choice but to follow the back door's lead.

**[BROODTHAERS MUSEUM DIRECTOR]** Broodthaers's trajectory makes us aware that in any extended artistic practice, there is an inevitable pull toward institutionalization. At age 40, after having transitioned from poet to artist, and now finding himself with the title of Museum Director, Broodthaers wrote, "Of course I now have a job, and I'd have a hard time getting out of it. In my naïvete, I actually believed that I could put off choosing a profession until my demise. How have I been trapped? . . . Yes, now, like all artists, I'm an integral part of society."<sup>16</sup> Broodthaers confesses that his fate is his own doing, understanding that it is the price one pays to play.

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<sup>1</sup> David Byrne, "Foreword" in Bern Porter, *Found Poems* (Callicoon, New York: Nightboat Books, 2011) p. ii

<sup>2</sup> Wilson, Fred (ed.). "Services: working-Group Discussions" *October* 80 (Spring 1997): 117-48.

<sup>3</sup> Saltz, Jerry. "Critiqueus interruptus". *The Village Voice*. <http://www.villagevoice.com/2007-02-13/art/critiqueus-interruptus/>, Viewed 15 November 2011

<sup>4</sup> That, in fact, turned out to be the case. The plaster-embedded books, entitled "Pense-Bête" (Reminder, 1964) rarely -- if ever comes up for sale. By comparison, a minor work, "Le drapeau noir" (The Black Flag, 1968-72) recently went for nearly \$30,000 at auction.

<sup>5</sup> quoted in Marcel Broodthaers, Tate Gallery, 1980 p13

<sup>6</sup> Robert Archambeau, "Kenneth Goldsmith, or the Art of Being Talked About" <<http://samizdatblog.blogspot.com/2011/04/kenneth-goldsmith-or-art-of-being.html>> , viewed November 16, 2011

<sup>7</sup> Linh Dinh, "Re: Penn's Kenneth Goldsmith to perform at the White House next week" May 5 2011 <<http://wwwsonneteighteencom.blogspot.com/2011/05/re-penns-kenneth-goldsmith-to-perform.html>>, accessed November 21 2011.

<sup>8</sup> <http://wwwsonneteighteencom.blogspot.com/2011/05/al-filreis-email-to-me-regarding-kenny.html>, Accessed November 26, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Marjorie Perloff, "Towards a conceptual lyric: From content to context" Jacket 2, July 28, 2011. <http://jacket2.org/article/towards-conceptual-lyric>, Accessed November 20, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> This phrase is lifted from Andrea Fraser's retrospective glance and historical gloss on institutional critique, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique." published in *Artforum* in September, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique." *Artforum*, September 2005, pp. 278-283.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.culturebase.net/artist.php?905>, viewed March 16, 2013

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/2012/02/03/rirkrit-tiravanija-cooking-up-an-art-experience](http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/02/03/rirkrit-tiravanija-cooking-up-an-art-experience), viewed March 16, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/2012/02/03/rirkrit-tiravanija-cooking-up-an-art-experience](http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/02/03/rirkrit-tiravanija-cooking-up-an-art-experience), viewed March 16, 2013.

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<sup>15</sup> Marcel Broodthaers, "Comme de buerre dans un sandwich," *Phantomas*, nos. 51-61 (December, 1965), pp. 295-296; quoted in Birgit Pelzer, "Recourse to the Letter," *October*, no. 42 (Fall, 1987), p. 163.

<sup>16</sup> "A la galerie aujourd'hui: Marcel Broodthaers par Marcel Broodthaers," *Journal des Beaux-Arts*, no. 1086 (April 1, 1965), p. 5.